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What Ethics Might Be

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Abstract

What are epiphanies, and might they be of use in doing philosophy? This essay explores how a great deal of philosophy – and in particular ethics – adopts methods that make no room for epiphanies and the insights they can provide.

I want to get to a question about how we philosophers, or at least most of us, do ethics, or at least most of the time. But to start with, here is a poem by R. S. Thomas:

The bright field

I have seen the sun break through
to illuminate a small field
for a while, and gone my way
and forgotten it. But that was the
pearl of great price, the one field that had
treasure in it. I realise now
that I must give all that I have
to possess it. Life is not hurrying
on to a receding future, nor
    hankering after
an imagined past. It is the turning
aside like Moses to the miracle
of the lit bush, to a brightness
that seemed as transitory as your youth
once, but is the eternity that awaits you.

Like many good poems, this is a reflection on an experience. The experience is – both metaphorically and literally – a flash of insight, a moment of illumination. Borrowing a term from James Joyce,[1] I call such experiences *epiphanies.*

What happens in an epiphany is a revelation of value, very often, as here, via a glimpse of the wonder and beauty of the world. As I have put it elsewhere,[2] in the most central cases

> [a]n epiphany is an overwhelming existentially significant manifestation of value in experience, often sudden and surprising, which feeds the psyche, which feels like it 'comes from outside' – it is something given, relative to which I am a passive perceiver – which teaches us something new, which 'takes us out of ourselves', and to which there is a natural and correct response. (At least one; possibly more.) Often the correct response is love, often it is pity, or again creativity. It might also be anger or reverence or awe or a hunger to put things right – a hunger for justice; or many other things. It may be something that leads directly to action or new knowledge, but it may also be something that prompts further contemplation or reflection; or other responses again.

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As my definition says, sometimes epiphanies are not moments of joy and delight, like Thomas's bright field, but moments of sudden anger or outrage. So, in the opening scenes of Richard Attenborough's great film *Gandhi*, the young Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, a gentle, scholarly, courteous young barrister, is insulted, assaulted and thrown off a South African train for daring, despite the colour of his skin, to travel First Class.

The film is quite accurate about this incident: it did actually happen to Gandhi at Pietermaritzburg in 1893. Whether it was epiphanic as it happened to him is hard to tell. Epiphanies, as my definition says, are typically surprising, and perhaps the real-life event came as no surprise at all to Gandhi. He had recently spent three years qualifying as a barrister in London, so it is unlikely to have been his first experience of racist abuse. Anyhow, the film *presents* the experience as epiphanic, by using it to show us, through Gandhi's eyes, not how wonderful things are, but how much the world needs to change.

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‘What happens in an epiphany is a revelation of value, very often, as here, via a glimpse of the wonder and beauty of the world.’

Another famous artistic presentation of an epiphany, indeed of two epiphanies, comes in *War and Peace*, Book 6 Chapters 1 and 3, where Prince Andrei twice meets an oak tree in the forest near his home. In the first encounter Andrei – whose wife, neglected because he did not love her, has quite recently died in childbirth – is full of sorrow, regret and depression. And the oak tree seems to mirror his feelings:

> At the edge of the road stood an oak. Probably ten times the age of the birches that formed the forest, it was ten times as thick and twice as tall as they. It was an enormous tree, its girth twice as great as a man could embrace, and evidently long ago some of its branches had been broken off and its bark scarred. With its huge ungainly limbs sprawling unsymmetrically, and its gnarled hands and fingers, it stood an aged, stern, and scornful monster among the smiling birch trees. Only the dead-looking evergreen firs dotted about in the forest, and this oak, refused to yield to the charm of spring or notice either the spring or the sunshine.
>
> ‘Spring, love, happiness!’ this oak seemed to say. ‘Are you not weary of that stupid, meaningless, constantly repeated fraud? … There is no spring, no sun, no happiness! Look at those cramped dead firs, ever the same, and at me too, sticking out my broken and barked fingers just where they have grown, whether from my back or my sides: as they have grown so I stand, and I do not believe in your hopes and your lies.’
>
> As he passed through the forest Prince Andrei turned several times to look at that oak, as if expecting something from it. Under the oak, too, were flowers and grass, but it stood among them scowling, rigid, misshapen, and grim as ever.
>
> ‘Yes, the oak is right, a thousand times right,’ thought Prince Andrei. ‘Let others – the young – yield afresh to that fraud, but we know life, our life is finished!’[3]

