

Chapter 1 : Table of Contents: The elusiveness of the ordinary

The concept of the ordinary, along with such cognates as everyday life, ordinary language, and ordinary experience, has come into special prominence in late modern philosophy.

The Elusiveness of the Ordinary: Studies in the Possibility of Philosophy Published: Stein offers these thoughts: Very funny this terrible thing is. A man that is born falls into a dream like a man who falls into the sea. If he tries to climb out into the air as inexperienced people endeavour to do, he drownsâ€”nicht war? The way is to the destructive element submit yourself, and with the exertions of your hands and feet in the water make the deep, deep sea keep you up. It is not clear that ordinary experience is either quite wholly available to us or quite wholly coherent, yet it is all around us, and nothing else can serve as the point of departure for the exertions of the philosopher. Rosen develops his own conception of philosophy by describing and criticizing these alternative conceptions, each of whichâ€”he arguesâ€”involves either denying or inappropriately resolving what Rosen himself sees as a standing tension between ordinary life and philosophical desire and thought. As envisioners of a strict science of ordinary life and human experience, Rosen considers first Montesquieu and then Husserl. Montesquieu in *The Spirit of Laws* is described as a founder father of the modern mathematical social sciences that fail really to grasp the basis and meaning of human, political life. Montesquieu, according to Rosen, holds both a that human beings have innate traits, as a result of which their actions fall under laws that are analogous to the laws of Newtonian mechanics, and b that human beings are free to deviate from these laws. This incoherent stance indicates that Montesquieu has failed to grasp exactly how human nature is expressed in political practice. No coherent political science can result from commitment to both a and b. We are worse off, according to Rosen, when we face this unavoidable, even unsolvable problem by conceiving of human nature as Montesquieu undertook to do along the lines of Cartesian-Newtonian material nature, where material bodies fall under exceptionless laws. First, we are just not like that in our actions, and, second, so conceiving of ourselves threatens to deprive us of all norms for political life. Perhaps we would be better off, at least in political philosophy, to hold to a Platonic-Aristotelian conception of even material nature. Either way, compelling norms seem unavailable. In pursuit of this aim, Husserl proposes a science of conceptual consciousness. This effort, too, founders, in that it cannot take account of the erotic drive, arising mysteriously from within ordinary life, that alone can motivate scientific efforts. Hence, though motivated by ordinary experience, it fails to grasp what goes on within ordinary experience. The transcendental investigations of Kant and of Heidegger are likewise incoherently both rooted in ordinary life and dismissive of its significance. Heidegger, too, incoherently repudiates ordinary, lived, deliberative experience. Wittgenstein and Strauss attempted to put an end to philosophy: Neither stance is coherent, according to Rosen. Speech and concepts change in ordinary life, and we need to and can think about what to say and think. Simply to endorse one version of everyday language at a particular moment, as Rosen takes Wittgenstein to do, is already itself to do philosophy, not to put an end to it. Rosen criticizes Moore, Austin, and Grice similarly. But they do not stop with this thought. Instead, and moved, respectively, by philosophical eros and by a desire to know, Plato and Aristotle each go on to develop metaphysical accounts of what realities underlie unitary wholes and their looks. Largely following Aristotle, Rosen himself endorses hylomorphism. The unitary wholes that we see are substances space-occupying particulars that are informed by a blueprint or model essence. In developing both his criticisms of others and his own conception of philosophy as passionate, extraordinary thinking beginning from within the ordinary, Rosen has two main, interrelated concerns. He is worried about vulgarity, consumerism, and drift in modern life, and he is worried about the dominance of constructivism and technological-instrumental thinking in modern thought. His endeavor to call us back to a reflective mode of engagement with the ordinary is designed to address both these worries. Receptive engagement with the ordinary will rein in subjective-instrumental theorizing, making it responsible to something real; reflection on our engagements will pull us out of ordinary consumerism and toward something higher. These are interesting and important worries to address, both in doing philosophy and in thinking about how to do it. The problem of achieving intelligibility and genuine practical accessibility,

on the one hand, along with exemplary pursuit of objective value, on the other, is genuine, both in thought and in life, and it is perhaps especially pressing in modernity. First, his address to this problem remains on the whole too methodological, too concerned with how to get started in doing philosophy at all, rather than with particular problems of inquiry, ethics, politics, religion, or art. The metaphysics that Rosen offers of unitary wholes and their looks is as he would concede compatible with any number of practices of inquiry, ethical life, political life, religious life, and practices of art. So exactly whereâ€”toward what specific fruitful engagements and orientations other than a lot more worrying about how to do philosophy â€”is Rosen pointing us? I am not clear that Rosen offers much of an answer. But is this right? It is true that Kant claims that the categorical imperative is a self-legislated command of pure practical reason, laid down within each individual conscience. Similarly, Rosen fails to take on the most powerful and persuasive readings of Wittgenstein and Austin that bring out their substantive commitments, preferring himself to focus instead on methodological issues alone. Rosen, however, remains silent about this. This stance too has consequences for the philosophy of mind, for ethics, and for how we actually conduct ourselves in our courses of education and legal dispute. The worries that motivate it are significant. His own investigations of philosophical methodology are often eye-opening. Against a background of considerable learning, he has thought hard about what serious, passionate, orientation-seeking thinking might be or be like. But one can also wish for more specific substance of thought than Rosen here provides.

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