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Cora Diamond and the Moral Imagination

Abstract

Over several decades, Cora Diamond has articulated a distinctive way of thinking about ethics. Prompted by a recent critique of Diamond, we elucidate some of the main themes of her work, and reveal their power to reconfigure and deepen moral philosophy. In concluding, we suggest that Diamond's moral philosophical practice can be seen as one plausible way of fleshing out what Wittgenstein might have meant by his dictum that "ethics is transcendental".

1. Diamond on the map

Over several decades Cora Diamond has articulated a distinctive way of thinking about ethics. The depth of Diamond's challenge to a good deal of moral philosophy perhaps helps to explain why her work has been sidestepped more than it has been critically responded to during the last thirty years or so. Her work has often mistakenly been seen as simply not engaging with mainstream philosophical ethics. One philosopher who has attempted to engage with Diamond at the level of her main concerns is Danièle Moyal-Sharrock in her recent paper "Cora Diamond and the Ethical Imagination" (2012). Responding to some of her criticisms is a useful way into clarifying and elaborating some of Diamond's

distinctive themes. We aim to reveal aspects both of the critical power of those themes, and of their power of positive illumination. In concluding we suggest that Diamond’s moral philosophical practice may be illuminatingly regarded as one plausible way of fleshing out what Wittgenstein might have meant by his dictum that “ethics is transcendental”.

Moyal-Sharrock’s ‘head-line’ accusation against Diamond is that she enjoins the “condemnation of philosophical ethics” (2012: 223), that she wants to “*replace* moral philosophy with literature, to take moral philosophy out of the picture altogether” (2012: 226, original emphasis), and aims not “merely ... to *include* literature in the realm of ethics, but to *exclude* philosophy” (2012: 230, original emphasis). She says that Diamond advocates a “drastic elimination of philosophical ethics” and that she wants to “kill” it (2012: 233). We call this claim that moral philosophy should be replaced by literature ‘the substitution thesis’. It is certainly true that in much of her work Diamond brings the aspirations of philosophy – for our present purposes moral philosophy – into relation with the moral imagination exercised in good literature. But, we will argue, in ascribing the substitution thesis to Diamond, Moyal-Sharrock shows that she misunderstands how Diamond sees this complex relation.

More broadly, we will try to bring out a range of ways in which Diamond’s view of moral understanding, moral philosophy, and the relations of these with literature and creative imagination escapes the terms of Moyal-Sharrock’s reading of her. In doing that, our governing aim throughout is to enable a deeper appreciation of Diamond’s moral philosophy and its illumination of moral philosophical issues. We divide the main discussion into two sections, corresponding to two broad categories of issue: alternatives to received moral philosophy, and the relations between moral philosophy and literature.

2. Contesting the Nature of Moral Philosophy

Moyal-Sharrock quotes Diamond (supposedly) speaking of “the false imagination of philosophy” and the “false expectations or hopes” that philosophy gives us (2012: 227). These words do not

occur in the source to which Moyal-Sharrock ascribes them. They instead appear in this passage:

In what sense is the aim of the *Tractatus* ethical? The understanding that it is meant to lead to is supposed to be a capacity to ‘see the world the right way’. That is, it is a matter of not making false demands on the world, nor having false expectations or hopes; our relation to the world should not be determined by the false imagination of philosophy. (Diamond 1991a: 86)

Diamond is here contrasting Wittgenstein’s practice of philosophy in the *Tractatus* with the practice of philosophy that he is criticizing. The “false demands” and “false expectations and hopes” are those which Wittgenstein thinks infect the kind of philosophy that Diamond takes him to be attacking – very roughly, philosophy as the attempt to formulate, *via* its own distinctive methods, theses and doctrines which complement the stock of knowledge available from the natural and formal sciences, or from everyday empirical observation. Diamond believes that Wittgenstein subscribed to the rejection of this view throughout his philosophical life. It is true that she agrees with him in rejecting it. However, like Wittgenstein, she rejects it not because she rejects all philosophy; she rejects it in favour of a different practice of philosophy. Diamond’s target in the passage Moyal-Sharrock quotes is clearly not philosophy *per se*, but instead certain modes of philosophical practice.

It is important, however, that for all she owes to the *Tractatus*, Diamond’s own philosophical practice differs from it in various ways. It will help in understanding that practice to list briefly some of the important features of much mainstream (Anglo-American) moral philosophy that Diamond opposes in her work as a whole: (i) that the understandings of truth, language, justification, belief etc. which are relevant to moral philosophy are not peculiar to morality, but are universal and are imported into moral philosophy from metaphysics, epistemology, philosophy of language etc.; and consequently (ii) that in its aspiration to knowledge philosophy lays down metaphysical and epistemological requirements that human beliefs and practices (especially those deemed ‘commonsense’ or ‘folk’) must meet – and potentially may not meet – in order to be legitimate (e.g. standards of rationality for ‘believing’ in an external

world or other minds, or supposed metaphysical commitments of morality); (iii) that moral thinking is exclusively or primarily a matter of applying principles to a world of non-moral facts¹; (iv) that these moral judgments are universalizable (i.e. that everyone in the same ‘morally relevant circumstances’ is subject to the same duties and permissions) in a sense that excludes there being anything essentially personal in moral judgment.