That’s how the oak tree appears to Andrei in Book 6, Chapter 1. But in Chapter 3, we find this:

> ‘Yes, here in this forest was that oak with which I agreed,’ thought Prince Andrei. ‘But where is it?’ he again wondered, gazing at the left side of the road, and without recognizing it he looked with admiration at the very oak he sought. The old oak, quite transfigured, spreading out a canopy of sappy dark-green foliage, stood rapt and slightly trembling in the rays of the evening sun. Neither gnarled fingers nor old scars nor old doubts and sorrows were any of them in evidence now. Through the hard century-old bark, even where there were no twigs, leaves had sprouted such as one could hardly believe the old veteran could have produced.
>
> ‘Yes, it is the same oak,’ thought Prince Andrei, and all at once he was seized by an unreasoning springtime feeling of joy and renewal. All the best moments of his life suddenly rose to his memory. Austerlitz with the lofty heavens, his wife’s dead reproachful face, Pierre at the ferry, that girl thrilled by the beauty of the night, and that night itself and the moon, and … all this rushed suddenly to his mind.
>
> ‘No, life is not over at thirty-one!’ Prince Andrei suddenly decided, finally and conclusively. ‘It is not enough for me to know what I have in me – everyone must know it: Pierre, and that young girl who wanted to fly away into the sky, everyone must

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> know me, so that my life may not be lived for myself alone while others live so apart from it, but so that it may be reflected in them all, and they and I may live in harmony!'

Andrei's encounters with the oak tree are plainly encounters with self-knowledge: like the tree, he is a proud, superior, withdrawn and somewhat life-battered individual. What he sees in his first epiphany of the oak tree is not false; but it is incomplete. World-weariness and a sense of the futility of things are not entirely without foundation – as indeed Andrei is to learn again, later in the novel, in deeper and more painful ways even than the loss of his first wife. Yet this second epiphany of the oak tree caps and overrules the first epiphany. It teaches Andrei a more hopeful sense of life and of himself, and – Tolstoy clearly believes – a truer and deeper one. (Though still a far from perfect one: there is plenty of naïve egotism in Andrei's wish for his own life 'to be reflected in them all').

So what has happened in between, in Book 6, Chapter 2, to turn Andrei from mournful pessimism to vernal aspiration? Like many of the best things in Tolstoy – like many of the best things in life – the answer is extremely simple: it is the hope of love. The 'girl' in the last quotation who is 'thrilled by the beauty of the night' and 'wanted to fly away into the sky' is Natasha Rostov. In Chapter 2 she was at her bedroom window after one o'clock in the morning, exclaiming to her companion Sonya at the beauty of the full moon, and Andrei overheard her from his bedroom window. So Andrei's first dark sad vision of the oak tree in Chapter 1 is transformed into a second, and a joyful, vision of that same oak tree in Chapter 3. And what mediates the transition from the one epiphany to the other is itself an epiphany, indeed an epiphany of an epiphany: in Chapter 2, the moonlight is epiphanic for Natasha, and Natasha's overheard delight in the moonlight is epiphanic for the listening Andrei. And what Tolstoy's art as a novelist does is this: he brings it about that these narrated events can be epiphanic for us his readers too. To read about these events is (or can be) to experience epiphanies of epiphanies of epiphanies.

Very often and very centrally, art conveys epiphanies to us. And to *us*, a society or collective, not just to me, a single person. We should reject the impression sometimes given, for example by Wordsworth's or Rousseau's frequent rhapsodising of solitude, that epiphanies as such are necessarily or even primarily *individual.* Many epiphanies are social or collective, and all epiphanies, even the most sharply individual ones, have their epistemic and their evaluative foundations in our shared awareness of the world. The epiphanies that art affords are prime examples of this. A theatre, concert or cinema audience – come to that, a football crowd – are there to witness an epiphanic event that is essentially a shared experience, as well as being an experience that each individual has. (Novel-reading differs from publicly presented drama in the way it combines the social and the collective; no doubt its peculiar combination of private and public experience is what gives the novel its very distinctive pleasures).

