

# *Reading Wittgenstein with Anscombe, Going On to Ethics* by Cora Diamond

Lars Hertzberg

Diamond, Cora, *Reading Wittgenstein with Anscombe, Going On to Ethics*. Harvard University Press: Cambridge, Mass. & London, 2019. 331 pp.

Professional philosophy is to a great extent a huge factory for the manufacture of necessities – only necessities give us mental peace. It is no wonder that Wittgenstein arouses a certain hatred among us. He's out to deprive us of our factory jobs.

G.E.M. Anscombe, *Introduction to Wittgenstein's Tractatus* (p. 184)

The central theme of this book is the concept of bipolarity both in Wittgenstein's early work and in moral philosophy. Bipolarity is the notion that, for things uttered to mean something, what is said must be something that could either be true or be false – it must have a meaningful negation. This notion, as I see it, is connected with a perennial dilemma of philosophy: the philosopher's task, it is often held, is to make claims that will be acknowledged to be *necessarily* true; in other words, claims that have no possibility of being false; but then, apparently, they do not fulfil the condition for being meaningful. Diamond loosens the restraints of bipolarity without yet opening the door to necessary truths.

The book consists of three parts:

“Wittgenstein, Anscombe, and the Activity of Philosophy”, “Wittgenstein, Anscombe and What Can Only Be True”, and “Going on to Think about Ethics”. Each part opens with a lengthy overview of the essays constituting that part. Thus we first get a summary and then a more detailed presentation of the arguments, though sometimes the summary adds to what is in the subsequent essays. In the two Wittgenstein parts, Diamond uses Elizabeth Anscombe's *Introduction to Wittgenstein's Tractatus* as a stepping-stone for reading Wittgenstein. Although Diamond on many points disagrees with Anscombe, she claims that Anscombe “brings out – superbly – the depth and interest” of the problems dealt with in the *Tractatus*. Hence, Diamond finds,

sorting out her own disagreements with Anscombe is a way of coming to grips with the core of Wittgenstein's thought. Diamond herself describes the underlying unity of the essays in this collection as follows: "In reading Wittgenstein and Anscombe, we can see them thinking about *thinking*, and about the way we may respond to thinking that has miscarried or gone astray" (p. 2). In other words, rather than strive to formulate allegedly deep and necessary truths, the philosopher should reflect on the various ways in which we are liable to lose our way in our thinking. The philosopher, thus conceived, is not in the business of formulating doctrine but in offering support towards intellectual self-help.

Central to the *Tractatus* is the laying out of what Diamond calls the picture-proposition use of signs. What picture-propositions have in common is their *saying that something is so* (p. 29). Or differently put: they have the possibility of being either true or false. Thus far every reader of the *Tractatus* would agree. Furthermore, there is a very large consensus that, apart from picture-propositions, the only uses of signs that are not nonsensical are mathematical propositions, tautologies and contradictions, even though these do *not* amount to saying that something is so, and they accordingly lack bipolarity (their truth – or falsity – it will be said, is a *formal* property). Now, Diamond differs from this consensus in arguing that Wittgenstein does not mean to exclude the existence of other uses of signs than these. She argues that Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus* does not

aim to draw any lines around what constitutes a legitimate use of signs: he simply wishes, in the interest of clarity, to draw attention to the difference between various ways of using signs. Thus, a proposition like "Socrates is identical" (Wittgenstein's example) is not "wrong" or inevitably nonsensical in itself; the problem with it is that the way the word "identical" occurs in it differs from the uses of the word "identical" with which we are familiar in such a way that we cannot understand what a speaker who utters such a proposition might mean by it unless she is able to explain how she is using the word. This perspective on nonsense is familiar from Diamond's essay "What Nonsense Might Be" (Diamond 1991b); apparently, Anscombe was thinking along similar lines.

An issue that is brought to mind in several places is what the locus of nonsense is. Diamond makes use of Wittgenstein's distinction between signs and symbols. Signs are the physical marks and sounds used to produce a written or spoken proposition. A symbol is a sign in its meaningful use. Now, the *sign* that makes up someone's writing the proposition "Red is a colour", for instance, could not as such be considered nonsense. For the same sign could be used to produce any number of different propositions, say, in some foreign language, in a code, etc. But neither could the *symbol* be considered nonsense, since it consists in the meaningful use of signs; and being meaningful it is not nonsense. Diamond's response, I take it, is to say that there may be *apparently*

meaningful uses of propositions. An example, from Anscombe, is someone who says “It looks as if the sun goes round the earth”. A little reflection should make one realize that one has no idea how this differs from its looking the other way round. Other cases would be the imagined uses of signs to which we may be tempted to attribute meaning in doing philosophy. (Of course, one may also utter nonsense on purpose, say, in order to confuse or entertain.) (This issue is touched upon on pp. 90f, and on pp. 58f, n 11.)

