

Coda

Overviews

In this concluding chapter, I explore what it is to have an overview or a general sense of the kind of situation in which there are simultaneously relevant but wholly mutually exclusive frameworks of sense.¹ What does it mean to grasp these coordinations of mutually exclusive frameworks or conceptual structures? I explore this not only as an issue of intellectual grasp but also with respect to what it requires of us and offers us to recognize and live with these kinds of coordination. I have discussed this kind of overview and what it involves at length elsewhere.² Here I aim only to give some brief, general ideas of what it might mean. I shall do this by looking at a few of the types of context in which they occur.

Let me set the scene for this discussion by noting a connection between the framework I argue for and a standard line of thought in some prominent areas of contemporary philosophy. It is well established in some areas of contemporary philosophy informed by Wittgenstein and ordinary language philosophy, for example, that, while things and states of affairs and concepts do have essences (or, alternatively expressed, properties that are internal to them), what they essentially are is often incompatibly different from context to context. The logical structure or “grammar” of what we can say and mean about something shifts between “language games” or

¹I am grateful to Paul Turner for making me aware of the need for a concrete, lived sense of what this “sometimes always” outlook might mean, and for occasioning my trying to get clear about it in many of the specific contexts I discuss in this chapter.

²Jeremy Barris, *The Crane’s Walk: Plato, Pluralism, and the Inconstancy of Truth* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009), esp. part 2, chapter 1.

“contexts of usage” of the relevant forms of expression. In this tradition, the key is not to reconcile these ways of talking but simply to recognize that they arise in different contexts, so that the questions appropriate to a concept in one context of its meaning simply do not arise in other contexts. In an important sense, meaning, and with it what we mean by reality, is often discontinuous from one kind of context to another. These discontinuities do not need to be reconciled because they require reconciliation only if we can compare their different contexts of meaning. But meaning is given only by the grammars of particular contexts, and comparisons between contexts would be located outside all particular contexts and so outside all grammars and the meaning they provide. As a result, that kind of comparison, and with it the reconciliation it would call for, literally has no meaning. Reconciliation of the differences in meaning, then, simply does not arise as a meaningful issue. To give just one example, Raimond Gaita makes the following argument:

If someone were to say that I should . . . declare whether I believe evil to be a reality or whether I do not, then I would say . . . there cannot be an independent metaphysical inquiry into the ‘reality’ of good and evil which would underwrite or undermine the most serious of our ways of speaking. I would say: now you may see why someone should speak of the reality of evil, and now you may see why the same person might say that Good is the only reality. We are likely to misunderstand . . . if we try to press him into acknowledging that he is contradicting himself. It would be better, at least in ethics, to banish the word ‘ontology’.³

This kind of view clearly has strong affinities with the idea for which I have argued, that truth can be incompatibly but legitimately different from sense framework to sense framework.

There are prominent equivalents of this line of thought in other traditions of contemporary philosophy as well, although they have not all become part of established philosophical procedure. For example, Collingwood argues that “you cannot tell what a proposition means unless you know what question it is meant to answer,” so that statements have no meaning in general, taken outside the specific contexts of specific questions that

³Raimond Gaita, *Good and Evil: An Absolute Conception*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2004), 190.

they answer.⁴ Gadamer also argues that “the meaning of a sentence is relative to the question to which it is a reply,” with related consequences.⁵ Again, Dewey understands the results of inquiry essentially to resolve specific situations of doubt.⁶ Quine hybridizes this pragmatist idea with the more linguistically framed “meaning depends on contexts of usage” line of thought to produce a similar general perspective on philosophical questions. So, for example, “the arbitrariness of reading our objectifications into the heathen speech reflects not so much the inscrutability of the heathen mind, as that there is nothing [outside the constraints of particular languages, so that theirs has no privilege over ours] to scrute.”⁷

As the quotation from Gaita illustrates, however, this kind of view denies that these grammars or sense frameworks need to or even meaningfully can be brought together. As a result, they do not produce the kinds of contradictions, and still less their self-cancellation, for which I have argued. But I have tried to show that there are many situations in which it is inescapably true that such incompatible frameworks are in fact simultaneously relevant. For example, I have argued that sometimes one such framework emerges from another, and as a result, at some point in that transition both frameworks apply to and structure the sense of the same world and the same elements of that world.⁸ Again, interactions of mind and body are describable with full recognition of the possibly essential and logically incompatible differences between them, and it would be very hard to argue that there is no meaning at all to statements about these interactions. We also think of people (perhaps falsely, but still meaningfully) as essentially in relation to others and to their environment, as what they are in virtue of those relations, but also as affected by what is not themselves in

⁴R. G. Collingwood, *An Autobiography* (Oxford: Clarendon Press of Oxford University Press, 1978), 33. See also R. G. Collingwood, *An Essay on Metaphysics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press of Oxford University Press, 1940), 23–25.

