

What some philosophers wouldn't dream of counting as part as their job¹

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Abstract: Cora Diamond's view of the materials admissible in moral philosophy (Diamond 1991h, Diamond 2006) is bound to strike many analytic philosophers as too broad: they wouldn't dream of thinking of them (namely of literature) as 'part of their job'. This, of course, assumes a conception of the nature of the such job, one in regard to which Diamond expresses doubts of several kinds. In this paper I will (i) search for different reasons for those doubts (Diamond 1991d, 1991e, 1991f, 1991g, 1991h) and then (ii) try to make the connection clear between Diamond's proposal of a change in 'the way we want to do moral philosophy' and her reading of Wittgenstein on ethical nonsense (Diamond 1991a, 1991b, 1991c, 2000). Finally, I suggest that although Diamond has a strong case defending that the dismissal of literary materials in moral philosophy marks an untenable 'neutrality ideal' (Laugier 2006), not every aspect of her view of the role of literature in moral philosophy is equally compelling. In fact, she recruits literature for two different purposes: countering the prevailing 'blindness to blindness' and countering the lack of awe in moral thinking, which she wants to connect with 'the dark and sinister in the human heart' (Diamond 2000), 'unspeakability' and 'difficulty of reality' (Diamond 2008). Since these are different purposes, 'philosophers who wouldn't dream of counting literature as part of their job' might be rejecting any of various things.

My title ("What some philosophers wouldn't dream of counting as part as their job") simply refers to literature and is partly a quote, from Diamond's article «*Having a rough story about what moral philosophy is*» (she says 'subject')². One problem is, one of the things Diamond defends in that article is that we will not have a 'widely agreed' view of the subject, so, neither, I assume, of the job³. Yet she does have her own rough story, which she puts to work in a number of papers on ethics⁴, and in this rough story literature is definitely involved. What I would like to do here is basically try to understand exactly how Diamond's

¹ This text corresponds roughly to the talk originally presented at the conference '*Éthique, imagination, formes de vie – hommage de la communauté philosophique européenne à Cora Diamond*', organized by Sandra Laugier and Emmanuel Halais (Amiens, France, September 13th-15th 2010). A later version was presented in *MLAG Research Seminar 2010-2011* (Mattia Riccardi org.), Faculdade de Letras da Universidade do Porto (December 7th 2010).

² Diamond 1991h: 380.

³ Contrary to what Martha Nussbaum, for instance, assumes (Diamond 1991h: 380). Cf. for instance her *Love's Knowledge – Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (1990).

⁴ Diamond 1991d, 1991e, 1991f, 1991g, 1991h, 2006.

wittgensteinian view of ethics could make such a big difference for the materials of moral philosophy. In order to do this, I will first (i) consider her criticisms of the ‘limited and limiting’⁵ (as well as widespread) conceptions of the job, (ii) then the questions to herself concerning the interpretation of Wittgenstein on ethics which underlies the proposed role for literature⁶, (iii) suggest that while she has a strong case against ‘blindness to blindness’, not every aspect of her view of the role of literature in moral philosophy is equally compelling, particularly where it concerns ‘the awe, the wonder and the reverence’ she finds lacking in moral thinking. Since she recruits literature for different purposes, ‘philosophers who wouldn’t dream of counting literature as part of their job’ might be rejecting any of various things.

I . Conceptions of the job

Diamond’s view of the materials admissible in moral philosophy⁷ is bound to strike many analytic philosophers as too broad: they wouldn’t dream of thinking of them as ‘part of their job’. This, of course, assumes a conception of the nature of such job, one in regard to which Diamond expresses doubts of several kinds. My first goal here is to search for the reasons for such doubts in the papers on ethics in *The Realistic Spirit*. These papers are not just critical: she says they «reflect what I take to be Wittgenstein’s view of philosophy»⁸.

The moral philosopher whose conception of the job Diamond wants to criticize appears in the guise of people as different as Peter Singer and Tom Regan («*Eating Meat and Eating People*»), Onora O’Neill («*Anything but Argument*») and William Frankena («*Missing the Adventure*»).