Here is a point of disagreement between Diamond and Anscombe: Anscombe contrasts “Socrates is identical” with the proposition “Red is a colour”, arguing that the latter is nonsense *period* because it cannot be meaningfully negated and hence violates a principle formulated in the *Tractatus*. But this would mean resorting to an exclusionary principle of the kind Diamond argues will not be found in the *Tractatus*. In fact, she claims, Anscombe is being inconsistent here; by analogy with the other example, she should have observed that the problem with “Red is a colour” is that the phrase “is a colour” is not being used in a familiar way here, and hence cannot be carrying the meaning it seems to carry on the face of it: “... is a colour” is not normally used to attribute a property to something. The proposition can be rectified by explaining that the phrase is here used in some other way. (Thus, we could imagine an interior decorator or an expert of heraldry dividing what we call colours into genuine

colours and something else, and telling an apprentice that red is one of the colours. Or, of course, telling someone in the course of learning English that “red” is a colour – or that red is a “colour”.)

In short, as Diamond reads it, on the *Tractatus* view there is no such thing as nonsense period. In this connection, Diamond distinguishes between drawing a limit to thought, which is what Wittgenstein does, and imposing limitations on thought, which is an idea that most readers, including Anscombe, have wrongly (according to Diamond) attributed to him. The former consists in pointing out that a certain formulation fails to express a thought (unless some words in it are assigned new uses), the latter in prohibiting certain formulations as attempts to say what cannot be said (as if a non-thought were something that can first be identified and then ruled out). (Pp. 42ff.)

In fact, Anscombe argues that the nonsense principle she claims to find in the *Tractatus* is problematic since it excludes some propositions she thinks ought to be allowed for. One of her examples is “‘Someone’ is not the name of someone”, which she thinks violates the bipolarity requirement but makes perfectly good sense, say, as a reminder to a philosopher who is inclined to explain the word “someone” as a name. Diamond returns to this example several times in the first two parts of her book. The problem with Anscombe’s example, she argues, is the way it relies on the word “name”. If meant as a general claim, it conflicts with a conceivable case in which

someone gives the name Someone to a person. (Of course – and this is part of the problem – what using a word as a name amounts to is not clearly circumscribed. The word also has a name-like use, for instance, when we say of a child, “Someone is in a bad mood today.”) To allow for this, one might be tempted to restate the proposition in the form “‘Someone’, when it isn’t used as a name, isn’t used as a name”, which would of course not do the philosophical work Anscombe requires of it (p. 72). Diamond’s suggestion is that the philosophical lesson aimed at by Anscombe can better be conveyed by pointing to the fact that a proposition like “Someone in Johnny’s class has the measles”, as it is commonly used, does not have the same inference pattern as a proposition where a name is substituted for “someone” – say, “Tommy, in Johnny’s class, has the measles” (p. 90).

Relying on a term such as “name” to formulate a logical principle is an instance of what Diamond considers a problematic practice. Here again, Anscombe seems to run foul of one of her own insights. She had written

If “a” is a symbolic sign only in the context of a proposition, then the symbol “a” will be properly presented, not by putting it down and saying that it is a symbol of such and such a kind, but by representing the whole class of the propositions in which it can occur. (Quoted on p. 107)

Or, in Diamond’s terms:

... often the logic-words of ordinary language, and often enough also the logic-words of logicians, cannot bear the weight we put on them in philosophical discussion. (P. 237)

For instance, saying that such and such a word is not a name, and that accordingly it cannot be used in such and such a manner, as we saw, risks misunderstanding. This can be avoided by giving, instead, examples of propositions containing a name, and contrasting them with propositions containing the word “someone”. (However, I am not sure I understand the idea of “representing the whole class of propositions”, but maybe this does not matter.)

These are ways of bringing out what Wittgenstein is speaking about in *Tractatus* 5.473: “Logic must take care of itself” and in 6.111 “Theories which make a proposition of logic appear substantial are always false.” What Wittgenstein warns against here is what Anscombe calls a “logical chemistry” – the idea of logic, as it were, as a theory of which expressions mix and which do not mix.