In David Lodge's words,

> literature is a record of human consciousness, the richest and most comprehensive we have. Lyric poetry is arguably [humanity's] most successful effort to describe qualia. The novel is arguably [humanity's] most successful effort to describe the experience of individual human beings moving through space and time … Works of literature describe in the guise of fiction the dense specificity of personal experience, which is always unique, because each of us has a slightly or very different personal history, modifying every new experience we have; and the creation of literary texts recapitulates this uniqueness … Jane Austen's *Emma*, for example, could not have been written by anybody else, and never will be written by anyone else again, but an experiment demonstrating the second law of thermodynamics is and must be repeatable by any competent scientist.[4]

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Compare Philip Larkin's reflections, in an interview, on his own experience of writing poetry:

> [Y]ou write because you have to. If you rationalise it, it seems as if you've seen this sight, felt this feeling, had this vision, and have got to find a combination of words that will preserve it by setting it off in other people. The duty is to the original experience … [a poet's writing must] be born of the tension between what he non-verbally feels and what can be got over in common word-usage to someone who hasn't had his experience.[5]

And Lodge himself quotes Joseph Conrad, in similar vein:

> My task… is by the power of the written word to make you hear, to make you feel – it is, before all, to make you see. That – and no more, and it is everything.[6]

So both in our own consciousness, and also in literature reflecting on human consciousness, we encounter epiphanies. And on my definition above, epiphanies are manifestations of value in our experience that are existentially significant – they have something to say about what it means to be alive. Furthermore, philosophical ethics is, by definition, the philosophy of value.

So here we get to the question that I want to ask: why isn't philosophical ethics more interested in epiphanies? I don't mean that epiphanies are the only thing that ethical philosophers should be allowed to talk about. But I do wonder why moral philosophers don't more often start with some careful and accurate examination of our experience of value; with some *phenomenology*, as philosophers call it, some close and detailed descriptive examination of our ethical experience. We hear a lot in philosophy about questions like 'What is it like to be a bat?', and such questions intrigue me too. But what about asking ourselves 'What is it like to be a human being?' Why don't we philosophers who do ethics begin with an attempt to understand our own subjectivity? And in reporting and reflecting on that subjectivity, why don't we hold ourselves to the same high standards of sincerity, accuracy and significance[7] that apply to novelists, poets, playwrights, film-makers and other kinds of artistic depicters of the human condition and human consciousness?

'Very often and very centrally, art conveys epiphanies to us. And to *us*, a society or collective, not just to me, a single person.'

My own preferred answer to this treats it as more or less a rhetorical question, and therefore simply responds 'You're absolutely right – let's do something about it.' Indeed I am myself already trying to do something about it, in a number of things that I have written.[8] But maybe a little more is needed here to set up that response. Maybe, in particular, I need to show (a) that philosophers do in practice fall short of the just-mentioned sincerity, accuracy and significance standards for phenomenology, and (b) that this falling-short matters in philosophy, in something like the way it matters in art.

In what follows,[9] some reasons to accept (b) will emerge before the end. But I begin with (a). I offer two items of evidence for my claim that remarkably low standards for describing our ethical experience are only too common among philosophers (many philosophers, prominent philosophers, influential philosophers: not *all* philosophers).

