

A Brilliant Perspective: Diamondian Ethics

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I

Even a casual reader of Cora Diamond's essays on ethics can find much to admire. The essays are consistently insightful and witty and occasionally devastatingly sharp; they have an originality that is a function of a gift for getting us to look with wonder and interest at humble and oft overlooked aspects of our lives; and they are written in a style that, while conversational and uncluttered by technical jargon, is erudite, rich in historical and literary allusions and rather relentlessly to the point. As I speak, a significant number of Diamond's treatments of ethical themes are published only as journal articles or book chapters. Many of these yet uncollected papers are slated to be included in a volume entitled *Ethics: Shifting Perspectives*.¹ Here, I want to explore implications of this forthcoming volume's title and ask what it might be to represent Diamond's ethical writings, when considered against the backdrop of contemporary Anglo-American moral philosophy, as calling for a substantial shift or reorientation. I am not proposing to survey exhaustively Diamond's contributions to ethics. I am going to make a few general, closely related suggestions about how Diamond's thought goes against the grain of dominant trends in ethics and bring out how some central elements of her work cohere with my suggestion. Along the way, I hope to illuminate some sources of philosophical resistance to her project in ethics and make a few suggestions about how this resistance might be countered.

1. Diamond (Forthcoming).

II

In several papers, Diamond discusses the philosophical work of Iris Murdoch and underlines ideas of Murdoch's that she finds congenial.² One way to approach the first suggestion I want to make about what is unorthodox about Diamond's orientation in ethics is to follow up on some of her own reflections about what is distinctive about Murdoch's ethical posture. In a recent paper, Diamond discusses a view of Murdoch's that put Murdoch at odds with British and American moral philosophy in the mid-twentieth century, when Murdoch first proposed it. At issue is a view of moral concepts on which they do not move within a world that is "hard" in that it is "given for, or given prior to, moral thought and life."³ Murdoch conceives the world in which moral concepts operate as illuminated by our moral activity and modes of response, and this means among other things that she is taking issue with the widespread philosophical assumption that the world of ethical concern is practically inert. When discussing these aspects of Murdoch's work, Diamond acknowledges that philosophical conversations about how the world moral concepts presuppose is set up have shifted since the time at which Murdoch was writing to allow a significant role for metaphysics. But Diamond stresses that moral philosophers still take this world to be "hard" in the sense of being articulated independently of moral thought and imagination. She turns to an influential and relatively recent article by three leading moral philosophers, Stephen Darwall, Allan Gibbard and Peter Railton,⁴ observing not only that Darwall and his co-authors implicitly distinguish between "the metaphysics of the realm of value and the metaphysics of other things, taken not to belong to ethics or meta-ethics" but also that they assume that any respectable account of moral concepts must locate them within this "metaphysics of other things." The result is an account of moral concepts that, while formulated differently from the specific accounts Murdoch once had as critical targets, likewise depicts moral concepts as functioning within a world that is given to us independently of the exercise of moral capacities.

2. See Diamond (1996) and "Murdoch the Explorer," forthcoming. See also Diamond, "Murdoch Off the Map, or Taking Empiricism Back from the Empiricists," Unpublished Manuscript.

3. "Murdoch the Explorer," section 1. This view of moral concepts is also a major concern of Diamond's (1996).

4. Darwall *et al.* (1999).

Diamond offers a quick series of examples of how we might follow Murdoch in conceiving the world that is the object of moral judgment and discourse not as hard but rather as “cloudy and shifting” because it is achieved partly through the use of moral capacities.⁵ We are following Murdoch if we allow, for instance, that, in Diamond’s words, “what life is, what death is, what a human being is, what an animal,” these things are not given to ethics by biology or metaphysics understood as external and prior to ethics but are rather “understood through moral thought.”⁶ Diamond’s aim in the passage I just cited is to provide illustrations of what it would be to inherit Murdoch’s ethical thought. But anyone familiar with Diamond’s writings will easily recognise that her illustrations correspond to organising preoccupations of her own writings. A central theme of Diamond’s work in ethics is that moral reflection is shaped by concepts of human beings and animals that, far from being simply handed down to us from biology, are works of moral thought and imagination. Diamond consistently attempts to get us to see that “*merely being human* has a role in moral thought”⁷ and, similarly, that animals “are not given for [ethical] thought independently of . . . a mass of ways of thinking about and responding to them.”⁸ Diamond’s observations about how Murdoch’s situating of moral concepts and judgments in an already moral world challenges engrained philosophical assumptions apply equally well to Diamond’s own work.

III

Fundamental for contemporary debates about how animals should be treated, which began in the 1970s, is the question of whether animals are themselves proper objects of moral concern. Many of the most prominent philosophers and animal activists who answer this question in the affirmative, representing animals as indeed proper objects of moral concern, insist on grounding the forms of respect and attention that they believe animals merit in individual capacities such as sentience or subjecthood. Defences of this basic approach to animals and ethics depend for their force on the idea that the forms of respect and attention human beings

5. The inset phrase is a phrase of Murdoch’s that Diamond employs.

6. “Murdoch the Explorer,” section 1.