A corollary of (i) especially relevant to this paper is that since the concepts of truth etc. applying in (say) metaphysics or philosophy of science are basically already perfectly well suited to moral philosophy, there will be no internal or necessary link between moral philosophy and moral thought as it is found in creative literature. Much in Moyal-Sharrock’s paper makes it clear that she endorses that view. For instance, she quotes Diamond on the importance of literature for showing us (in Diamond’s words) “forms of thinking about life and what is good or bad in it, forms of thinking” which philosophy (of the sort Diamond criticizes) might ignore. But Moyal-Sharrock immediately associates this with a passage from D. H. Lawrence where he speaks of art changing “the blood, *rather than* the mind” (2012: 225, our emphasis). She then goes further into construing Diamond as a follower of Lawrentian blood-mysticism by writing that her “... aim is to deintellectualize morality, to get us to see it as an attitude, a way of being” (2012: 226). But Diamond’s admiration for Lawrence does not mean she holds that feeling and thinking are mutually exclusive, and this should already be apparent from the very words which Moyal-Sharrock has just quoted: that literature presents us with “forms of *thinking*” (our emphasis) about morality. Diamond’s point, in the passage from which the “forms of thinking” quotation comes, is that moral thinking needs to be informed by the kind of thinking that goes on in good literature. Her complaint is that “philosophical requirements” laid down by a great deal of moral philosophy “on the character of thought, mind, and world” (1991b: 24) preclude recognition of that need. One of those requirements is precisely the sharp separation of thought and feeling that Moyal-

¹ Virtue ethicists, particularists, and those who think ‘thick’ ethical concepts are salient in moral thinking will resist this feature being attributed to them.

Sharrock's argument assumes here. Moyal-Sharrock is at least very close to supposing that moral thinking either is an attempt to achieve knowledge, where that attempt is modelled roughly on factual inquiry, or involves no real thinking at all. Diamond does think that morality is closer to "an attitude, a way of being" than to an attempt to acquire something that can unequivocally be called knowledge. But to suppose that this means there cannot be insight, understanding, the exercise of the mind, and (arguably) even truth in moral thinking is really to succumb to a lingering prejudice about the variety of forms that these things can take.

Talk of morality as an "attitude" or "way of being" is closely connected to another distinctive Diamond theme: that our moral sensibility pervades the whole of our lives. One has to be careful about how to understand this. Diamond is not of course denying that a moral question is different from a factual or technical one. When she says that "our thought about *anything* is the thought of a morally live consciousness" (1996a: 102), and speaks of the "ubiquity of value" (1996a: 103), Diamond is telling us that even when we address a narrowly factual or technical issue the manner of our thinking and acting inescapably expresses a moral demeanour. Moyal-Sharrock offers cooking pea soup as an obvious example of a human activity, involving thought, that is not "morally coloured". But even the way one cooks pea soup will manifest a kind of spirit in which one encounters the world. One can cook patiently, attentively, sociably, mechanically, gracelessly, greedily, with an obsessive attention to detail, absent-mindedly, and in indefinitely many other ways each of which *is* a morally inflected demeanour. Of course, if we think of 'making pea soup' as simply the recipe on the page, the mechanical steps, and take out the demeanour of the person doing the cooking, then indeed one has a sharp contrast with anything one could call 'moral' (one has something merely factual or technical). But to take out the demeanour of the person cooking is to take out the person, so that the soup might as well be made by a machine, and we are not talking of human activity or thought at all.

Moyal-Sharrock allows that in some extreme circumstances cooking pea soup might become a moral matter – her example is

ignoring a murder to continue cooking the soup. Well, that might happen, but Diamond's different emphasis is on the spirit in which someone acts, whether or not an external event intrudes to raise a question about one's being right or wrong or justified in continuing to do what one is doing. The difference between a person who finds the world a "wild and startling" place (to use an example Diamond borrows from Chesterton (Diamond 1996a: 93)) and a person who is jaded and world-weary, is profound, even when no specific moral issue is at stake. One can of course always insist that this demeanour-towards-the-world is outside morality simply because it is not an exercise of casuistic thinking. One can take the view, for example, that it is merely aesthetic, as Nigel Pleasants does about Wittgenstein's notion of "wonder at the existence of the world" (quoted in Pleasants 2008: 246). But jadedness and world-weariness, for examples, are closer to moral notions than to aesthetic ones: the jaded and world-weary live in an ungrateful and perhaps resentful spirit (even if they rouse themselves to do the 'right thing' in casuistic matters). And while this spirit is something a person will have in their solitariness as much as in their sociality, it will colour, however subtly, all their inter-personal relations (and ones with other sentient and living creatures) – should anyone think morality must show up in, or begins with, these.