⁵Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd ed., trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 1995), 370. Gadamer acknowledges Collingwood’s contribution here.

⁶John Dewey, *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry* (New York: Henry Holt, 1938), e.g., 3–4.

⁷W. V. O. Quine, “Speaking of Objects,” in *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), 5, my insertion.

⁸I argued this in most detail in Chapters 4, 8, and 9.

their environment, and, contrariwise, as essentially responsible for their own individual actions, that is, in a way that is independent of the activity of what surrounds them. It is also easy to think of circumstances in which we understand people as essentially both of these simultaneously.

I have also tried to show, principally through the example of Davidson's work, that this prominent contemporary view that there is nothing meaningful to say about sense outside particular contexts, or, alternatively expressed, about sense in general or as a whole, cancels itself. It is itself, after all, an attempt to say something about what is possible for sense as a whole. Analogously, as I quoted from Putnam in that discussion, "if we agree that it is *unintelligible* to say, 'We sometimes succeed in comparing our language and thought with reality as it is in itself,' then we should realize that it is also unintelligible to say 'It is *impossible* to stand outside and compare our thought and the world.' . . . In this case to say that it is impossible to do 'p' . . . involves a 'p' which is unintelligible."⁹ Because this line of thought cancels itself, then, it is built into it itself that a general view or coordination of these conflicting grammars that it excludes is also a legitimate possibility.

In fact, this self-cancellation is expressed indirectly in this widespread line of thought itself, in that it is really not entirely without an attitude toward the fundamental sense of the world. Instead, it generally has what is perhaps a kind of ascetic attitude toward it. It does not fail to offer an answer to the great questions of the meaning of life and of the sense of the world that are traditional to philosophy, but offers the answer that the questions themselves are an illusion, and that we consequently do not need the satisfactions they seem to provide. This is a genuine answer, and not just an arbitrary abandoning of the big questions: this line of thought gives a thoroughgoing account of why these questions have no meaning and so are not in fact questions at all. As a result, we can recognize that there truly are no questions to answer, and we can be at justified peace with what those questions aimed to raise. As Wittgenstein writes, "the clarity that we are aiming at is indeed *complete* clarity. But this simply means

⁹Hilary Putnam, *Words and Life*, ed. James Conant (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 299.

that the philosophical problems should *completely* disappear. The real discovery is the one . . . that brings philosophy peace.”¹⁰

That this line of thought actively cancels itself in some respects means that this kind of philosophy often carries out the kind of logic and procedure for which I argue in this book, although typically without recognizing what it is doing.¹¹

In terms of this line of thought, then, what I try to do in this book is to show the necessity of coordinating these mutually meaningless grammars, and to give an account of the possibility and nature of these kinds of coordination. One result of doing this, as I have argued, is that we can offer a justification of the legitimacy of this kind of current philosophy in a thoroughgoing way that is not available to it purely in its own terms, as we also can analogously for its alternatives in other traditions.

Now I turn to looking at the nature of an overview or general sense of these sorts of coordination.

A general point about situations where mutually exclusive sense frameworks or conceptual structures are simultaneously relevant is that even in these situations direct clashes between these frameworks occur only sometimes, in the very particular circumstances where they simultaneously have focus on precisely the same elements of the world. When these direct clashes do not occur, the extreme nature of the disparity of the frameworks itself helps to grasp the frameworks simultaneously: because they are meaningless, and so completely irrelevant to each other, they present no obstacle to each other’s general construal of things.

There are, however, occasions when or respects in which they are directly relevant to the same issues, and consequently directly clash. On those

¹⁰Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1958), 51e, no. 133.

¹¹I discuss this in detail with reference to what used to be called conceptual analysis and is now, in a modified form, widely practiced in Anglo-American philosophy as a combination of philosophy of language, mind, and action, in Jeremy Barris, “The Convergent Conceptions of Being in Mainstream Analytic and Postmodern Continental Philosophy,” *Metaphilosophy* 43, no. 5 (2012): 592–618. I also try to show there that this Anglo-American line of thought has this in common, again in a typically unrecognized form, with much of postmodern continental philosophy and, in particular, with Heidegger (although, as I argue in Chapter 7, this is not what Heidegger’s work ultimately carries through).

occasions, one possibility is that it might fit the sense of the situation for us to have no views about the issue in those conflicted respects at all, to have no sense of how it might or might not make sense in those respects, in the way of the ascetic view I described above. As Gaita notes, if we try to press the issue to gain more than the understanding we already have of the clashing sides each on its own, we are likely to misunderstand. We then need to engage in the discipline of simply not understanding and not pursuing understanding.