Nevertheless, Diamond agrees with Anscombe in holding there to be other things to say that may be meaningful though they can only be true. Unlike Anscombe, however, she argues that these are not ruled out by the *Tractatus*. Among them are definitions, mathematical equations, scientific laws, probability claims, linguistic rules, things said to forestall philosophical confusion, etc. Diamond calls these uses of words preparatory or accommodatory; they *subserve* the

use of picture-propositions in enabling us to substitute one expression for another, to make inferences, clear up misunderstandings, etc., etc. Diamond here refers approvingly to Michael Kremer who has argued that the most general notion of meaningfulness in the *Tractatus* is “having a linguistic function”. Such a claim shows how far we have been travelling from the received reading of Wittgenstein’s early work.

So far so good. But one may ask: should we not also make allowance for various things we say which do not bear any direct relation to picture-propositions? Why should “linguistic function” be limited to what is subservient to picture-propositions (or is it)? Diamond has little to say about metaphors, for instance. And what about secondary uses of words (which Diamond has written about elsewhere, 1991a), the use of words to encourage, to console or to insult, etc.? Why should picture-propositions be given such a privileged position in discussing uses of words in the first place? Here the determination to remain true to the basic notions of the *Tractatus* begins to feel like a straight-jacket.

Part of the problem here, of course, is that the notion of a picture-proposition is not clearly circumscribed. Are propositions like “War is hell”, “You’re fabulous”, “The third movement of Beethoven’s *Eroica* expresses grief”, “That would be murder!” ways of saying that something is so? Perhaps. Here more clarification seems called for. (I should point out, however, that Diamond has an

extremely interesting discussion of related questions in essay 5, section 5.)

\*\*\*

As a reader of the *Tractatus*, here as in her earlier work, Diamond does not grapple with the “machinery” of the book, with the rather specialized vocabulary (logical form, elementary proposition, *Sachverhalt* vs *Sachlage*, etc.) which has given rise to much disagreement and many headaches among the *Tractatus* commentariat. Rather she goes directly to what for her seems to constitute the deep structure of the work, to Wittgenstein’s thoughts about the conditions of sense and the character of philosophical activity. The present book differs from her earlier writings on the *Tractatus* in placing less emphasis on the so-called frame of the book (the idea that the preface and the concluding remarks frame the exercise in nonsense which constitutes the bulk of the text). We might say she is engaged in opening up the *Tractatus*: “The justification of what we do in philosophical clarification lies in its helpfulness, not in anything in the *Tractatus*” (p. 28): whatever serves the purposes of clarification cannot be in conflict with Wittgenstein’s intentions. She says her basic disagreement with Anscombe lies in what she takes the *Tractatus* to be doing: she regards it “as a guide to philosophical activity”, Anscombe as “the setting out of a complex and powerful [and partly flawed] theory” (p. 31f). To this reader, at least, Diamond makes the work a great deal more interesting than many readings

that cleave more closely to the text. To be sure I can imagine someone objecting, “C’est magnifique, mais ce n’est pas le *Tractatus*”. I would not presume to pass verdict on whether that is so or not, but that may not be the most interesting question to be asked here. For one might ask: when all is said and done, what is so special about the *Tractatus*?

\*\*\*

In the third part, the question of bipolarity enters in a different way. Diamond here brings up a debate between David Wiggins and Bernard Williams (both 1995). Wiggins argued that, just as there is “nothing else to think but that”, for instance, 5 plus 7 make 12, there are analogous cases in ethics. His example is “there is nothing else to think but that slavery is unjust and insupportable”. Note: Wiggins is not claiming that there is nothing else *for us* to think, but that there is nothing else to think *period*. He says a “wealth of considerations ... can be produced” in support of his claim, and if you think through them it will be clear that in denying the claim you will “have opted out altogether from the point of view that shall be common between one person and another” (quoted on p. 272).

Williams disagrees. According to him, in ethics there is always something else to think. His claim seems to be borne out by the fact that the morality of slavery has had its defenders. The way in which Wiggins could have tried to make his point, Williams argues, would be by

appealing to “thick concepts”: concepts like cruel, or rude, or generous, or obscene: these are concepts which (unlike good/bad, right/wrong) have a descriptive richness while at the same time an evaluative stance is internal to them. However, according to Williams, such an appeal could not be used to establish Wiggins’s point, since there are no thick ethical concepts that are used universally. So, if it should be argued that there is nothing to think, say, but that a certain practice is cruel, Williams’s retort would be that a community might lack the concept of cruelty, and besides, even if they had the concept people might fail to apply it to their own doings. Diamond has an interesting if somewhat sketchy discussion about thick concepts, but in the end she points out that Williams’s argument cuts no ice with Wiggins’s position, since Wiggins does not rely on the idea of thick concepts in the first place. In fact, Williams’s critique, as presented here, is left rather rugged-looking. (Diamond claims that slavery does not function as a thick ethical concept. This must have been true in the debate concerning slavery in the U.S. before the Civil War. On the other hand, in contemporary debate it is surely an ethical concept: when it is said that guest workers in Qatar are made to work under slave-like conditions, that will not be taken as a mere piece of information.)