Thus Diamond can maintain the position that the ethical is ubiquitous in our lives, even though casuistry is not. That said, Diamond still sees a crucial conceptual connection between these deeper ethical sensibilities and practical issues. She holds that not only our opinions on practical issues, but *even our understanding of what those issues are* – what is at stake in them, what the morally possible options are for us, what we consider to be salient and even relevant in our thinking about them, even whether we see a problem at all – depends to a great extent upon this deeper, pervasive demeanour towards the world. This contrasts with a common view, that practical moral understanding centrally consists in applying moral principles to the 'facts' of cases, where those facts are accessible without the need for anything like an already ethical sensibility in any important sense. Of course casuistry, principles and so on are morally important; but they have their

place in a wider scene. (Various aspects of our later discussion further illuminate this theme.) To use a different figure: on Diamond's view the ethical dimension of our lives is an iceberg much of which is below the surface. By identifying what is often on the surface – choice and action, justified by reasons which are applied to readily describable states of affairs – as if it were the whole of morals, moral philosophy not only misses a great deal that should enter its purview, but distorts the significance of what it does attend to.

There are other aspects of Diamond's views on ethics and the *Tractatus* that may have misled Moyal-Sharrock to attribute the substitution thesis to her. According to Diamond, in the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein regarded all philosophical theses, including those of moral philosophy, as unequivocal nonsense.² More strikingly still, she argues that he regarded even non-philosophical ethical talk as nonsense, albeit nonsense that can be treated imaginatively as expressing an ethical attitude towards the world as a whole.³ Diamond's general rejection of moral philosophy as the search for knowledge does not mean she shares the Tractarian view that ethical talk is nonsense.⁴ But she does share with Wittgenstein the denial that moral concerns and moral significance show in language only through the use of a specialized moral vocabulary (comprising the familiar thick and thin moral terms), a vocabulary picking out a

² And, most controversially, that this applies to his own apparently metaphysical propositions in the *Tractatus* itself. We have no stake in the debate over how to read the *Tractatus*.

³ To be more precise, that is how (on Diamond's account) he regarded ethical talk *of a certain sort*, that which sought to broach what, in "A Lecture on Ethics" (Wittgenstein 1965) he called 'absolute' (as opposed to 'relative') value, or what Diamond by implication characterizes as ethical talk that cannot be subsumed under accounts of evaluation that would also apply to good and bad strawberries and good and bad sewage (Diamond 1991a: 76).

⁴ Moyal-Sharrock (2012: 233-234) quotes Diamond's views on how to read the *Tractatus* ethically to support the attribution of the substitution thesis to her, overlooking the fact that Diamond is expounding (what she believes to be) Wittgenstein's Tractarian views, not her own. Diamond certainly shares with Wittgenstein the desire to mark out an ethical sense that we cannot identify with anything inside the world of empirical fact. But she says that there are various ways of doing this, and the Tractarian way – of putting it beyond the limits of sense-making language – is just one (Diamond 1991a: 86-90). See the final section below where we explain why not being inside the world does not imply being 'outside' it.

distinctive set of moral properties that go to compose a distinctive moral subject-matter, much as botanical concerns show in language through the use of a specialized botanical vocabulary picking out the properties that comprise the subject-matter of botany. Rather, drawing on what Wittgenstein says about mathematics in the *Tractatus*, Diamond holds that it is how a word or sentence gets used that gives it moral import. Any words or sentences at all can be used in a way that gives them moral import: there is nothing special in this respect about the vocabulary that moral philosophers take to mark out the subject matter of their discipline.⁵

It is worth teasing out some issues here. Whether or not someone is drawing on that special vocabulary, the moral import of her words is not confined to what she intends it to be, and can even be quite at odds with that intention. To mention one simple instance: a person takes herself to be issuing a just and wise rebuke, when in fact she is manifesting her sanctimonious nastiness. And one's words can have moral import when one has no intention of their doing so: a remark that is thoughtlessly cruel, for example. But even to focus on words here is to unduly narrow Diamond's outlook. *Failing* to say something can be morally momentous, sometimes for good, sometimes for ill; and so can all sorts of gestures and interactions that involve no words at all. Sometimes the particular moral import of a person's activity even depends on the person lacking any and all specific moral concern: some expressions of innocence or purity or magnanimity are examples of this. To highlight these points is not to say that there is *nothing* special about the vocabulary that moral philosophers commonly take to mark out the subject matter of their discipline. That we do have and use such a vocabulary has done a good deal to shape the way morality has been and is for us. In using that vocabulary we give expression to a particular, and self-conscious, moral concern. But that is no reason at all to equate morality with what is thematized specifically in the use of that vocabulary. Rather than a distinguishable domain or subject matter defined as what is marked out by the use of such a vocabulary, the moral on Diamond's view

⁵ The seminal paper for this issue is Diamond 1996b.

is more like a medium in which we live (see also the final section of this essay). One can readily acknowledge the power of that view while also recognizing that use of the (let us call it) ‘specifically’ moral vocabulary has a significant place in our lives. But in treating that use as the unique site of moral thinking and engagement, as they often do, philosophers both distort the place of that use in our lives and also miss a great deal of what belongs to our moral life.