Sometimes, however, we have to enter into the conflict because it affects issues that need to be sorted out. It then fits the sense of the situation for us to be confused and at a loss as to how to proceed. But since, as I have argued, the situation itself is confused and incoherent, this experience of confusion *is* in fact an accurate and clear grasp of the situation. In addition, this kind of confusion or senselessness is self-canceling: our confusion will resolve itself into unqualified kinds of clarity. But it is also part of its self-cancellation that we can recognize the confusion itself as already constituting a successful grasp of the sense of the situation, and this recognition is also part of that resolution. In these cases we need to engage in the discipline of accepting confusion and being at a loss, and delivering ourselves over to the process by which sense variously emerges from the working of that confusion or loss of sense itself.

As I noted, these alternative possibilities apply generally to situations involving mutually exclusive structures of sense. One pressing specific question about these sorts of coordination, however, is how we can live with other people or cultures whose views we recognize as unqualifiedly true while also recognizing that those views unqualifiedly exclude the truth of our own. How are we to understand the kind of attitude we should have toward those others, toward ourselves, and toward truth, when balancing these mutually exclusive recognitions? As I have argued, this contradiction is self-canceling and so resolves itself, in a several-faceted way. Further, however, I suggest that even with respect to that part of its resolution that consists in the recognition of its unresolved incoherence or confusion as itself a legitimate and successful grasp—what we might call its “resolvedly unresolved” aspect—a kind or measure of straightforward overall grasp is possible.

I have argued that the truth of each view, ours and theirs, is partly a matter of these views’ being rooted in the truth of our and their respective

being.¹² (As I noted in arguing this, our being is not just a brute entity, meaningless in itself and so incapable simply on its own of offering a contribution to truth beyond the fact of itself. For one thing, our being consists partly in a meaningful awareness, so that it is in itself in some sense inherently connected with what it reflects on. For another, constituted as our being is by our sense framework, it is partly conceptual, consists partly but essentially in meanings, which in turn are constituted as the meanings they are partly by their relations to systems of other, connected and contrasting meanings. That is, our being is conceptually or logically connected with, among other meanings, the contrasting and also in many ways connected meanings of its contexts.) This truth to the being of the one committed to the view is one of the conditions for any truth (even while its contribution can, certainly, conflict with those of other conditions). The other person's or culture's view is certainly simply wrong from our perspective, but if it is an honest view it is rooted in the truth of that person's being, as our honest view is rooted in the truth of ours. As a result, since this rootedness is one of the conditions of any truth and so is common to all truth, their view is, *more deeply* than the conflict between the views, *of the same truth* as ours: the truth that is the truth to being itself or being as such. Even though the particular being to which the views are true is different in each case, the principle of truth to being itself is the same. Consequently we can and should respect their view simultaneously as wholly wrong but as nonetheless *legitimate*. We can see this in common-sense terms, in that we can see the sense of respecting the integrity, intelligence, and responsibility of someone who, when she wholly disagrees with us, is honest to what she thoughtfully cannot but believe, and consequently of respecting her view because it is the view of that honest and responsible kind of person.

An important variety of this kind of relationship is that between people who are reflectively aware of their own frameworks and assumptions, or at least of the possibility that their views are informed by larger assumptions that may be questionable, and people who do not have this awareness. It is more particularly important in the context of this book that this is a relationship between people who can take the idea of "sometimes always" logic seriously (at least to contemplate before dismissing it), and people for

¹²See, for example, Chapter 1, section 5.

whom this idea simply cannot have any meaning. There are two possibilities here that I would like to discuss.

First, it is arguably possible that people for whom this idea cannot have any meaning are not lacking something but are legitimately taking for granted truths that should be taken for granted. That this kind of taking for granted can be legitimate is in fact part of the force of the ascetic line of thought I outlined above. According to its account, there is no sense outside particular contexts of meaning, and there is consequently no sense to the idea of reflecting on those contexts so as to justify them. If this account is appropriate for the people who do not have a reflective awareness of their own frameworks, then the reflective position has no privilege of thoughtfulness or depth over the nonreflective one. The conflict between these two kinds of standpoint is then not essentially different from conflicts in general between frameworks.

Second, however, it is arguably possible that the nonreflective person does in fact lack the capacity to think his framework through as thoroughly as the other, and so is comparatively limited or shallower. In this case, the nonreflective person, because he does not think things through as thoroughly as they meaningfully can be thought through, is ultimately dogmatic in an arbitrary way, and consequently deeply unjust. His knowledge claims are ultimately unfounded, and his attitudes and actions arbitrarily exclude the concerns and sense of reality of others in advance and without appeal.¹³ (Of course, people who are deeper in this sense can also be unjust, by failing to live out their awareness fully or because of other kinds of limitations. But that is a different, more limited and more straightforward type of problem.) Even if this is true, however, I think that if the person is genuinely incapable of thinking things further, then that limitation is part of his own being, to which he is honestly true. As a result, while deeper or reflective people are certainly unqualifiedly justified in identifying his injustices as injustices and as shallowness and in defending themselves against them, it is *also* true in this kind of case that that person himself is unqualifiedly reasonable and just. What is more, reflective peo-

¹³As I mentioned in section 3 of the Heidegger chapter, this kind of problem is, for example, the concern of Jean-François Lyotard's *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988).

ple who do take “sometimes always” logic seriously must, by their own principles, recognize both descriptions, since it is part of their reflectiveness to make room both for the meaningfulness of the other person’s standpoint and for the rootedness of truth in the person’s being, which in this case relevantly includes his honest limitations.