7. Diamond (1991d, 59).

8. Diamond (1991b, 327).

merit are likewise grounded in individual capacities. Members of the group of theorists who defend these closely related conceptions of our ethical relationships to human beings and animals – a group that includes utilitarians such as Peter Singer as well as proponents of various rights-based theories – are sometimes referred to collectively as advocates of *moral individualism*. It is a tacit assumption of different moral individualisms that the concepts of human beings and animals we draw on in moral thought are morally neutral, biological concepts. To the extent that moral individualists make this assumption, thereby treating what human beings are and what animals are as things given to us prior to moral reflection, they commit themselves to partial versions of the sorts of outlooks in ethics that, according to Diamond, Murdoch sought to dislodge. Diamond's discussions of animals and ethics give expression to her own opposition to such outlooks, and this opposition also gets expressed elsewhere in her ethical writings. Although Diamond does not use the term "moral individualism," it is possible to capture some of the larger concerns of her work in ethics by describing her as criticising the tendency of moral individualists to represent human beings and animals as handed down to us by biology conceived as external to and independent of ethics.

A recurring theme of Diamond's work in ethics is that we need to distance ourselves from the basic conception of our ethical relationships to other human beings characteristic of different moral individualists. Again and again, Diamond attempts to get us register ways in which ethical thought is shaped by concepts of human beings of sorts foreign to the work of moral individualists, concepts that are "ethical" or "imaginative," as opposed to merely biological, insofar as they treat humans as creatures that as such merit specific forms of respect and attention. She proceeds by bringing out how an imaginative sense of human life enters thought about ourselves and others, giving the plain fact of being human, in her words, "a role quite different from that of properties like sentience or rationality or the capacity for moral personality."⁹ Some of Diamond's examples concern thought about human beings with extremely diminished capacities. She describes how a sense of what it is to have a human life to lead can be present in thought about, for instance, retarded human beings. She evokes the way in which we may conceive a severely retarded person, not in the ethically neutral and merely biological terms to which moral

9. Diamond (1991d, 59).

individualists take us to be limited but as a fellow of ours with a “soul in mute eclipse” whose incapacities represent a terrible deprivation in virtue of which she merits our sympathy.¹⁰ The thought of such fellowship is there, for instance, in our appreciation of the special outrage that Dostoyevsky expects us to feel at the deed of the man who, in *The Brothers Karamazov*, rapes the village idiot.¹¹ Nor are Diamond’s examples of how an imaginative sense of human life can enter our thought limited to cases of thought about impaired human beings.¹² One of her more striking examples is about Dickens’ Scrooge, about how Scrooge’s understanding of himself and others is transformed, not by the acquisition of new facts but by an ability he develops as a result of hearing tales about his life from a series of ghosts, the ability to look at himself and others in a manner informed by a vivid sense of what is humanly significant.¹³

Just as we operate with imaginative, ethical concepts of human beings, we also operate with imaginative, ethical concepts of animals. Showing this is an important object of Diamond’s writings on animals. Diamond illustrates how thought about animals can be coloured by a sense of animals as creatures that are our fellows in being embarked on mortal paths, as creatures that are both mysteriously like and unlike us. In this connection, she discusses, for example, a couple of poems by Walter de La Mare, in one of which we are invited to look upon a titmouse not as a merely biological thing but as a “tiny son of life,”¹⁴ and in the other of which, after being presented with striking observations about mallards, goldeneyes and other ducks, we are told, in a manner that Diamond

10. The inset phrase, which Diamond quotes at *ibid.*, 55, is from Walter de la Mare’s poem “The Mourner.”

11. Diamond is here referring to Book III, Chapter II of Dostoyevsky’s *Brothers Karamazov*, in which a village girl, who is so impaired that she never learned to talk, Lizaveta, gives birth to a child, leaving the other villagers to speculate about who was so vile as to impregnate her.

12. Diamond’s treatments of cases of retarded human beings are important for her conversation with moral individualists. Moral individualists maintain that human beings who lack characteristics that, by the lights of moral individualism, qualify as morally relevant impose diminished demands for moral attention and concern. When Diamond discusses, e.g., the village idiot in the *Brothers Karamazov*, one of her aims is to get us to recognise that, far from regarding the severely retarded to place diminished demands for attention, we take them to have special vulnerabilities in virtue of which they merit special solicitude. In addition to the passages already cited, see Diamond’s rejection of Singer’s treatment of the retarded in Diamond (1991d, 52). See also Diamond’s treatment of dead human beings, another class of human beings who lack the capacities that moral individualists take to be morally important, at *ibid.*, 51 and 1991b: 467, 476–477.

13. See Diamond (1991d, 42–43).

14. Diamond (1991b, 473–474).

describes as evoking a sense of the mystery of individual duck life, that: "All these are *kinds*. But every Duck/Himself is, and himself alone."¹⁵