One of many such distortions is an almost obsessive preoccupation of moral philosophers with moral judgment. The idea seems to be that what we most fundamentally are as moral beings (in addition to being agents) is judges. Moreover, we are judges ideally of a particular kind, ones modeled on an absolute God who determines with perfect and dispassionate clarity and accuracy the moral status of what, or whom, he judges. (Non-cognitivist and atheistic meta-ethics, too, can readily enough represent moral thinking as ideally having this character.) But this picture is a devastating distortion. Bill forgets an important meeting with his friend Mary for a second time. Mary responds angrily: “Where were you! This is the second time in a week! How could you!” The exchange could continue in a thousand ways. But from the perspective of the preoccupation just sketched, we don’t get its moral dimensions until we distil Mary’s response into the form of propositions expressing distinctively moral judgments about what Bill did – until, that is, we re-present Mary in the position of a putatively impartial judge of what Bill has done. Mary’s anger is then an arguably justifiable accompaniment to her impartial judgment, which is the real locus of her moral engagement. (As already noted, the essential features of this picture can be sustained within a ‘non-cognitivist’ view.) But now consider this. John Keats wrote: “Though a quarrel in the streets is a thing to be hated, the energies displayed in it are fine; the commonest man shows a grace in his quarrel” (Keats 1954). Keats can perhaps be taken as registering how someone’s personal presence can flare forth in an especially compelling way in his anger, powerfully summoning attention and response from the one with whom he is angry. In this way anger can enact a moral claim upon another, be itself the communicative expression of such a claim, and can be

acknowledged and responded to as a genuine such claim (for example, Bill might be moved to apologize) – and not a proposition, or a proto-godlike judge, in sight! We are not saying that Mary’s anger, let alone anger more generally, is morally self-validating – anger can be (for example) aggressive and uncalled-for. But we resist the assumption that anger *itself* never has moral substance or standing. Mary’s response to Bill is inadequately described as (merely) the affective consequence of an implicit prior impartial moral judgment about his behavior. On the contrary, taking a cue from Keats we might speak of the moral weight or power carried by the mode of Mary’s presence to Bill in her anger. Then *the experienced authority of Mary’s presence to him* may be what enlivens Bill to acknowledge the need to apologize. Casting the moral dimensions of their interaction in terms like these belongs to a very different kind of picture of morality from one which says that what we most fundamentally are as moral beings (in addition to our being ‘intentional agents’) is ideally impartial judges of the rights and wrongs of courses of action. Seeing the moral dimension of Mary’s and Bill’s interaction in the different way just described would, however, be wholly congenial to Diamond.

Diamond thinks that a great many common moral uses of language cannot be reflected in the terms of the standard properties appealed to in moral philosophy: sentience, desire-satisfaction, rationality, autonomy, agreements, human flourishing, etc. It is important to recognize that this is not because she thinks that these uses are held in place by supernatural rather than natural facts – that would be simply a reversion to the view of morality as dealing with facts that define its subject matter. What is at issue is, rather, a matter of giving expression to a different orientation to the world. Moyal-Sharrock quotes Diamond thus: “There are radically different ways of thinking about *the evil that murder is*. No philosophical understanding of these differences can be reached ... if we restrict ourselves to ordinary philosophical language” (230, emphasis Moyal-Sharrock’s). Here again, *pace* Moyal-Sharrock, Diamond is not criticizing philosophy *per se* but philosophy *of this or that specific kind*. In the paper from which this quotation comes, Diamond makes clear that the feature of “ordinary philosophical language” she has in mind is

that it “has the capacity to represent as of moral relevance only [factual] properties of situations or of people or of things” (1993: 152).⁶ She contrasts it with a way of thinking about “the evil of murder” that is informed by “ideas about particularity and irreplaceability” (193: 152). In the former language, the evil of murder must be most fundamentally a function of the killing of a creature with properties of the sort listed above. Part of Diamond’s point here is that discussion of (say) murder in the terms of this language simply *assumes* a sense of the seriousness of murder which it can itself give no account of, or even make sense of. A point Raimond Gaita makes is relevant here. He imagines someone waking to the realization of what he has done in murdering someone, and then giving expression to that in the kind of philosophical language Diamond is criticizing: “My God, what have I done! I have been a traitor to reason. I have violated rational nature in another...” (Gaita 1991: 33). One could substitute for ‘rational nature’ the description ‘...a creature with such and such interests’, or indeed the relevant language from pretty much any favoured philosophical account, and get a similarly incongruous, even comic, result. Gaita rightly says these are parodies of moral seriousness, and that their being so provides a powerful challenge to the capacity of “ordinary philosophical language” to reflect the evil of murder.⁷ Gaita’s point parallels Diamond’s line of thinking in the essay from which Moyall-Sharrocks’s quotation comes. Diamond’s own account of how one might think about the evil of murder draws on the role played by the particularity and irreplaceability of human beings in such thinking. The detail of what she says we cannot go into here. But while she does say that “we need to turn to texts such as novels, texts engaged in shaping the language of particularity” (1993: 153) in any attempt to give such an account, it is again important to recognize that this is not an injunction to *replace* philosophy by literature. On the contrary, it

⁶ Lest anyone think Diamond’s representation of this issue is out-of-date, the role Jeff McMahan gives to ‘status-conferring intrinsic properties’ in his critique of Diamond *et al* is a recent re-assertion of the attitude Diamond is here targeting (McMahan 2005).