Wiggins argues that a position like that of Williams involves “a questionable presumption of symmetry” between competing ethical positions – in short a form of ethical relativism.

As Diamond puts it, “Wiggins’s idea was that denying that slavery is evil puts you at risk of having no workable system of moral ideas, because you will be working *without* such moral ideas as justice and the significance of treating human beings not as mere means” (p. 285). Though Diamond seems more in sympathy with Wiggins than with Williams, she does not exactly endorse Wiggins’s position, though she concludes by saying that “following out Wiggins on slavery can help us see the issues here” (p. 306).

I am not sure how far that is true. Could we not (for instance) imagine a defender of slavery who holds on to the moral ideas stressed by Wiggins but who simply fails to see that blacks fall inside the purview of justice or that they count among those who may not be used as mere means? Wiggins seems unaware of this possibility. Of course he might say that someone who argued that way suffered from moral blindness. But just as surely the defender of slavery can be imagined to be saying that it is the critics of slavery who are deluded (which Diamond admits). Or is Wiggins simply trying to force the slave-owner to realize how much he has to give up if he wishes to be consistent in his defence of slavery?

Diamond seems to be testing the idea that the defence of slavery is a case of thinking having gone off the rails in a way analogous to that in which philosophical thinking will sometimes go off the rails. But is not she – and Wiggins – in danger of intellectualizing the issue? If someone persists in producing philosophical

nonsense, we may, in the end, simply shrug our shoulders. With regard to slavery this is not so. Someone who opposes slavery with all her might would not leave off after having failed to get her adversaries to realize that their thinking had gone off the rails. For her, in the end, argument would not matter: in her eyes, the very fact of slavery presumably constitutes a *reductio* of any argument advanced in its defence.

In any case, I am impressed by Diamond’s thorough familiarity with the debate about Southern slavery in the 19th century and with the way she disentangles the issues. The road is worth travelling even if we do not end up in any very specific place. Especially the way in which records of past public debates can be used to illuminate the nature of ethical disagreement is highly fruitful.

There are a number of issues here that it would be interesting to pursue further. More attention might have been given to the question whom the combatants in the debate were addressing, and what the stakes were. Why were the representatives of the Southern states so concerned to defend slavery, given that they were not going to give it up voluntarily in any case? It would also be interesting to know more about the processes through which slavery originally came to be abolished in the North.

\*\*\*

In all, Cora Diamond has produced a book that merits careful study. It is sure to leave a mark both

on the *Tractatus* literature and on moral philosophy. It is not an easy read, rather it demands the reader's fullest attention, and then some. However, its difficulty is not like that of the *Tractatus*. While that work was weighed down by the rhetorical ambitions of its young writer, Diamond's writing, as always, is free from rhetorical pretensions: in contrast to the *Tractatus*, her writing is in immediate contact with the thinking going on. The downside of this is that she does not exactly smoothen the reader's path.

An observation Diamond makes about Anscombe's book certainly applies to her own: "The book has a deep intelligence evident in the treatment of every topic; and this means that virtually every passage one reads, if one turns to it anew, has more in it than one had seen" (p. 65).<sup>1</sup>

Åbo Akademi University, Finland  
Lars.Hertzberg @ abo.fi

## References

- Anscombe, G. E. M., 1971. *An Introduction to Wittgenstein's Tractatus*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Diamond, C., 1991a. "Secondary Sense." In Diamond, *The Realistic Spirit: Wittgenstein, Philosophy, and the Mind*. Cambridge, Mass. & London: The MIT Press.
- Diamond, C., 1991b. "What Nonsense Might Be." In Diamond, *The Realistic Spirit*.
- Wiggins, D., 1995. "Objective and Subjective in Ethics: With Two Post-Scripts on Truth." *Ratio* 8:243–258.
- Williams, B., 1995. "Truth in Ethics." *Ratio* 8:227–242.
- Wittgenstein, L., 1921. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Trans. C. K. Ogden.

---

<sup>1</sup> I wish to thank David Cockburn as well as the participants in the philosophy research seminar at Åbo Akademi for useful criticism.