In the bits of her thought, I just surveyed, Diamond mounts a direct challenge to the thought of moral individualists. She tries to get us to see that being a human being or an animal is as such morally important, and she does so with an eye to bringing into question the idea, central to moral individualisms of all types, that any forms of respect and attention humans or animals merit are grounded in the qualities and capacities of individuals. Although the relevant portions of Diamond's work are well-known, it is difficult to find rejoinders to it in the writings of moral individualists.¹⁶ This neglect can be traced in part to the extent of the philosophical distance separating Diamond from moral individualists. Diamond not only maintains that, in contrast to what moral individualists assume, being human or being an animal is by itself ethically significant, she attempts to get us to recognise this by showing us that, again, in contrast to what moral individualists assume, we ourselves operate with concepts of human beings and animals that are products of moral reflection. In adopting this doubly oppositional posture, Diamond differs from many other critics of moral individualism. Critics of moral individualism more commonly employ strategies for challenging its core claims that do not turn on rejecting the idea that in speaking of human beings and animals in ethics we are speaking of things that given prior to moral reflection and thus "hard" in Murdoch's sense. Consider in this connection above all the way in which some Kantian moral philosophers attack moral individualists' conception of our ethical relationship to our fellow human beings. The Kantian moral philosophers I have in mind are in agreement with Diamond insofar as they hold, in opposition to moral individualists, that the recognition that a creature is a human being is inseparable from seeing her as meriting certain forms of respect and attention. But they insist that the relevant act of recognition, instead of being at least partly a matter of theoretical cognition, is a matter of the adoption of an exclusively practical attitude and, further, that we can therefore acknowledge the need for such an act of recognition without forfeiting an understanding of the features of the world to which the concepts of human beings

15. See "Murdoch the Explorer," section 1.

16. The one moral individualist I am aware of who comments on Diamond's work in some detail is Jeffrey McMahan. See McMahan (2005), esp. 369–376. There are, however, respects in which McMahan's commentary is disappointing. See in this connection the next note but one.

and animals we employ in ethics apply as “hard.”¹⁷ Whereas, within the writings of these Kantian moral philosophers, the idea that the world to which ethical thought about humans and animals is responsible is “hard” figures as a sort of unquestionable starting point, just as it does for moral individualists, there is no such thing as appreciating what Diamond is doing in ethics apart from seeing that she rejects this idea.¹⁸ This gesture of rejection is worth underlining because, among other things, it shapes Diamond’s thought about the kinds of demands moral thought imposes.

IV

When Diamond invites us to understand elements of the world in which our moral concepts operate as “shifting and cloudy” because brought into view through the exercise of moral capacities, she is advancing a meta-physical claim with substantial epistemological implications. She is making a point that bears on how we conceive the cognitive enterprise to the extent that it is directed toward illuminating the world of ethical concern. She is suggesting that it is an enterprise carried out by modes of thought that reflect what we have learned about the significance of a wide range of situations, actions and reactions, in part through what we have taken from our knowledge of differences in the significance that different people – people distant from us in time and place – attach to these things. The

17. The line of thought I just described receives an especially forceful defence in the writings of Christine Korsgaard. Korsgaard clearly and explicitly tells us not only that the world to which moral thought is responsible is “hard” but also that she favours a Kantian approach in ethics because, in her eyes, such an approach represents the best account of moral thought and life that, as it were, acknowledges this fact (see esp. the “Prologue” to Korsgaard 1996). Korsgaard’s work is also worth mentioning in this connection because, in a series of relatively recent papers, she appeals to Kantian lines of thought in attacking moral individualists’ conception of our ethical relationship to animals. Here, Korsgaard distances herself from Kant’s official view of animals as mere means that do not in themselves merit specific forms of attention and treatment, defending instead a view that both represents animals as direct sources of moral claims and resembles the Kantian view of our ethical relationship to other humans she advocates in that it is supposed to be consistent with an understanding of the world to which moral thought is responsible as “hard.” See esp. Korsgaard (2004).

18. This point about what appreciating Diamond’s ethical project requires is a point that Jeffrey McMahan simply misses in his efforts to defend moral individualism against her criticisms (see the reference to McMahan’s work in the last note but one). I critically examine McMahan’s work, together with the work of other moral individualists, in “Minding Our Fellow Creatures: A Critique of Moral Individualism,” (Crary, Forthcoming).

kinds of moral modes of thought that are in question here are aptly described as informed by our senses of what is important in ways that distinguish them from the modes of thought characteristic of the empirical sciences. While it is no part of Diamond's project to impugn the empirical sciences, she is denying that the empirical sciences have a monopoly on shedding light on "particular realities."¹⁹ She is distancing herself from a classic strategy for distinguishing reality and appearance that is often taken to establish such a monopoly, a strategy that treats the expulsion of everything affective as one of the touchstones of uncompromised access to how things really are. By the same token, she is calling on us to transform the way we construe the epistemic ideals we appeal to in describing what getting our minds around reality is like. One of Diamond's characteristic ways of expressing her sense of the need to transform construals of our epistemic ideals is to say that we need to conceive legitimate or rational modes of discourse so that they include more than *argument*. When Diamond speaks of "argument" in this context, she has in mind a judgment or set of judgments that allow a further concluding judgment to be inferred in a manner that does not depend on any tendency of the initial judgment or judgments to shape modes of responsiveness. Diamond is aware that there are other ways of characterising argument and that philosophers and others sometimes speak of "arguments" in a broader sense. Her goal is to engage with philosophical traditions that, in addition to conceiving argument in this narrow manner, take argument thus conceived to be the hallmark of rationality. When Diamond describes rationality as extending past argument, she is using the terminology of these philosophical traditions with an eye to challenge them. She is suggesting that the realm of rationality needs to be understood as including stretches of discourse that contribute directly to our ability to make genuine connections of thought by cultivating our responses in various ways.