⁷ Pleasants has an insightful discussion of the inadequacy of standard philosophical theories to bring out the distinctive evil of murder, and also makes use of parodies (Pleasants 2008: 257-261).

is part of Diamond's own creative fashioning of a practice of moral philosophy that is deeply informed by what we may find in and learn from "texts such as novels".

We have sketched some of the issues which moral philosophy can attend to when it rejects the mainstream way of doing things. But there are many other such issues, and of course there are many philosophers other than Diamond who have long been working on them. Diamond's critique of mainstream Anglo-American moral philosophy is far from being a critique of moral philosophy or moral philosophers *per se*. Even within the Anglo-Saxon tradition there are numerous exceptions, many discussed and admired by Diamond, including Elizabeth Anscombe, Stanley Cavell, Iris Murdoch, Martha Nussbaum, Rush Rhees and Peter Winch. Moyal-Sharrock herself produces a list of philosophers who do not fit the type: Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Camus, Sartre, and Jaspers. Moyal-Sharrock cannot maintain both that these are philosophers who fall outside the kind of philosophizing Diamond criticizes and that Diamond condemns all moral philosophy, unless of course Diamond has criticized the basic assumptions of these philosophers too, which she has not. This alone makes it clear that her target is not philosophy *per se*, but philosophy practised in (variously) limiting ways. Moreover, the work of the philosophers just named tends to be widely ignored by the analytic mainstream, in part because it exhibits just the sort of ethical imagination Diamond says the mainstream lacks. By pointing to these philosophers specifically as exhibiting such a sensibility, Moyal-Sharrock implicitly concedes that the mainstream does not, thus inadvertently admitting there is a large swathe of moral philosophy to which Diamond's critique applies.

3. Literature, Moral Philosophy and Creative Imagination

Having praised Diamond for her appreciation of "the moral force of many kinds of literature" (225), Moyal-Sharrock writes:

But while Lawrence, Leavis, Nussbaum salute the moral force of literature, Diamond...goes a step further: she forges an *internal* link between ethics and the creative imagination: 'If we are engaged in reflecting about moral value, we need...to be exercising creative

imagination’, and although she does not take the creative imagination to be exercised only in literature, her linking moral thought to ‘stories’ gives a sense of her wanting to *replace* moral philosophy with literature, to take moral philosophy out of the picture altogether. (2012: 226)

The attribution to Diamond of that “step” is correct: Diamond does think that there is “an internal link” between morality and the creative imagination. But Moyal-Sharrock reads Diamond as thinking that while literature manifests this link, philosophy *per se* cannot do so, and that because of this, philosophical reflection cannot illuminate – indeed can only distort or miss – morality. Hence moral philosophy is to be “replaced” by literature.⁸

Moyal-Sharrock misunderstands Diamond’s “internal link” between ethics and imagination, in that she takes Diamond to mean by “stories” only fictional narratives written by poets, short story writers or novelists. The quotation from Diamond that Moyal-Sharrock provides (2012: 226-27) to justify the passage quoted above, however, makes it clear that under “stories” Diamond includes “our imaginative efforts to think about the kind of being that we are”. The paper from which this quotation comes explains that while fictional narratives can manifest such “imaginative efforts”, these efforts can also be exemplified in other ways, including in philosophical thinking. Indeed, the very quotation just mentioned opens with the words: “[O]ne might

⁸ Moyal-Sharrock’s allowing that Diamond “does not take the creative imagination to be exercised only in literature” does not contradict what we have just said: in the abstract of her paper, Moyal-Sharrock says explicitly that Diamond “subtly unthreads the operations of the ethical imagination in literature, but *deplores its absence in philosophy*” (2012: 223, our emphasis). (The phrase there is “ethical imagination” rather than “creative imagination”, but Moyal-Sharrock elsewhere moves easily between these phrases, treating ethical imagination simply as creative imagination in application to ethics.) But two sentences later Moyal-Sharrock also writes that Diamond “does, however, herself make a philosophical, if idiosyncratic, use of the imagination in her appeal to it for a ‘transitional’ understanding of nonsensical Tractarian remarks”. It is presumably this “idiosyncratic” philosophical exercise of imagination that occasions Moyal-Sharrock’s caveat that Diamond “does not take the creative imagination to be exercised only in literature”. The caveat is then perfectly compatible with Moyal-Sharrock holding – of course we believe mistakenly – that Diamond thinks philosophy incapable of exercising creative imagination of the kind she values in literature. For on Moyal-Sharrock’s view, the exercise of creative imagination in philosophy that Diamond does “idiosyncratically” affirm is an “opportunistic” (2012: 223) exercise unconnected with “reflecting about moral value”.

divide *ethical theories* into those that do and those that do not tell stories” (1990: 174, our emphasis). Certainly, in that quotation Diamond also says there are moral philosophies, such as utilitarianism, which are not at all informed by creative imagination and thus have “nothing to do with moral thought” (1990: 174).⁹ Moyal-Sharrock quotes this as compelling evidence that Diamond espouses the substitution thesis, but in fact, much of that paper is devoted to explaining how Kantian and contractualist thought, unlike utilitarianism, *do* “tell stories”, *do* involve creative imagination, and thus *do* have relevance to moral thought. Furthermore, she clearly explains that “telling stories” here amounts to much more than merely using literary examples in papers. She means that Kantian and contractualist moral philosophies in themselves “tell a story” in the sense of expressing a certain imaginative vision of human life and what matters in it, which in turn bears on how we are to behave. In those cases the imaginative vision focuses on reason, moral personality and social cooperation. Diamond does of course criticize these theories too, but not in any way which suggests that they have nothing to do with morality. Her central criticism is that they employ too limited a list of topics for imagination to work on – that the stories they tell are unduly limiting or restrictive, being unable, for example, as we argued in the last section, to account for even so salient a thing as the heinousness of murder.