This case is really also essentially the same as relationships between mutually exclusive standpoints in general. It just has an additional layer of twisty-turny. As a result, we can grasp and negotiate it in the same kinds of ways.

Another variety of this kind of paradox in relationships with others is that, because mutually exclusive principles of sense are both relevant, it can happen that the way to carry out a principle is by carrying out its opposite. So, for example, if someone lives by a principle according to which it is appropriate to disrespect conflicting views, then those who live by principles of respecting conflicting views can respect that view by disrespecting it: this respects its principle. In fact, they not only can do so, they are disrespectful if they do not do so. Purely to carry out their principle of respect is to disrespect the principle they aim to be respectful toward. Where people or cultures are nasty as a principle or in a way that is essential to who or what they are, being nice to them is also being nasty or deeply disrespectful to them, at the deeper level of the principles that shape their attitudes and conduct.

On the other hand, simply carrying out one’s own principle of being nice to them and in this way being nasty to them is still being nasty to them, and so in turn respects their nasty principle. But that is what it is doing: it is not simply being nice to them, it is also disrespecting them. And it is doing so in an especially deep way, since it is directly disrespecting their principle itself: it actually ignores their principle of disrespect as a principle to be considered at all, as even to be recognized as a possible principle of conduct.

I suggest, then, that the choice we have in these particular kinds of situations is not between respecting and disrespecting the other framework, or between being nice and being ugly to it, but between being respectful of it on the surface and as a result disrespectful at the deeper level of its principle, and being disrespectful of it on the surface and as a result respectful at the deeper level of its principle.

These alternatives describe the significance of our actions for the other framework. We also have to balance these kinds of significance they have for the other framework with the significance they have for our own. In being deeply respectful to the other framework by its lights, for example, we are deeply disrespectful to it by our own, and we strain or perhaps sacrifice our own principle of respect in the sense it has purely in our own framework. We may not find it right to make that sacrifice.

The same kinds of considerations apply to dealing with frameworks for which self-serving violence is legitimate, or for which hate is a self-justifying attitude. In responding to these kinds of frameworks, violence can be the action that respects the other framework's principles and so carries out the principle (perhaps our own) of nonviolence, and similarly, hate can be the attitude that carries out the principle of love.

To resolve these kinds of situation, again, we need to submit to the confusion that is appropriate to them and allow it to cancel itself into sense. Again, as I have discussed, part of this resolution may lie in our truth to our own being, in the existential decision in which we establish (in a sense we decide, but in a sense we find, since the deciding emerges from and as what we are) what we are honestly committed to and what we can honestly find to make sense.¹⁴ The confused, self-canceling, and emerging sense of these situations, then, includes the sense of ourselves, which is part of what these sense frameworks frame. As a result, our own truth emerges together with and in the same way as that of the other relevant elements of the situation, and in resolution-contributing connection with them. We ourselves undergo confusion and emerge into clarity, and this is not just an unfortunate byproduct of the process of establishing a resolution, but a necessary part of its working.

This peculiar logic of relations between mutually exclusive structures of sense does not create only difficulties for thinking about our relationships with other people and other cultures. It also offers ways of making

¹⁴In Chapter 2, for example, I mentioned Johnstone's argument that the self resolves the problem of negotiating between mutually exclusive frameworks, since it exists as the tension involved in standing both inside and outside one's position at the same time and in the same respect; Henry W. Johnstone, Jr., *Validity and Rhetoric in Philosophical Argument: An Outlook in Transition* (University Park, PA: Dialogue Press of Man and World, 1978), 60–61, 120ff.

sense of these relationships, and in fact of making sense of aspects of our relationships even when they are within a shared framework of sense.

For example, it helps us to understand why certain kinds of impersonality, indifference, and even dislike need not qualify in any way the fully devoted and intimate bond we share with those we love. An impersonal critical distance from a friend, for example, is part of a genuinely caring friendship, but involves seeing her independently of our personal commitments to her. This is still more sharply true of actively opposing our sympathies for the other person and rigidly refusing to accommodate her perspective when, say, we are dealing with an alcoholic, whose self-destructiveness is no longer within the area of her choices. The same paradox occurs in less intimate relationships, too. For example, impersonal clinical distance in a therapist or doctor is a way in which concern for the specific person's interests is carried out. (Interestingly, the reverse is also true: an impersonal, principled, even bureaucratic way of dealing with others with whom one has no personal relationship, say in a professional role, is connected to a commitment to their personal well-being, although this is true as part of the nature of the principle rather than out of explicit concern for or attention to this specific person.)