Many of Diamond's examples of such non-argumentative yet legitimate discourse are drawn from novels and poems. Diamond describes how literary works of these kinds can change the way we see the world, specifically by eliciting emotional responses through the imaginative presentation of different objects and events. She acknowledges that our reactions to particular works may be unconsidered, that we may respond

19. The phrase in quotations is one that Diamond uses in her unpublished contribution to the "Author Meets Critic" session devoted to Stanley Cavell, Cora Diamond, Ian Hacking, and John McDowell (2009).

“in a wholly unreflective way,”²⁰ but she claims that we can come to respond in ways that are considered insofar as they are informed by, for instance, “a sense of what is alive, and what is shallow, sentimental, cheap.”²¹ Moreover, she wishes us to see that texts that invite us to respond emotionally in various ways may, as she puts it, “include, in the ‘invitation’, an invitation to . . . [a] kind of attention and critical reflection” that essentially promotes such considered responsiveness.²² Her idea is that works of literature may thus, in virtue of literary features that engage us emotionally, present us with genuine, critically demanding modes of thought. It follows that we utterly misrepresent what she is up to if we represent her as, for instance, Onora O’Neill once did, to be taking an interest in literary works because they can facilitate “mere conversions” and can be useful when rational conversation has broken down.²³ To be sure, if we start from the assumption that rationality is limited to argument, it may seem as though this is the only serious role that literature taken as literature can play in our discursive lives. But this assumption is a central critical target of Diamond’s discussions of literature. She turns to literature with an eye to showing that not all legitimate modes of discourse take the form of argument.

Some of Diamond’s examples come from classic realist novels. She writes with great insight about novels of, among others, Austen, Dickens, Dostoyevsky and James. Although the centrepiece of these novels is the development and interaction of a core cast of characters, and although when Diamond discusses them she does so with an eye to making a point about legitimate, non-argumentative forms of discourse, her point is not that the novels offer, as part of their descriptions of the different characters and of the characters’ conversations, descriptions of such modes of discourse. What interests Diamond is a point about how, in consequence of the kinds of demands for emotional responsiveness these works place on readers *in* their imaginative presentation of different characters and conversations, the works directly contribute to genuine, rational understanding and are thus rightly depicted as presenting us with legitimate,

20. Diamond (1991a, 303).

21. *Ibid.*

22. *Ibid.*

23. See O’Neill (1989). Diamond discusses O’Neill’s paper in her second introduction to *The Realistic Spirit* (see Diamond 1991h, esp. 27–28). For passages in the paper to which O’Neill was responding in which Diamond specifically distances herself from the idea that her interest in literature is a function of the ability of literary texts to facilitate “mere conversions,” see Diamond (1991a, 295 and 306) – a paper written in 1980–1981.

non-argumentative modes of thought and instruction. For instance, when Diamond writes about Austen and James in particular, she tells us that these authors use irony in presenting a “moral criticism of human character and forms of social life,” that, far from being separable from literary gestures that invite the adoption of an ironic attitude, is essentially tied to “a way of viewing human nature and its failings in which amusement, critical intelligence and delicacy of moral discrimination all play a role.”²⁴

One of Diamond’s strategies for clarifying the nature of her interest in literature involves bringing out how not only various realist novels but also some formally quite different literary works present us with rational modes of thought in virtue of ways in which they engage us and direct our attention. Among her examples are novels that challenge certain older conventions of novelistic realism, such as Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse Five*, and also a variety of poems, including poems by Blake and Wordsworth. Diamond’s discussions of these texts, like her discussions of various classic realist novels, are supposed to show that the texts’ moral interest is essentially a function of how they can contribute to understanding specifically through the ways in which they address our hearts, through the ways in which, within them, “objects are described and feelings are given in connection with each other.”²⁵ Her idea is that, since the emphasis of these particular works is not on the development of a slate of characters, her treatments are not likely to be (mis)interpreted as intended to show merely that the works’ descriptions of characters encode descriptions of philosophically heterodox forms of moral reflection.²⁶

Diamond wishes to get us to see that literature considered as literature can traffic in the sort of rational moral understanding that is the hallmark of moral philosophy. Her writings on literary themes are provocative, not

24. Diamond (1991a, 300).

25. *Ibid.*, 298.

26. Diamond’s most focused discussion of these matters is in Diamond (1998). Here, Diamond addresses a prevalent misunderstanding of Martha Nussbaum’s treatments of various realist novels. She brings out how, when Nussbaum discusses specific forms of practical reasoning in reference to such novels, Nussbaum is in the first instance making a point not about how the novels’ descriptions of their characters exemplify these forms of reasoning but rather about how the authors’ moral imaginations, as exhibited in the kinds of responses and modes of attention their works are designed to invite from readers, exemplify them (see esp. *ibid.*, 42–44). Although Diamond is in this paper primarily concerned with Nussbaum’s writings, her remarks apply also to her own treatments of realist novels.