Diamond does make use of poems and novels – “stories” in the narrow sense in which Moyal-Sharrock understands the term. But she does not quote them and stop at that, as one would expect if she wanted to substitute them for moral philosophy.¹⁰ On the

⁹ It could plausibly be said that utilitarianism still reflects a certain picture of the world and our place in it: roughly a picture of human beings (in their capacity as agents) as ideally neutral administrators, producers of states-of-affairs. Such a picture – we could equally well call it a ‘story’ – then *is* itself an expression of creative imagination. But it is a story part of whose purpose is to deny that our moral being is shaped by any stories! And that is a key problem with it.

¹⁰ It’s worth noting that even doing just that – quoting (say) poems or novels and writing nothing else – *might* constitute a piece of philosophical writing. Wittgenstein once mooted the possibility of a book of philosophy that consisted of nothing but jokes. Presumably he meant that its philosophical power would depend upon the way the jokes were juxtaposed.

contrary, she proceeds to reflect on these stories philosophically. But it is then important that, on Diamond's view of the matter, these philosophical reflections also characteristically involve creative imagination. Diamond's thought is not: 'yes of course moral philosophy can contain literary stories involving creative imagination, but if it also contains philosophical reflection on the stories, this is then an exercise not of creative imagination but instead of intellect or rational understanding'. Rather, philosophical thought itself can be an exercise both of the intellect and of creative imagination. (We describe one of Diamond's own examples of this below.) When the latter is absent, then, Diamond thinks, the moral-philosophical intellect will distort rather than illuminate. The important distinction for Diamond is not, as Moyal-Sharrock construes her, philosophy (incapable of creative imagination, so bad) versus literature (has creative imagination, so good). It is – to put it crudely – philosophy or literature with creative imagination (good) versus philosophy or literature without it (bad).¹¹

The following passage helps reveal Moyal-Sharrock's very different picture of how creative imagination relates both to ethics and to philosophical reflection upon ethics:

... we can't get to the adult shades, the sophisticated moral texture of novels, without first having had the formulaic ethics of our upbringing, and so the latter too belongs to ethics. Prelinguistic children and those in the early stages of language acquisition are initiated into ethics through formulaic instruction before they get to read stories: a gesture or a few words, in context of course, suffice to get an ethical message across: 'Not nice, don't hit'; 'Good girl, to share

¹¹ In effect, Moyal-Sharrock's presents Diamond as holding that propositional, argumentative philosophizing has no place in moral thinking and should be replaced by literature. What Diamond actually claims is that the force and value of argumentative philosophizing depends upon it being informed by the same sort of imaginative sensibility, responsiveness to life, that informs good literature. This equivocation, and others similar to it, appear more than once in Moyal-Sharrock's paper – for instance, when she writes that "good moral philosophy does not require an artistic imagination" (2012: 232). This is true if it means that a good moral philosopher does not have to be, or even be capable of being, a good novelist. It is false if it means that he or she can do good work without an imaginative sensibility drawing on resources of a kind the good novelist is rich in.

your candy’, etc. We can then say that certain responses from literature continue certain responses from social enculturation; literature being the more sophisticated ‘educator’. Literature offers the fine shades in the application of the formative principles in life... (2012: 235)

Moyal-Sharrock seems to think of moral thinking as essentially or at least primarily casuistry.¹² Children begin with simple rules – the “formative principles” enjoined in the “formulaic ethics” of our upbringing’ – and then progress via literature and other enculturation to a more nuanced application of those rules in difficult contexts (“the fine shades in the application of the formative principles in life”). If this counts as allowing a role to creative imagination in moral thinking, it is an extremely limited role, confined to casuistry. “Creative imagination” in this sense is not a source of moral responsiveness, and is concerned only with its refined application. But creative imagination is present right from the outset, and is more basic to the child’s development than formulaic instruction (in Diamond’s view). This is not to deny that parents must often control children’s behavior with rules. However, in so far as a child grows up simply to follow rules it acquires social conventions rather than morality. The infant who responds, with some sense of sympathy, or of the meanness or even cruelty of what he just did, to a parent’s admonishment to share his candy or not to hit another child, displays an embryonic appreciation of the moral claims made on us by other human beings. And if children subsequently learn not to do these things on account of this sense, then they are not following a rule at all. Rather they have been enlivened to a sense of the other child as a fellow human being, and so as one who is ‘not to be hit in that way’, as one who is violated in being hit in that way; and their thus responding belongs to the activity in them of what Diamond understands to be creative imagination. (It goes without saying that not every admonishing will ‘work’ that way: the manner of the