Item one is this, from Peter Unger's *Living High and Letting Die*.[10] Unger is introducing a series of highly schematic thought experiments about choices between giving to famine-relief and other possible uses of their money that affluent people often have. Setting up his first thought experiment, he says this:

> Toward having the puzzle be instructive, I'll make two stipulations for understanding the examples. The first is this:[11]

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> Beyond what's explicitly stated in each case's presentation, or what's clearly implied by it, there aren't ever any bad consequences of your conduct for anyone and, what's more, there's nothing else that's morally objectionable about it. In effect, this means we're to understand a proposed scenario so that it is as boring as possible. Easily applied by all, in short the stipulation is: Be boring! (Unger, *Living High and Letting Die*, 25–6)

('There aren't ever any bad consequences of your conduct for anyone': the main scenarios that Unger considers are Shallow Pond, where a toddler is in danger of drowning, but it is rather troublesome to rescue her; Envelope, where I can give to famine relief, but clearly it costs me to do so; and Vintage Sedan, where I can save someone from less-than-lethal injury, but only if I wreck my prized car's upholstery. If we take Unger's instructions literally, then we must imagine each of these cases having no bad consequences, ever, for anyone, except what Unger explicitly stipulates. This seems, to put it mildly, a tall order.)

Item two of my evidence of low standards in philosophical phenomenology is one of those online 'test your moral intuitions' quizzes. Such quizzes are supposed to be a way for you, the innocent punter, to find out which moral theory your intuitions align you with – on the unstated but remarkably powerful assumption that, if you are rational, then your intuitions will align you with *some* particular one of the moral theories, rather than, say, lead you to reject the lot of them.

Anyway, I looked up one such quiz. (I could say which, but I don't think I want to give such tests – there are lots of them – the oxygen of publicity.) As I worked through this quiz, I found myself confronted again and again by bald thought experiment-type questions like 'Does it make a difference if you are helping ten people by harming one person rather than helping 100,000 people by harming 10,000 people?' For most questions, the only available answers were Yes and No. 'I don't know' was never an available answer, not even once; how on earth would Socrates have got on?

I wanted to put in some requests for clarification: 'What do you mean by *by*?', '*What* help and harm exactly – how big, and what sort?', 'Harm and help that the recipients *deserve*, or not?', '*Who am I* in the example – a private citizen, a civil servant, a lifeguard, Iris Murdoch, Alexander the Great, The Joker, or what?' Perhaps above all, I wanted to ask '*Which* people am I harming/helping?'. But all such requests for clarification were simply excluded by the software. On the basis of my responses the system spat back to me the 'analysis' of those responses that it had been programmed to give. This analysis must have been composed by someone who either knows more, the same, or less about moral philosophy than I do myself. But I was clearly not supposed to ask who wrote it. I was supposed simply to accept the analysis as The Word Of The Expert (or as something perhaps even more authoritative: The Word Of The Computer). It was pretty much as if I had consulted a quack psychologist, or an astrology guru, or a fortune cookie.

Unger's advice to philosophers doing thought experiments is 'Be boring', and these quizzes seem to be written on that assumption too. But while online quizzes of this sort could be presented as 'just a bit of fun', like personality tests in *Hello*! magazine, they are normally presented as perfectly serious contributions to a supposedly presupposition-free 'scientific' approach to teaching and researching moral philosophy – in fact, as an activity continuous with what Unger is up to.

With this sort of spectator's (or sometimes participant's) thinking about a person facing some situation of choice, I want to contrast the sort of thinking that comes naturally when one is reading a novel like *War and Peace* – or, if uncalloused by philosophy, deliberating in the first person. Here, 'Be boring!' is *exactly the opposite* of how it goes. What we do is open up our minds to all sorts of possibilities, including – centrally including – the possibility of visionary moments, of transforming insights such as those I call epiphanies. What might happen next to Prince Andrei – or to Natasha, or to Sonya,

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or even to the tree – is in all sorts of ways an open question, and exciting *because* it is open. And our minds range freely over those possibilities, wondering with interest and anticipation, and even something like hope, which of them it is that Tolstoy will choose to realize.