only because they invite us to understand the distinction between moral philosophy and literature as more complex than many moral philosophers assume²⁷ but also because, as I have been stressing, they do so by suggesting the need to transform the way most philosophers construe the notion of rationality. I noted that the particular transformation Diamond recommends is the epistemological counterpart of her metaphysical claim about how the aspects of the world with which our moral concepts are concerned are not “hard” but “cloudy and shifting” in the sense of being illuminated by moral reflection. My claim was that, if we are to allow that particular realities may be “cloudy and shifting” in the sense Diamond intends, we need to conceive the notion of rationality so that it accommodates the possibility that a bit of discourse may directly inform rational understanding in virtue of ways in which it shapes sensitivities internal to moral reflection. Admittedly, it will appear reasonable to many philosophers to reject as unsatisfactory the case Diamond makes for this broad, argument-transcending conception of rationality in her discussions of literary works she takes to illustrate it. It will appear as though, even if Diamond successfully shows that it is *natural* to take certain literary works as contributing internally to rational understanding insofar as they direct our feelings, she cannot thereby take credit for having shown that we are *justified* in taking the works to be doing this. What creates this appearance is the widely shared philosophical assumption that there are antecedent considerations against a conception of rationality, of the sort, Diamond favours, that reaches beyond argument. So it is to the point to mention that in substantial portions of her work, portions in which she draws significantly on the philosophy of Wittgenstein, Diamond defends a view of thought and language that challenges this assumption.

27. It follows from the lines of Diamond's thought that I have been discussing not only, as I have stressed, that literary works can as such directly contribute to the sort of rational moral understanding that is the prime concern of moral philosophy but also that literary features of *philosophical* works can, by engaging us in different ways, directly contribute to the rational content of the works. For what is in effect a discussion of the latter possibility, see Diamond's reading of Plato's *Crito* in Diamond (1991e). Diamond's reading of Wittgenstein's early and later writings represent a further, much more involved exploration of ways in which literary features of philosophical texts can as such directly contribute to the rational content of the texts. I discuss Diamond's work on Wittgenstein in the next section, but I cannot, in this paper, consider how Diamond treats what might be described as literary qualities of Wittgenstein's texts as in themselves contributing to the texts' rational content.

Diamond's writings on Wittgenstein's philosophy are not only well-known but also well-known for being rather heretical. Diamond distances herself from various widely received interpretations of Wittgenstein, presenting a distinctive account of the trajectory of his thought. One good place to turn for an explanation of what is unusual about her reading of Wittgenstein is the essays on Wittgenstein collected in her 1991 volume, *The Realistic Spirit*. Here, Diamond presents readers with what she describes as two complementary sets of terms for capturing what sets her interpretation of Wittgenstein apart. She says that she opposes the familiar idea that Wittgenstein espouses realism in the *Tractatus* and traded realism for an anti-realist posture in his later writings. She also tells us that it is possible to do justice to the development of his thought by characterising him as, at both periods, advocating the adoption of a "realistic" attitude or "spirit." Let me briefly comment on the significance of both of these sets of terms.

When the author of the *Tractatus* is described as a philosophical realist, he is taken to be developing a view of thought and language on which logic supervenes on metaphysics and, more specifically, on which the meanings of expressions are fixed by links to objects in an antecedent reality. When the later Wittgenstein is then described as exchanging realism for an anti-realist orientation, he is taken not only to be resisting the idea that meaning is fixed in such a manner but also to be suggesting that there can therefore be no such thing as wholeheartedly objective agreement between the language and the world. The idea is that meaning is determined (not by ties to a prior reality but) by our public practices with expressions and, further, that, insofar as meaning is in this way a function of what we do, there can be no question of its attaining to our ideal of objectivity.

Diamond opposes this narrative about Wittgenstein's philosophical evolution because she reads him as, in the *Tractatus* as well as in later writings, concerned to reject an assumption common to the sorts of realist and anti-realist doctrines that get associated with his work at different periods. Read as a realist, the author of the *Tractatus* is taken to be assuming that we have the type of external or transcendent perspective on language from which to determine that the objective stability it exhibits is a matter of grounding in a prior reality, and an important object of Diamond's work on the *Tractatus* is showing that its author not only does not make this assumption but also sets out to repudiate it. An image of the *Tractatus* as

having an anti-metaphysical agenda is interpretatively controversial, but I cannot here consider either the kind of critical attention Diamond's – in themselves nuanced – original efforts to develop this image have received or the subtleties of her responses to critics.²⁸ Diamond claims that Wittgenstein's early and later writings are united by an anti-metaphysical ambition, and what interests me here is a sense in which, despite any appearance to the contrary, this claim represents a challenge to standard readings of Wittgenstein's later work. Given that different anti-realisms are often depicted as anti-metaphysical enterprises, it might seem as though the idea of hostility to transcendent metaphysics is unthreatening to anti-realist readings of Wittgenstein's later work. Yet Diamond wants to get us to see the anti-realist outlooks attributed to the later Wittgenstein as resembling the realist outlooks attributed to the author of the *Tractatus* in encoding the following metaphysical assumption, namely that whatever objective stability (if any) language exhibits is a matter of grounding in a prior reality. Diamond recognises that the allegedly Wittgensteinian anti-realist differs from her realist counterpart in denying that there are transcendent objects undergirding our modes of thought and speech. Diamond's thought is that to the extent that this thinker represents our entitlement to the notion of objectivity as standing or falling with the existence of such objects, she presupposes that we can make sense of the idea of a transcendent perspective on language, at least well enough to capture what the (by her lights unattainable) ideal of objectivity amounts to. This, then, is the metaphysical presupposition, common to realism and anti-realism, that Diamond takes Wittgenstein to be challenging both early and late, and she undertakes to motivate Wittgenstein's case against it and to bring out the significance of the type of view of language that comes within reach once we reject it.²⁹

A view of language that truly repudiates the presupposition is, Diamond tells us, the one that treats the idea of a transcendent perspective on language as utterly confused so that now there can be no question

28. I give a more detailed description of Diamond's approach to reading Wittgenstein, giving references to her own and others' responses to various criticisms of the approach, in Crary (2007b). In suggesting, as I did just now in the text, that Diamond's original writings on the *Tractatus* contain a nuanced account of its author's anti-metaphysical ambitions, I had in mind the many passages in her early essays on Wittgenstein in which she indicates that the author of the *Tractatus* favours a conception of logic that is important respects in tension with this ambition. See, e.g., Diamond (1991h), esp. 18–20, and Diamond (1991g), esp. 43.