Each of these is part of caring for the other person or at least looking out for her; but they are successful as caring for the person in, and only in, being indifferent to and even actively excluding that person as someone we care for. Differently expressed, each is wholly internal to our personal bond with or concern for the other person, while also being wholly external to it.

More extremely, a genuine bond with another allows for us sometimes to take her for granted, and at a deep level requires us to do so. If we wonder whether we can rely on a friend when we are in difficulties instead of just assuming it, we insult the other person and even put the friendship in question. But it is also true that if we do not greatly appreciate her reliability and her willingness to help, we also fail fully to appreciate and respect the friendship. Both of these mutually exclusive attitudes are appropriate simultaneously and in the same respects. Similarly, a genuine bond allows for us (at least up to a point) to make hurtful mistakes, to be annoyed, even unreasonably, and to have genuine conflicts with the other person. It allows these not just as acceptable exceptions to the bond but as part of it. It belongs to the sense and health of the bond itself that, up to a

point, one is free to work against it, that there is room for these kinds of conflicts with it.

I argued in Chapter 6 (section 4) that sometimes sense does not coincide with itself. Here we can see that intimacy in some respects itself essentially consists in a coordination of itself with what it wholly excludes.¹⁵ In those respects or contexts, it is not only that different conceptual structures legitimately describe it simultaneously but that its own character as intimacy consists in that self-incongruent coordination: what it excludes belongs to its own sense. It is what it is by not being the same as itself. Or, rather, this is sometimes always true, since this nonself-identity or nonself-coincidence in turn also does not fully coincide with itself, and partly consists in what it wholly excludes.¹⁶ This nonself-identity is sometimes always (but only sometimes always) the case with all the things, states of affairs, or issues that the logic of these kinds of coordinations describes. This includes the nature of this “sometimes always” logic itself, as its name indicates, since it is also one of the things it describes.

In the case of intimacy, the confusion or incoherence that is part of the coordination of incompatible appropriate attitudes resolves itself in the same self-canceling way I have discussed. But here the “resolvedly unresolved” aspect of that resolution, in which the confusion is recognized and

¹⁵This modifies what is involved in the kind of absolute respect that, for example, Emmanuel Levinas argues we are obliged to have for others. It is not that we need not have that kind of respect but that what we understand by it needs to include in some contexts not being true to it. Conversely, this idea also modifies what is involved in what Nancy, for example, argues is the state of already being essentially connected with others: “the essence of Being is only as coessence. . . . In fact, coessentiality cannot consist in an assemblage of essences. . . . If Being is being-with, then it is . . . the ‘with’ that constitutes being”; Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, trans. Robert D. Richardson and Anne E. O’Byrne (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 30. My argument, on the contrary, is that it is part of deep coessentiality itself that there are nonessential, simply external, trivial relations between things, that these are already included in the “with.” While what Nancy is trying to show in this context is, I think, right and profound, and is right even as explaining an essential dimension of the very kind of separateness of things for which I myself am arguing, I think it also needs to make room for what its own rigor cannot encompass (or, in my language here, room for its own complete self-cancellation).

¹⁶On the affinities of this self-canceling logic with that of Taoism and Zen Buddhism, see the Introduction, note 19.

retained as in itself being an insight, is perhaps part of our sense of the deep mystery of friendship and of love generally.

Along the same lines, we can see how an ethics based on compassion and an ethics based on impersonal duty or calculation can be simultaneously right, and in fact can be parts of each other, not because they can be shown ultimately to share the same sense of what is at stake in ethics, but despite and partly because of their unqualified mutual exclusiveness.

Similarly, we can see how, although the obligations of compassion often cannot be satisfactorily limited, even then the limitations of our capacity for compassion and, for that and other reasons, the limitations of what we can offer or of what we can afford to offer, as the limited beings we cannot help being, sometimes also need not qualify in any way the significance of what we *can* offer. This can be true both in our relationships with others in general and in our intimate relationships. And in some ways, again, as I discussed in connection with our caring relationships, these opposed and mutually exclusive aspects or concerns of our relationships can actually belong to each other's sense and so can be parts, and even essential parts, of each other.

As I commented in the Preface, it is not that there are no definitive answers to philosophical questions or questions about essential reality, but that there are many, mutually exclusive definitive answers.

