

The Calling of Anthropology

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Textures of the Ordinary: Doing Anthropology after Wittgenstein is a compelling read, which you can “feel and think” (p 324) simultaneously, just like ordinary lives that find a place in this book: lives where “thinking is not done in the atmosphere of a philosophy lesson but in the thick of experience” (p 323). Veena Das professes anthropology’s claim on philosophy by edifying how to move beyond the “frictionless space of pure thought” (p 317) and descend into ordinary modes of contemplation on the uncertainties of life, the frailty of human existence, loss, grief and death. This is precisely why reviewing it is a challenging and unusual task, owing to its density of emotion, connection, and philosophical excess.

Individual and Theoretical Interlocutors

Das works with two sets of interlocutors. First, we encounter the people who have been a part of her journeys into the ethnographic field—the homes and lives of the urban poor and those who have endured tremendous suffering and violence. As readers, we witness up close the lives and words that have entwined with those of Das and so many of her students, followers, and colleagues, who have read, engaged, and used her ideas to make sense of their own fields. The second set of interlocutors is far more difficult to comprehend—the philosophers, mainly Stanley Cavell and Ludwig Wittgenstein. The brilliance of her work lies in fostering a dialogue between these seemingly disparate groups, revealing the uncertainty of language, ideas, and concepts on the one hand and the profound philosophical contemplation that ordinary individuals living ordinary lives are capable of. One of the most challenging issues in ethnographic research and writing is how to enable “voice” not just to belong and represent a person, community, worldview, or practice but to give voice the ability to

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acquire “life within (a) history.” In this work, Das demonstrates how to do this through the seductive power of her words. While it is relatively simple to become engrossed in this immersive experience of lives that are different from our own but are nonetheless intricately connected by our shared traumas and enduring struggles, it is evidently difficult to consider their significance in terms of theorising the everyday and other categories of ethnographic analysis. The methodological routes to uncovering and attempting to theorise the everyday are: tracing microhistories and microgeographies of the urban neighbourhoods where the author established what she calls a “long intimacy;” paying close attention to words that “swell up” and become significant unexpectedly; and through the everyday forms of the revealing and masking aspects of lived experience. Thus, two methodological lessons stand out. The first is that the ethnographer must pay attention to two notions of truth without privileging one over the other—“demonstrative truth,” that which can be provided or falsified with reference to a body of carefully gathered evidence; and the second is the truth discovered through a special vision, charisma or some special dispensation. The second lesson that ethnography holds out is the invitation to understand something without being explicitly told anything about it.

The extraordinariness of how the “human striving” to survive melds with the ordinary in making the everyday “inhabitable” through “different sorts of return to the ordinary” is at the book’s core (p 7). Ordinary lives are reduced to discourses and data and somehow remain voiceless in social science exposition on the human condition. Das contends that the social sciences have

stressed more on “forms” or the systemic features than on “life” to comprehend sociality, how people in different contexts engage in the lives of others while holding on to a “counterpoint of culture,” or that trace of defiance that forever lingers in the folds of life. In other words, how does culture play out in the nitty-gritty and strains of everyday life? Das builds on this idea of culture, distinct from the ideal to its lived forms embedded in the disappointments of the everyday (p 66), to include the disjunction between normative and ordinary ethics—“ethics embedded in the most ordinary of actions” (p 121), which cannot be reduced to the standards of virtuosity and morality but reflect a conflict of values one encounters while going about life.

Facets of Everyday

In addressing these anthropological concerns of culture, ethics and morality, the work draws out three facets of the everyday. While some of these are familiar and drawn from the sociological literature on the everyday, such as in the writings of Michel De Certeau, Patrick Heller and Henri Lefebvre, Das attempts to transcend these formulations to focus on the insecure, uncertain and disappointing aspects of the everyday. The everyday is marked by a duality, as Heller describes it, the misery and the power, or as Lefebvre discusses, repetition and difference, or as Das points out, the routine and habit on one side and doubt and improvisation on the other. This duality results in the everyday being both a secure and an insecure space. The ways of acting and expressing oneself in daily life are not predetermined; they must be created through the labour of making the everyday. This process also involves uncovering the threats to the everyday as we seek to find ways of acting and expressing ourselves. Additionally, Das emphasises the concept of engaging in the “labour of criticism,” which arises from our unmet expectations and the failures experienced in everyday life. Hence, our loyalties to a culture and its institutions are always subject to questioning, challenges, and meaningful critique, stemming from our encounters with the failures of

the everyday. The ordinary is anything but routine; it is a realm of politics and possibilities that gives words life, "human forms of life."

Scepticism, the book's leitmotif, is central to how Das conceives of the everyday, "arising from the experience of living" (p 50). It also firmly anchors philosophy in the anthropological modes of engaging with the other and the challenges of cultural translation. It is the uncertain ground on which the everyday is restored and lived, the "lining of the everyday" that mediates between people and their contexts. The focus on microgeographies is evident in the discussion on the struggle for legitimate rights over housing and other amenities in a Delhi slum, and an inter-religious union that upset the conventional grounds of sociality between communities and places and contexts marked by violence. In these instances, Das discerningly elucidates how people regain a different or an "eventual" everyday to mend life in the most mundane and hidden ways. It is accomplished despite and amid the difficulties that encumber the everyday. It takes dedicated efforts, or what Das calls "the miracle of small acts of care," to repair, restore and reinhabit the quotidian.