29. This basic line of thought gets traced out with particular force clarity in two papers in *The Realistic Spirit*: Diamond (1991i) and Diamond (1991c).

regarding its forfeiture as threatening to our entitlement to logical ideals like objectivity. It is, at the same time, a view that treats sensitivities and modes of appreciation characteristic of us as people who have learned a natural language as contributing internally to our ability to bring the world objectively into focus. This brings me to the second set of terms Diamond uses in her 1991 book in discussing what is distinctive of about her reading of Wittgenstein. When Diamond talks about the person whose thinking reflects the relevant of view of language, she says that this person exhibits the *realistic spirit*.

Diamond conceives the person who embodies this spirit as a person who thinks and talks about the world in a manner that is ordinary as opposed to metaphysical in that it bears the imprint of sensitivities characteristic of her as a speaker. But Diamond is not recommending an attitude of blind acceptance of existing methods of inquiry. With an eye to clarifying what she means by a realistic posture, she turns to the sorts of classical realist novels that, as we saw, preoccupy her elsewhere in her work. Novels that qualify as instances of classic literary realism employ strategies for presenting their plots and characters that eschew “magic, myth, fantasy [and] superstition,” going in instead for attention to particulars and details, including details of how things work or get caused.³⁰ Diamond tells us that when she talks about being realistic, she is using the term “realistic” in roughly the way it is used in connection with classic realist novels. A person is realistic insofar as she is, in a similar manner, attentive to particulars and details. While such attentiveness is invariably informed by a person’s sense of what is significant and salient, there is – this is Diamond’s point – no obstacle to allowing that it can reveal flaws in received methods of inquiry.

It is possible to betray what Diamond calls the realistic spirit by trading attentiveness to the world for, say, myth and superstition. There are also more characteristically philosophical ways to betray the realistic spirit. Philosophical realists and anti-realists betray it when they insist, not only that modes of attentiveness essentially informed by sensitivities are incapable of grounding our confidence that we have gotten our minds around how things really are but also that to show that our confidence is justified, we need to abstract from our sensitivities and to adopt a perspective on language as if from outside them.³¹ Moreover, when

30. See Diamond (1991g, 40–41).

31. In one particularly colourful passage in her writing, Diamond suggests that the philosophical realist who adopts this tone of insistence is helpfully thought of as treating our

Diamond discusses how resistance to the realistic spirit shapes contemporary philosophy, she sometimes mentions, in addition to assumptions common to philosophical realists and anti-realists, analogous assumptions underlying opposition in ethics to allowing that legitimate, rational modes of discourse include more than argument.³² The philosopher who antecedently excludes the possibility that sensitivities can internally inform our ability to follow legitimate lines of thought, and who accordingly insists on limiting rationality to argument, resembles the philosophical realist and anti-realist in allowing her reflections to be governed by philosophical assumptions opposed to the realistic spirit. By the same token, the philosopher who demonstrates the realistic spirit will not only refuse to follow in the footsteps of the philosophical realist and anti-realist but will also make room for the possibility that rationality includes more than argument.

These reflections are intended as a follow-up to what I said earlier about how, in representing the realm in which moral concepts function as “cloudy and shifting” (as opposed to “hard”), Diamond helps herself to a conception of rationality broad enough to encompass more than argument. My aim just now was to give an overview of how, in her discussions of the philosophy of Wittgenstein, Diamond makes a case for this conception and thereby offers a defence of her larger project in ethics. It was with an eye to this aim that I sketched the way in which Diamond adduces Wittgensteinian considerations in favour of a view of language

everyday ways of thinking and speaking as like medieval hagiography (*ibid.*, 51–55). In making this suggestion, she is drawing attention to the fact that hagiography does not aim to be realistic. While this is partly a function of the kinds of events it deals in, it is also a function of how, in it, ordinary events are described. Descriptions of ordinary actions and happenings (e.g., St. Francis doing “his utmost” to conceal the wound in his side) are allowed to coexist with representations of facts that directly contradict them (e.g., the relatively straightforward way St. Francis allows the other friars to discover his wound) (*ibid.*, 51). What is put into a saint’s *vita* may by no means be true, and once we recognise this, we can see that it makes sense not only to ask whether what is mentioned there actually belongs in an accurate history of a given saint but also to make use, in judging the truth of what is said, of techniques “for weighing and sifting evidence . . . [that] would not have been of interest to the author of the *vita*” (*ibid.*, 54). Diamond notes that it is possible to adopt an attitude of “elementary realism” toward the conventions of medieval hagiography because she thinks that the philosophical realist confusedly adopts such an attitude toward our ordinary ways of thinking about the world. The philosophical realist is guided by a wrongheaded tendency to reject wholesale the modes of attention and methods of inquiry internal to our everyday ways of thinking, taking them to be as such incapable of directly contributing to the revelation of the real world and in this respect similar to the conventions of hagiography.