Another context of these coordinations I would like to look at is that of our relations to ourselves: our personal identity or integrity as persons. For example, someone who is typically pleasant and thoughtful can be unpleasant and unfair because she is unusually stressed, hungry, or vulnerable. Her conduct is still her responsibility: she is fully responsible for her unpleasant behavior in the stressed circumstances. But this need have no bearing on her nature, her appropriate self-conception, when she is in more typical conditions. Fair treatment of her still involves not characterizing her as what she is in the anomalous conditions: we reasonably regard her as essentially a pleasant person. Nonetheless, she is responsible for her anomalous unpleasant conduct even when she is in the mood that typically characterizes her. She is the same person in both contexts. As a result, she is always both the person who is capable of being unpleasant in that kind of way (she is responsible for it) and also someone who is simply not that kind of person (she is appropriately regarded and trusted as someone who does not behave in that kind of way). The phrase "it was out of

character” helps to carry out this coordination: it was this person, but it was not this person.

Similarly, in the case of conflicts with oneself, defenses against awareness of oneself or rejections of aspects of oneself are also acknowledgments of what they exclude. If they were not, they could not target it as what needs to be pushed away. As a result, defenses and self-rejections are at once both barriers to what they defend against in oneself and connections with it, both separate from and continuous with it. In fact, what they defend against is *of* the defense itself or internal to its own being, since an acknowledgment or recognition is the specific awareness it is only as an awareness of its particular object. Without that object the acknowledgment is not itself. Because of this continuity or connection, defenses and self-rejections, as psychotherapists are usually aware, can often be a gateway to integration with what they defend against. In fact, they are often the *necessary* path to integration, since they are often necessary defenses with respect to what the person can manage emotionally. I suggest that, as essentially (or wholly) self-contradictory structures, they cancel themselves, through moments of confusion, incoherence, and lost bearings, into including what they exist to exclude. I discussed the logic of this kind of case more fully in connection with the dream of self-judgment in Chapter 9.

One consequence of this continuity of defenses with what they defend against is that the result and therefore the appropriate aim of getting past or working through defenses is not straightforwardly the freeing of what is defended against—for example, the freeing of what we might contrast (in important ways wrongly, I am suggesting) with the defenses as the true person or her true feelings. Instead, it is the emergence of an integration of what was until then separated into defense and something defended against, and now is not simply either. That is, what the true person or her true feelings turn out to be includes something of the feelings and attitudes in which the defenses consisted. We can also see this in that defenses are expressions of the person or are of the person’s substance, just as what they defend against is. Consequently the substance of the defenses needs to be included in a true emergence of the undefended person.

This is not to say that we cannot become or be truly undefended. Instead, what the undefended feeling or characteristic truly is in its own nature (that is, in light of the shifting meanings in this self-canceling kind

of structure, what its own nature sometimes always truly is) includes something of the character of the defense against it, and it is understood only in a distorted way as long as it is understood in separation from the defense. Just as what the defense defends against is internal to the defense, something of the character of the defense is internal to the feeling or characteristic itself that is defended against. So, for example, if someone is defended against her own vulnerability or capacity fully to feel and be appropriately affected by the important events in her life, then that vulnerability itself consists partly in, say, the resilient strength in which the defense consists. Without that resilience, it cannot sustain itself, and so it is not vulnerability but something more like fragility. Like the self I discussed in Chapter 9, the defense and the defended against are essentially one thing in conflict with itself, and the true nature of both (sometimes always) emerges only after the resolution.

It is still true, however, that defenses are also barriers against and so are separate from what they defend against. Consequently, as in other cases of these kinds of coordination of mutually exclusive attitudes and modes of sense, it is also sometimes or in some respects true that what is defended against is simply separable from the defenses against it. This is self-cancelingly the case or part of the case during the transition to the undefended state, when the continuous and discontinuous aspects of this self-contradictory structure are working themselves out against each other and so are both present in opposition to each other. It may perhaps also be the case, for example, before the transition to the undefended state, in limited contexts where only the barrier-like character of the defenses is relevant. Or it may sometimes or in some respects be the case after the transition, when, for example, the undefended character of the person has been established and consequently is identifiable as who the person simply is (and perhaps, in this new context of meanings, as who she always has been), so that who she truly is is clearly separate from the previous or other defenses.

The same kinds of coordination apply to the relation of ourselves as individuals to our social, political, and natural environments. It is true that we are what we are in virtue of these environments. What we are is constituted, for example, by the cultural sense frameworks into which we are born and socialized, as well as by the concrete relations that we are in with others and with social institutions. We could not describe as a human

individual a creature that was in no way constituted by any social order, that was not, for example, fundamentally shaped or structured by social institutions like language or norms of thought and feeling. One of the ways our social being is expressed is that we are arguably responsible for what the society we participate in does to its members and to other societies, even if we have done none of those things ourselves. But this “sometimes always” framework allows us to understand how it can also be true that we are essentially individuals, independent of that social and political environment. We are, for example, arguably wholly responsible for our own personal actions; and there are many forms of suffering and joy that can only appropriately be regarded as simply our own. When someone is in agony because he has broken a leg, it surely misses the reality of the situation to refuse to indulge in sympathy for him because he is structurally and without being able to help it complicit in his society’s misdoings, or to require him to set his pain aside because he is currently structurally and without being able to help it involved in much more serious social suffering. To be clear, it is not that the social issue really is more serious even in this context but is temporarily treated as secondary only for the pragmatic reason that the person is incapacitated from attending to it or is blinded to its greater seriousness by his distorting immediate experience of pain. The expression I used above is appropriate: to lecture the person on their social responsibility in this situation misses the reality of what is happening. Similarly, when someone is grateful for a kindness from another person, broader social issues are irrelevant in that immediate context. They are not part of the meaning of the reality of the situation.