¹² This is often the case with critics of views similar to Diamond’s: see, for example, Onora O’Neill (1980, 1986). O’Neill’s central concern is that ‘Wittgensteinian’ moral philosophers, because they forgo moral theorizing, lack any way of rationally resolving fundamental moral disagreements and are consequently implicated in relativism and conservatism. This issue is not raised explicitly in Moyal-Sharrock’s paper and we cannot go into it here – but for direct replies to O’Neill see Diamond 1991b: 26-29 and 291-308.

admonishing and the receptivity of the child both play crucial roles in such contexts.) Of course rules can sometimes be abstracted for practical purposes from this imaginative sensibility, but their point depends on that sensibility remaining alive and well, albeit sometimes operating in the background. Diamond has often highlighted how adult ethical imagination can and should involve sustaining a child's sense of wonder at the world, helping transform it, without its being stunted by familiarity or knowingness, into adult forms of insight and expression. Fairy tales and traditional children's stories typically paint a magic and mysterious world which nourishes a child's sense of the significance of human and animal life and of good and evil. But this draws on an imagination native to the child. Something along these lines is an important part of Diamond's "internal" link between ethics and imagination, and *pace* Moyal-Sharrock it makes imagination natal and vital to the very possibility of morality, including formative moral instruction.¹³

Moyal-Sharrock notes that Diamond "does not deny a use for rules or principles in moral understanding", but adds that "she is mostly disparaging of it" (2012: 236). But to see rules and principles as dependent on creative imagination in the ways we've sketched is not to disparage them. Diamond does recognize a place for rules and principles, just not as the source and origin of moral thinking. An image Diamond uses in the following passage, about several writers in whose outlook she finds much that needs to be taken seriously, helps capture how she sees that place:

... they take as the root of morality in human nature a capacity for attention to things imagined or perceived: what I think it would be fair to call a loving and respectful attention. (1991b: 306)

The view Diamond here crystallizes is that such attention is the root of morality, not the whole plant. The roots spread nourishment through the plant whose other parts may include the fact that "sometimes we decide how to act by bringing a moral rule or principle" (1991b: 312) to bear on our situation. Whether or not

¹³ Moyal-Sharrock quotes Diamond to this effect (2012: 224). However, both the paragraph of Moyal-Sharrock's just discussed and many others concerning Diamond's use of imagination reflect little of the import of the quoted passage.

Diamond would herself describe the root of morality exactly as loving and respectful attention, her botanical image is suited to expressing her view about the moral importance of rules and principles. For Diamond, rules have a place in morality within a wider imaginative responsiveness: they are perhaps a branch of the plant – but not its root, as Moyal-Sharrock supposes.

In simply asserting a view of principles as foundational in morality, Moyal-Sharrock misses what Diamond is saying. Here is a closely related way in which she fails to engage with Diamond's views. The three dominant moral traditions – consequentialism, Kantianism (including contractualism) and Aristotelian virtue ethics – have, as suggested earlier, all strongly focused on moral agency, and agency conceived in a narrow way at that: as manifested in “the direction of choice between fixed and readily grasped possibilities, with the idea that it is not for us as moral agents to struggle to make sense of things” (1991b: 312), that is, to struggle to discern the situations in which – ‘the facts’ on the basis of which – we must deliberate and make our moral decisions. These traditions can of course acknowledge some ways in which description may be difficult: most obviously, where it depends upon factual information it is not easy for the agent (or perhaps anyone) to acquire. But there is a kind of difficulty-in-description they cannot accommodate – difficulty whose resolution needs the sort of creative imagination that is exercised in good literature.

Of course, the value aspect of a situation is sometimes not difficult to discern: the options are starkly clear, and I must decide. Other times, the real moral difficulty (the ethical “struggle”) lies precisely in trying to “make sense of things” – it lies in reaching, in a way that calls upon the exercise of creative imagination, for a morally better or truer sense of what is at issue in the situation.¹⁴ Here is an example Diamond finds in Plato's dialogue *Crito* of philosophical argument informed by moral imagination. Socrates' friends are urging him to accept their offer to help him escape from

¹⁴ This is not to say that moral imagination is not active in ‘straightforward’ cases as well, albeit inexplicitly. As we explained earlier in discussing the limitations of a rule-based view of moral thinking, even straightforward moral thinking and response draws on creative imagination, both in children and in the adults they will become.

prison and from Athens, to avoid the death penalty that has been imposed on him. In rejecting their offer, Socrates famously represents the state of Athens as his parents, who have brought him up and to whom his responsibility is such that he may not flee. In crystallizing what Socrates says to his friends, Diamond writes:

What is possible in Socrates' story is something unthought of by his friends, and depends on his creative response to the elements of his situation, his capacity to transform it by the exercise of creative imagination, and thus to bring what he does into connection with what has happened in his life. (1991b: 312)