32. See, e.g., Diamond (1991f, 8) and Diamond (1991h: 23 and 24).

that, to the extent that it underwrites the idea of the realistic spirit, is capable of accommodating the relevant conception of rationality.³³

Before concluding my discussion of these portions of Diamond's work, I want to touch on a recent paper in which Diamond presents a set of illustrations of how fidelity to the realistic spirit obliges us to acknowledge the existence of legitimate modes of thought that do not have the form of arguments. The illustrations Diamond gives in the paper, I have in mind, complement illustrations she gives elsewhere in her treatments of literary themes. When in her discussions of particular works of literature, Diamond shows us that some literary works present us with respectable, non-argumentative modes of thought, and she is showing us that, if we are to maintain a realistic posture in ethics, we need to recognise the existence of such modes of thought. What interests me now is a further set of illustrations she gives in a recent paper in which she discusses what she calls the "difficulty of reality."³⁴

33. It may seem as though, in my attempt to outline how, in her discussions of the philosophy of Wittgenstein, Diamond provides support for her ethical enterprise, I have missed a step. I pointed out that Diamond mounts a defence of the argument-transcending conception of rationality that informs her descriptions of moral concepts as operating in a world that is not "hard." Yet it may seem as though, even if successful, such a defence is not enough to justify us in talking about the world of ethical concern as "non-hard;" at least not if such talk is intended – in the way that both Diamond and Murdoch clearly mean it to be – to imply that features of that world may in themselves possess the sort of importance that gives them a direct bearing on action and choice. Features of the world fitting this description would be such that no adequate conception could be formed of them apart from reference to the kinds of practical responses objects that possess them elicit. It is common for philosophers to observe that objects endowed with such features differ from those endowed with secondary qualities like colours in that they do not merely cause but rather *merit* certain subjective responses. Nor is it uncommon for philosophers who draw attention to this disanalogy to go on to claim that it follows from it that, even if we abandon the demand for the sort of transcendent perspective on the workings of language that seems to prevent us from allowing rationality to reach beyond argument, and even if we thus position ourselves to make a case for treating secondary qualities as real features of the world, there can nevertheless be no question of treating intrinsically practical qualities as real aspects of the world. The alleged problem is that the question of whether something merits the responses internal to a given intrinsically practical quality is itself a practical question and, further, that judgments about such qualities are accordingly governed, in a circular manner, by standards that essentially reflect our substantive practical beliefs (for a version of this line of thought, see, e.g., Darwall *et al.* 1999: 163f). There is, however, good reason to believe that this alleged problem is a merely apparent one (I present an argument to this effect in Crary 2007a, 30–35). For this reason, I do not take it to be threatening to the coherence of Diamond's work and am happy here simply to set it aside.

34. See Diamond (2006), reprinted in Cavell *et al.* (2009) together with a set of related articles by Stanley Cavell, Ian Hacking and John McDowell. The conversation formed by

The phenomenon Diamond places under this heading is, as she puts it at her paper's opening, "the experience of the mind's not being able to encompass something which it encounters."³⁵ At issue is, she adds a bit later, the experience of taking "something in reality to be resistant to our thinking it, or possibly to be painful in its inexplicability, difficult in that way, or perhaps awesome and astonishing in its inexplicability."³⁶ Insofar as Diamond's emphasis in these passages is on a kind of disorientation of soul that may be occasioned by efforts to bring aspects of the world into focus, it is fair to say that she is concerned with a subjective experience. But we miss what she is up to if we take the phenomenon she has in her sights to be a *merely* subjective one. Diamond stresses that she is concerned not only with individuals' tendencies to react in dramatic ways but also with particular realities that are such that the clear-sighted contemplation of them can throw us off our rockers.³⁷ Among her central examples of such realities are the horror of the way in which human beings treat animals and the awesome fact of the separateness and suffering of other human beings. There are suggestive connections between Diamond's conception of these two things as difficulties of reality and the aspects of her ethical writings on human beings and animals that I discussed earlier, but I cannot here discuss these connections.³⁸ What interests me right now is the way

Diamond's paper and these articles has itself become an object of commentary. See, in this connection, especially Mulhall (2009). References to Diamond's paper in what follows are to the original published version.

35. Diamond (2006, 98).

36. *Ibid.*, 99; see also 104.

37. Here, I am disagreeing with John McDowell who, in a discussion of Diamond's work in McDowell (2009), suggests that it is indifferent whether the things Diamond describes as difficulties of realities are realities or whether they are merely putative realities (see *ibid.*, 134). For another correction of McDowell on this point, see Hacking (2009).