Scepticism is the most complicated among intimate others, such as family, kin and neighbours, as are the related intricacies of pervasive violence and conflict. While acknowledging other conceptualisations of the everyday, as in the work of Scott, who speaks of the everyday in terms of scripts of resistance, Das contends that such interpretations tend to secure the everyday and limit its possibilities, diminishing the space for the play of temptations, doubts and scepticism. However, one feels compelled to ask if temptations and scepticism are not amenable to certain kinds of cognitive and cultural scripts. And why, then, is one script, that of everyday resistance, for instance, not open to threats of scepticism while others are?

A possible opening out is revealed through the heft of the domestic on women's lives, which is often, and rather mistakenly, associated with women's

complicity, and only reaffirms the labour of what it means to "re-engage" and coexist with concrete others in the quotidian. She explains how domestic cruelty is experienced on a daily basis and is embedded in the interstices of familial relationships. One among the many revealing examples she takes is that of a daughter-in-law, already late for work, being heckled by her mother-in-law to complete some household chores before she leaves for her office. The acerbic effects of such everyday rankling harbour scepticism, often leading to more obvious forms of violence; however, Das focuses on what scepticism apprehends and how the breakdown of the everyday is averted. She dwells on how the ethical dilemma of living on the faultlines and conserving social ties reflects women's critical vantage point on their cultures and contexts. They find a voice by including others' contempt for them and continuing to engage with the world. Das argues that this ability to braid this abomination into a first-person, singular narrative

about the world is often sidelined, concealing both voice and the prospects of healing.

The themes of dying and near-death experiences underwrite the discussion on scepticism. Das brings in a sobering discussion on how one of the iconic figures in Anthropology, Renato Rosaldo, went about his fieldwork and life after he lost Michelle Rosaldo (Shelly), his partner, to a freak accident during their fieldwork in the Philippines among the Ilongot in 1981, popularly known for the institutional practice of headhunting. As he struggled to understand how feelings of grief could manifest as rage upon the death of a loved one among the Ilongot, Shelly's death and the circumstances after the event augured scepticism and a "cognitive opening" to rage as a possible route to express loss, but importantly, an acknowledgement of other forms of knowing that had eluded him thus far. In other fascinating narrations of how the singularity of events can often negate a lifelong certainty, Das recounts two dying statements, one made by her

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mother-in-law when she gestured for a *phoo phoo* (a smoke) in the intensive care unit; the other was that of Sita, someone she interacted closely with during her fieldwork in Delhi, who had instructed her family, in defiance of customary practice, that upon her death, she should not be covered in the shroud sent by her brother. For someone she had known to be a teetotaller and extremely pious, Das wondered what could have prompted her mother-in-law to make such an incongruous request. Similarly, Das recalls interactions with Sita to make sense of her proclamation and her immediate family's efforts to hide their embarrassment among the extended circle of kin. In an elaborate discussion of what such statements could mean to the dying person and their family and kin, Das leaves the reader with the poignant realisation of how the quotidian demands on life often numb our capacity to understand the import of our experiences on self-knowledge, let alone the knowledge of the other.

Das illustrates the social nature of language, its use, and its modalities in the ordinary, as she weaves in and out of different ethnographic encounters to discuss the braiding together of action and expression in the conduct of politics in the everyday. These are instances of how not to engage in a "negation of voice" and how to enable voice to appear as something that acquires life in the speaker's history. The anthropologist attempts to present an episteme, a way of thinking, cognition and its translation into

practices of the everyday. Though the authority of the ethnographer has been questioned externally and through difficult processes of self-reflexivity, the ethnographer continues to write with some sense of control over the narrative. This is certainly more pronounced when the ethnographer wields considerable influence in the academic world. Who can afford for doubt to seep into one's presentation of the everyday and, by extension, perhaps into the practice of the ethnographic method? Doubt and scepticism, though sensitive and sensitising concepts, are incredibly difficult to translate as a method, language, and expression.

Task of Anthropology

How can anthropologists comprehend the density of life experiences that conceal more than they reveal? According to Das, the answer lies in the "long intimacy on which ethnography is based." Even as *Textures of the Ordinary* exemplifies this intimate connection and provides insights into how one might practice such long intimacy through ethnography, the reader is also drawn into a profoundly philosophical space, engaging with Cavell and Wittgenstein, where one may feel adrift from the mooring of experience and voice. However, the profundity of the discussion breathes life into philosophy as it seamlessly cleaves to the mundane and reorients anthropological inquiry towards an intellectual high ground. This intellectual high ground comes from learning

the art of letting go, not being rigid about using precepts and concepts to capture what we think exists, but critically evaluating them against the ever-changing life situations in the field. New pathways in inquiry emerge not in "breaking through the resistance of the other" through a conceptual toolkit but in the "gesture of waiting" for the other to reciprocate it with the "gift" of knowledge (p x).

The book reminds us academicians, especially anthropologists, of our calling and why we continue researching, teaching, and writing about the world, if not to unravel the labour and aesthetics of what it means to engage in the "life of the other" and "learn to be in a world." Ethnographic fieldwork and research have opened many routes for engaging with cultural others and learning the sagacity of coexistence from them. And yet, somehow, along the way, it seems we have stopped relating our lives to the lives of others, specifically with those we research, ordinary lives that impact us and among whom we find a voice. In this sense, the book is autobiographical; it is as much about allowing the knowledge of the other to kindle the journey of self-discovery as it is about acknowledging the human voice in the ordinary.

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