This goes further than what Moyal-Sharrock recognizes under the banner of “creative imagination”. One such limit of what she can recognize under that banner shows in this passage: “here, I would like to use the word ‘*reminder*’ – in much the same way Wittgenstein uses it. For the exercise of the creative imagination similarly involves the prompting by a *perspicuous presentation* of that which is already there, in plain view, but had been overlooked” (2012: 223, original emphasis). Diamond specifically does not represent Socrates as providing a “reminder” of “that which is already there, in plain view, but had been overlooked”. She highlights, instead, the capacity to radically reconceive one’s situation in surprising ways. Moyal-Sharrock’s footnote 2 (2012: 223) confirms that she overlooks Diamond’s much more radical conception of the creative imagination: “I felt literature afforded us a *recognition*, more than a mere *cognition*”, writes Moyal-Sharrock. On Diamond’s view imaginatively creative literature is certainly not confined to giving us “mere cognition”. But she does not think that its distinctive power instead lies in affording us a re-cognition, a ‘knowing again’ of what was already known independently of the creative imagining. That misses her key point about the creative imagination as the capacity to re-conceive, to conceive anew.¹⁵ The difference between Diamond’s and Moyal-Sharrock’s views of the creative reach of imagination is akin to Kant’s distinction between productive and reproductive imagination. Moyal-Sharrock

¹⁵ The key point is almost registered in the first two sentences of Moyal-Sharrock’s paper. But the fact that the passage and footnote we have just commented on are offered as explicating those opening sentences suggests that the point has not been clearly grasped.

assimilates imagination to its ‘re-productive’ role – a representation of (in Moyal-Sharrock’s words) “that which is already there in plain view but [may have] been overlooked”. Diamond would readily accept that imagination importantly can and does fill the reproductive role which Moyal-Sharrock assigns it – we often do need imaginative everyday “reminders” of what we have, for various reasons, lost sight of. But imagination also works, in Diamond’s view, at a different and deeper ‘productive’ level.

The question in just what ways the language of moral philosophy needs to be adequate to our shared ‘everyday’ moral experience and language is difficult. Perhaps more than one answer to it is possible. But the question does need to be pondered, and moral philosophy has commonly been inattentive to it. It is instead very often assumed that some such terms of moral philosophy as those mentioned above – for example, sentience, rational autonomy, flourishing – will be of the right kind to express the deeper understanding that holds in place our everyday thinking and speaking about (for example) the evil of murder. But this is not at all obvious. Diamond, indeed, has argued repeatedly and compellingly that not only is it not obvious, it is simply not true. She has tried to reveal ways in which moral philosophy, in various widely shared and influential modes, has, in failing to answer to the significance of our moral experience, failed to provide the illumination it has hoped to provide. Diamond once proposed these questions: “How do our words, thoughts, descriptions, philosophical styles let us down or let others down? How do they, used at full stretch – and in what spirit or spirits – illuminate?” (1991b: 380). Her own work has offered many profound and powerful, while of course contestable, answers to them.

4. “Ethics is transcendental”

Diamond has again and again shown how the ethical manifests itself in our lives in ways of which moral philosophy as mostly practised can make little or no sense. In bringing out this rich variety of manifestations, Diamond is doing what Wittgenstein said of his own philosophical practice by citing the Earl of Kent from Shakespeare’s *King Lear*: “I’ll teach you differences!” But while this

is indeed true of her practice, describing what Diamond is doing in these terms falls short of capturing a still deeper Wittgensteinian affinity of her moral philosophy. We end by briefly indicating what we take this deeper affinity to be.

Diamond can be taken as seeing the ethical as a pervasive *element* of human life, in something like the sense in which the sea is a pervasive and essential element of the life of fish, at once shaping, sustaining, nourishing and limiting the forms of fishly life. The ethical analogously shapes, sustains, nourishes and limits the forms our human life takes. Perhaps a still better analogy is *materiality* – the very existence of a spatio-temporal world – as an element of our human lives, as shaping and limiting the forms of our embodied human life. Diamond’s constant aim of highlighting the narrowness of much philosophical ethics and its “laying down of requirements” is one aspect of the way her work returns us again and again to this elemental character of the ethical, as escaping definition or final capture just because it is not an object *for* us but instead something in which we are elemented. This is one way of elucidating the idea that the ethical cannot be identified with anything, or any number of things, *inside* the world, without requiring the postulation of super-empirical entities that exist *outside* the world (an assumption that drives so much of the debate in standard meta-ethics). But if the ethical cannot be defined or finally captured, on Diamond’s view, it can be acknowledged through and manifested in indefinitely many ‘moments’, in something like Hegel’s sense of that term, of our human life. (Materiality, likewise, is not *itself* an object for us, but is acknowledged through and manifested in indefinitely many moments of our lives.)

We have given some indication of the range of ways in which Diamond has undertaken to re-mind us – to help enable in us an imaginatively vivid appreciation – of the open-ended variety of such moments. Our reference to ethics as elemental suggests that this variety can in turn be seen as having a further significance. There is point in saying that Diamond’s practice of philosophical ethics fleshes out one plausible understanding – we do not say the only possible understanding – of what Wittgenstein might have meant by his dictum that “ethics is transcendental” (Wittgenstein

1961: 6.421). That form of words can be heard as answering to an appreciation that though the ethical can manifest itself in indefinitely many ways in the world, it cannot be defined or finally captured. If there is a single way of crystallizing Diamond's view of the ethical, perhaps this is it.¹⁶

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