38. A satisfactory discussion of connections between Diamond's conception of our relationships with animals as a difficulty of reality and her writings on ethics and animals would need to mention that Diamond's discussion of this difficulty of reality takes as its point of departure J.M. Coetzee's Tanner Lectures, "The Lives of Animals," and a set of responses to them that were published in a volume with the same title (Coetzee, 1999). Coetzee's lectures are a narrative about an aging novelist named Elizabeth Costello, and Diamond focuses largely on the description we are given of this character, emphasising that she is presented as a woman who is "haunted by the horror of what we do to animals" and who in her attempts to give expression to the horror she eschews argument and instead comes out with provocative analogies and anecdotes (the inset quote is from Diamond 2006, 99). When Diamond characterises this horror as a difficulty of reality, she is suggesting that efforts to comprehend it may unsettle us as they unsettle Elizabeth Costello, and she is also allowing that we may deflect from what unsettles us. She is particularly interested in the kind of characteristically philosophical deflection that takes the form of insistence that it

in which Diamond describes the response of the person who, when confronted with these or other difficulties of reality, is unwilling or unable to rise to the constitutional, emotional challenge of grasping what is at issue. Borrowing a term of art from the philosophy of Stanley Cavell, Diamond describes such a response as a form of *deflection*. Although Diamond does not claim that deflecting from difficulties of reality is in every case a bad thing,³⁹ she is concerned with philosophical forms of deflection that are insidious insofar as they are driven by the assumption that no soul-wrenching, non-deflecting mode of comprehension is possible and insofar as they accordingly veer toward reducing the difficulty of the particular realities that occasion them to the difficulty of devising satisfactory arguments. The particular realities Diamond refers to as difficulties of reality are, we might accordingly say, realities we only bring adequately into focus insofar as we treat them as occasions for modes of thought that, instead of taking the form of argument, essentially call on us to work on ourselves. This is what it comes to say, as I said a moment ago, that in laying before us a series of difficulties of reality, Diamond is

must be possible to do justice to the relevant reality by producing arguments. Here, Diamond mentions the commentaries of the four thinkers whose responses to Coetzee were published with his lectures, bringing out how for the most part they not only depict Coetzee as presenting an argument about the “issue” of animals and ethics in literary garb but also thereby obscure the fact that in the lectures we are presented with a woman wounded by knowledge of what we do to animals (*ibid.*, 102). There is a clear tie here to Diamond’s writings on animals and ethics – writings in which, as we saw, she criticises philosophers who qualify as moral individualists insofar as they presuppose that animals are given to us prior to moral reflection and that if we are to show that animals merit specific forms of treatment we therefore need to produce arguments about the moral significance of their individual capacities. There are also connections between Diamond’s conception of the separateness of other human beings as a difficulty of reality and her writings on the importance of being human. In discussing the separateness of others as a difficulty of reality, Diamond is following up on portions of Cavell’s writings on scepticism about other minds (see *ibid.*, 104 and 107ff) in which Cavell is criticising a response to scepticism that he thinks is wrongly associated with the later Wittgenstein and that he also takes to be deeply misguided. The relevant response is supposed to shut down scepticism by showing that the sceptic’s arguments are confused. According to Cavell, this response is inadequate because it deflects, ignoring the possibility of construing the sceptic’s confused stutterings as a non-argumentative reaction to the awesome and terrifying fact of the separateness of others, and, as Diamond reads him, Cavell thus invites us to regard this fact as what she calls a difficulty of reality. There is, again, a straightforward link here to Diamond’s own writings. When Diamond asks us to see that in ethics we operate with non-biological, ethical concepts of human beings, she is making a claim that lays the groundwork for an understanding of our relationships to others, like Cavell’s, on which these relationships are one of the difficulties of reality.

39. See Hacking (2009, 151).

illustrating how maintaining a realistic posture can oblige us to treat rationality as including more than argument.

VI

I want to close by offering one further answer to my opening question about what is distinctive about Diamond's work in ethics. Thus far, I have given two related answers. The first was that Diamond departs from the mainstream of contemporary Anglo-American moral philosophy in representing the world to which moral concepts are responsible, in something very much like the manner in which she herself takes Iris Murdoch to represent this world, as brought into view by moral reflection. The second answer was that, in thus representing the world of ethical concern as "cloudy and shifting" and not "hard," Diamond draws on a conception of rationality largely foreign to contemporary ethics, a conception that encompasses more than argument. The third answer I now want to give corresponds closely to the first two, and, in formulating it, I am once again going to use terms that Diamond employs in discussing what is special about Murdoch's work in ethics. In a couple of very recent papers, Diamond says that Murdoch is helpfully understood as opposing "dictationism."⁴⁰ Diamond uses this term to refer to the creed of philosophers who hold that, in her words, "other branches of philosophy like metaphysics, philosophy of language, and epistemology do their work and lay out what kind of entities there are, or what it is to use language in this or that sort of way, or what we can know and how we come to know it, and [that] these branches of philosophy then dictate what possible understandings of things are open within moral philosophy."⁴¹ It should be clear from things I have said that Diamond herself refuses to allow other areas of philosophical research to dictate to ethics. This is noteworthy because to observe that Diamond is adopting a philosophically heterodox anti-dictationist stance is to make a suggestion about the kinds of obstacles that threaten to obstruct the reception of her contribution to ethics. Hers is a contribution that, declining to be dictated to, ventures into, among other places, metaphysics, epistemology

40. See both "Murdoch the Explorer," Diamond, Forthcoming, and "Murdoch off the Map," Diamond, Unpublished Manuscript.

41. "Murdoch off the Map," section 1.

and philosophy of mind. This means that, to take its measure, we need to “shift perspectives,” directing our attention in ways, and to places we may not be inclined to look.

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