This activity of the reader's mind – call it *open deliberation* – is free and wide-ranging and full of lateral thinking over all sorts of possibilities, including possibilities for epiphany. Yet it does not happen in an unconstrained or undisciplined way. It is just silly to think that in Book 6, Chapter 4, Andrei might sell his aristocrat's estate and start up a taxi-cab business in Smolensk. *That* possibility is pretty well ruled out (at least in Tolstoy; maybe it would be a real possibility in Dostoevsky), though not by anything like Unger's test. It is more to do with a test that has something to do with the aesthetic constraints – nebulous to formulate, yet perfectly real – on what counts, artistically, as a good narrative. It is not so much a 'Be boring!' test, as one that we might put in the words 'Tolstoy – what the hell are you doing?'. By contrast with such outlandish and bathetically unsuitable possibilities as Andrei's taxi-cab start-up, it is intriguing to think that in Chapter 4 Andrei might fall in love, yet fall in love not with Natasha as expected, but much to our surprise with Sonya instead; or that (a little Xerxes-like? See *Epiphanies* Chapter 3) Andrei might send his servants to put up a paling round the oak tree to protect it; or that … and so on indefinitely, and yet, as I say, not without constraints and disciplines.

The contrast between open deliberation in this sense, and the kind of *closed* deliberation that Unger's 'Be boring!' enjoins, could not be starker. We all have a natural propensity for open deliberation that comes out every time we read a novel, or watch a Netflix drama, or deliberate about what to do in our own lives; and central to the possibilities that confront us is, always, the possibility of future epiphanies, indeed of indefinitely many different kinds of epiphanies, and the lasting power of past epiphanies. But in moral philosophy classes all over the world right now, that same natural propensity is being carefully drilled out of students by their tutors' expositions of trolley problems, cave problems, transplant problems, rescue problems, and the rest of the usual applied-ethics diet of hard-case thought experiments. We have a whole industry in moral philosophy that is committed to thinking only in the terms of closed deliberation, and not even mentioning open deliberation – except, as with Unger and my online test, to set it aside as an irrelevant nuisance. And, it seems, very few of the thousands of professional philosophers involved in this closed-deliberation industry are explicit or self-conscious about what they are doing; at least Peter Unger knows he's doing it.

The typical philosophical use of the thought experiment in ethics is not just not to take students of ethics in the same direction as they go in when they read fiction, or deliberate about their own or their friends' lives: towards wide-ranging, lateral-thinking, unpredictable, creative explorations of the indefinite possibilities of human life and action, of the kind that open deliberation promotes. It is to take them in exactly the opposite direction: to channel them down an ever-narrowing modal funnel within which all possible readings of a schematically described situation except for one or two, and most certainly anything like possibilities for epiphany, are remorselessly eliminated. This narrowing-down falsifies our own ethical experience. It cannot possibly be adequate to what it is like to be a human being to represent it, or misrepresent it, by means of this hopelessly schematic and robotic over-simplification.

Compared with all that, ethics might be something different, and something much better: something involving open deliberation not closed, and something more clearly and straightforwardly based on our actual experience of value; particularly our epiphanic experience of value. But as things stand, much of the training that we give our students in philosophy is one to which Unger's injunction 'Be boring!' is unfortunately apt.

The normal penalty that philosophy students face, if they fail to be boring in the required way, is a Fail. But is it the students who have failed philosophy? Or philosophy that has failed them?

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Notes

1. James Joyce, *Stephen Hero* [1944], ed. Theodore Spencer (London: Paladin, 1991), 216–18.
2. Sophie Grace Chappell, *Epiphanies: An Ethics of Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 8–9.
3. Quoted, with minor corrections, from The Project Gutenberg eBook of War and Peace, by Leo Tolstoy.
4. David Lodge, *Consciousness and the Novel* (London: Vintage, 2002), 10–13.

5. Philip Larkin, *Required Writing* (London: Faber 1977), 58, 82.
6. Joseph Conrad, quoted in Lodge, *Consciousness and the Novel*, 13.
7. See *Epiphanies* 3.2, pp. 115ff.
8. In three books in particular: *Ethics and Experience* (Durham: Acumen, 2009), *Knowing What to Do* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), *Epiphanies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022).
9. Quite a lot of the material in the rest of this article is adapted from *Knowing What to Do*, ch. 2, pp. 45–50.
10. Peter Unger, *Living High and Letting Die* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).
11. Unger's other stipulation about his cases is also a be-boring stipulation – it is to hold motives constant (*Living High and Letting Die*, 26): 'As much as can make sense, the agent's motivation in one contrast case, and its relation to her conduct there, is like that in the other.'

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