In these kinds of context, among a wide variety of others, large and small, complicity with the broader doings of society is not part of the meaning of relevant reality and specifically of the reality of ourselves, and we are innocent of those doings.¹⁷

Similarly, we can legitimately feel wholly relaxed joy, despite the reality of the great, often unredeemable sorrows of our lives and the world, without deluding ourselves about that other side of reality that also legitimately entirely excludes joy. The reality of *each*, the good and bad of life,

¹⁷Chapter 6, on the exclusive legitimacy of our own moral givens while also allowing for the exclusive legitimacy of moral givens that are not ours, is relevant here.

is absolute and to be respected for its own unqualified truth, as well as sometimes or in some respects to be balanced and weighed against the other. I would say it this way: the badness of life is overwhelming, in a way that cannot legitimately be denied; but so is the goodness of life.

These mutually exclusive ways of our being are sometimes meaningfully simultaneously true. We have, for example, a personal responsibility as individuals that no other can take over for us for our complicity in the ills of our society, in which we have nonetheless also played no personal part in our lives as individuals. As in the cases of our relations with others and with ourselves, we are, as it were, wholly of the substance of our social environment or wholly continuous with it, but also wholly independent of it so that its processes are irrelevant to us, and sometimes we are both of these at the same time and in the same respect.

As I discussed in the case of intimacy, in these kinds of contexts a thing is sometimes always (and this self-cancelingly) not the same as itself. This also applies both to ourselves and to our social and political environments respectively. As I noted above, what it means to be a separate human individual, for example, *is* partly to be in essential—consubstantial—relationships with a social order. Conversely, what it means to be a social environment *is* to be the environment for individuals with at the least the potential for their own idiosyncratic meanings and perspectives. In other words, as I argue in these essays with respect to all relevant meanings in situations where mutually exclusive sense structures simultaneously apply, our independent selves and our social and political environments are sometimes each themselves what they are partly by making room for the other which their own sense excludes.

It is already built into the nature of social orders, then, that individuals are both essentially continuous with them and so complicit with them in their structural doings, and also essentially independent of them and so free of that complicity. And it is already built into the nature of individuality that our doings are both essentially our own and also essentially an act of society at large. One way this is expressed is that we as individuals are true to shared principles we sustain and in that way represent something that goes far beyond ourselves (and in fact, because it is principles that we are true to, what we represent also goes far beyond what the social order includes). Other people can then, for example, be heartened by our conduct because of what it says about the world in general that living by

principles is possible, and because of the endorsement of their own lives that fidelity to those particular principles might signify.

Similar considerations are true of other kinds of relations we have with our social environment. Because we are (sometimes always) both essentially of our environment and essentially independent of it, we can make sense of ways in which what we respond to in the world can be both of our own substance and an external influence on our independently existing selves. So, for example, it is true that our social norms of sense and conduct (and, for that matter, our sense framework in general) are applied to us externally: they preexist us, we are socialized into them, and we can take up a critical attitude toward them. But it is also true that these norms *are* us: there is no meaningful “us,” or at least not the particular one (black, male, middle class, adult, Ghanan, and so on) that we are, until we have already entered into our social norms. And to have a critical attitude toward those norms is already to rely on and express them or norms that are ultimately derived from them, since they are at least in large part the standards we have by which to judge and criticize.

The same kinds of considerations also apply to our relation to our natural environment. For example, we can understand in this light how it can be simultaneously true that we *are* our relation to the environment, and yet also externally affected by it, so that we can say that one environmental influence is bad for what we are independently of it while another is good. And vice versa: we can be good or bad for the environment, over against us, that we nonetheless also are. We can also understand in this light how we might be able legitimately to understand the things in the environment both as wholly and exclusively brute, meaningless things but also as wholly and exclusively embodiments of meaning toward which attitudes like respect and fairness are appropriate, and, as Latour points out, how *we* can truly be both of these too.¹⁸

Similarly, again, we can understand how mind and body might be essentially and exclusively aspects of one and the same thing (or simply one thing) and yet also essentially and exclusively separate entities, and also how they might be both simultaneously. Among other things, this would allow us to conceive of interactions between them while recognizing that

¹⁸ On Latour, see Chapter 6, section 2.

they belong to mutually exclusive conceptual orders for which interaction is inconceivable.

This would in part be a case of the “resolvedly unresolved” aspect of the resolution that self-cancellation brings here, a recognition of the simple legitimacy of incoherence or confusion that I mentioned above in connection with our relationships with others. Our grasp of it would then in part or at times involve our partly not understanding it and not pursuing further understanding that I discussed there too. And perhaps in part or at times it would involve an analogue of what I discussed there as our sense of the shared rootedness of both conceptual orders in their self-cancelingly nonself-identical or self-divergent being.

In general, this case exemplifies that in situations where mutually exclusive conceptual orders are simultaneously relevant, internal or essential relations of continuity between elements of the situation function at a (self-canceling) point or moment through discontinuity, or by being themselves external relations, without deeper grounding of connection; and vice versa.

I have discussed personal identity and our relations as individuals to our political environment. One pressing concern for contemporary political thought that combines the concerns of both is that of political identity: we can be simultaneously women, black, gay, working class, and so on. Each of these has priorities that do not exist for the others and that conflict with the others’ priorities. As the various accounts I have given in these essays suggest, there is no solution to this problem that does not recognize their inescapably contradictory complete mutual exclusivity.¹⁹ I suggest that the kind of self-canceling “sometimes always” framework I propose allows us

¹⁹Georgia Warnke, for example, argues that we can resolve issues of this kind by recognizing that the meaning of a concern is given by its context, so that if we place each conflicting concern in its own separate context, the conflicts turn out to be only apparent; Georgia Warnke, *After Identity: Rethinking Race, Sex, and Gender* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), e.g., 245. This view clearly has similarities with the separate “grammars” or “contexts of inquiry” lines of thought I discussed at the start of the Coda. (In fact, it is directly in one of those traditions, as Warnke’s work is largely informed by Gadamer’s.) But while Warnke recognizes the need to coordinate these contexts, I think that she does not recognize the wholly mutually exclusive character that they can give the meanings of the relevant concerns, and the consequences that this mutual exclusivity has for coordinating them.

to work constructively with this kind of situation.²⁰ As in the other cases I have discussed, this involves the disciplines of living with deep perplexity, being at a loss, and giving ourselves over to the truth of ourselves and to the self-canceling working of sense.

Let me end with a context that is immediate to that of this book, the context of the practices of scholarship. One of the principles of the logic for which I argue here is illustrated in the usual practices of scholarship, including in the relation of the essays in this book to one another. When we go about demonstrating a general thesis, we typically do so by discussing different relevant lines of thought or examples of an issue. In each case we explore the line of thought or the example largely in terms of its own unique details and their relations, without more than tangential reference to the detailed working of any of the others. We do this necessarily, because in each context the principle or thesis we are exploring functions in ways that can only be accurately expressed in terms that are largely unique to that context. The general thesis or principle therefore in a sense means something different in each instance, a difference in meaning significant enough to require this extended independent work with each set of different terms. These different demonstrations or illustrations of the thesis, then, are incomparable as expressions of a single meaning. And yet it is these incomparable instances that we rely on to demonstrate a general principle or thesis whose meaning consists in expressing what they commonly illustrate or show.

As I have argued, however, this kind of coordination of incompatible sense structures can be conceivable and legitimate. What it would mean in this case is that the successful grasp of the thesis *is* partly the grasp of its instantiations in various incomparable contexts, with the moments of incoherence and confusion that are self-cancelingly (and so not always or in every respect) built into that awareness. It is not that we always or even often need to grasp a principle or thesis differently from the way we are accustomed to doing, but that we often need to understand differently what we are doing when we grasp it as we ordinarily do. There are sometimes less ordinary implications that then follow about the status and scope

²⁰Chapter 6, on the exclusive legitimacy of our own moral givens while also allowing for the exclusive legitimacy of moral givens that are not ours, is relevant here again.

of the truth we grasp, and about how it relates to other truths. But the grasp of the thesis itself is also (sometimes always) simply a grasp of the thesis.

It follows from the discussions in these essays that this same sometimes always simplicity of a grasp of the unity of incompatible contents, and the sometimes always simplicity of the unity itself that is grasped, is also true of the grasp and unity of being, of essence, of truth, and of personal and political identity.

Where simultaneous incommensurable sense structures or the vantage from outside the sense structure at issue are not relevant, the whole account I have given in this book has no relevance and in fact no meaning. In much of life, there is no reason to have “stepped outside” our structures of sense in the first place, and the issues I have discussed never arise. The questions we try to answer are often given their own meaning wholly within our framework of sense, so that any answers that would meaningfully respond to them can also only be given wholly within that framework. Further, even when issues involving stepping outside our sense structures have arisen, they are self-canceling, and their self-cancellation in turn establishes their meaninglessness. This then also establishes, in these contexts, the meaninglessness of the account I have given here.

If, then, as I have argued, all of these overviews are sometimes always true, they are also sometimes never true.