In the guise of Singer and Regan, we have the moral philosopher discussing what is rational to do (and not to do) in our relation with other animals in terms of their right to have their interests taken into account. The idea is any creature with interests – where having interests depends on the capacity for suffering and enjoyment – should have their interests respected. Part of the job of the moral philosopher is to argue for unbiasedness here; Diamond’s (surprisingly)

⁵ Diamond 1991h: 376.

⁶ Diamond 2000.

⁷ Diamond 1992, Diamond 2006.

⁸ Diamond 1991 a, “Philosophy and the Mind”, p. 14.

irritated tone when she talks about Singer and Regan has nothing to do with the rightness of their intuitions in regard to the 'callous way we treat other animals'⁹: she describes herself as writing as 'herself a vegetarian distressed by the obtuseness of arguments'; her irritation has everything to do with the way the job of moral philosophy is seen by people like Singer and Regan. This is reflected in the non-accidental 'moralistic tone'¹⁰ of their claims, and is encapsulated in Singer's use of the very term 'specisism', which for Diamond is itself a mark of a wrong way to conceive our moral relations with other animals, which starts with a wrong way to conceive our moral relations with other humans. I will come back to this.

In the guise of O'Neill we have the moral philosopher's accusation to another moral philosopher of a specific kind of failure to do (moral) philosophy: in *Anything but Argument* philosopher Stephen Clarke is criticized for, in his book *The Moral Status of Animals*, 'not reaching beyond assertion to argument', thus failing to do the job of the moral philosopher. His case for animals rests ultimately on a vision, and on an appeal made to the heart, and is thus capable of persuading 'only those already inclined to accept his vision'. In this case Diamond's annoyance concerns O'Neill's assumption that argument is the sole way to go beyond assertion, which depends on her having something like a view of *moral philosophy proper* – a self-assured certainty about the nature of moral thinking, which makes the moral appeal of anything other than argument incomprehensible. I will also come back to this.

In the guise of Frankena we have the moral philosopher teaching other people how to do moral philosophy. Analysing Plato's *Crito*, Frankena didactically takes apart the arguments put forward by Socrates: he has three arguments to show why he ought not to break the laws of the city; he indicates the premises (a principle and a statement of fact) and the conclusion of such arguments (for instance: we ought to obey and respect our parents and teachers, if Socrates escapes he will be disobeying his parent and teacher, so he ought not to escape). So, thus goes moral thinking: in it we deal with arguments about what is good, bad, fair, unfair; if one agrees with the premisses and one is rational,

⁹ Diamond 1991f: 334.

¹⁰ Diamond 1991f: 323.

application of the principle to the statement of fact follows and a conclusion follows.

These views may seem quite natural: what could possibly be wrong with conceptions of the job which involve talk of rights, use of argument, conclusions about what any rational being ought to do? For Diamond, many different things. In fact she is using the three cases above as examples of moral philosophers being 'blind to their own blindness'.

Singer-Regan's ideal of unbiasedness makes them overlook the nature of the very concepts involved in the discussion, in particular what it is to be human¹¹. This comes out clearly in an example Diamond finds particularly revealing (and outrageous): Singer's question (in the context of his discussion with opponents who underline the importance of rationality and language for considering animal-human differences) about why we do not use humans who lack these capacities the same way we use other animals (in experimentation namely). While Singer is interested, with his question, in underlining our specisism, as ungrounded bias (that's why we don't), in Diamond's eyes, he's showing his blindness to the kind of question the question about being human is: he simply takes for granted that it is a question to be answered by natural science, both for humans and other animals, and that this could be no ground for moral differences. Diamond's very graphic question that gives the title to the paper – *Is eating people really like eating animals?*¹² – intends to draw our attention to the limits of the analogy between humans and animals: it is not as a mark of respect for rights and interests that we do not eat other humans, the same way it is not a mark of a respect for rights and interests that we engage in certain practices (burying the dead) or do not engage in others (e.g. sexual practices with parents or siblings). These are all things 'which go to determine which sort of a concept 'human being is', they regard 'the invention of the human'. This is why something Singer simply does not see.

As for O'Neill, her conception of 'moral philosophy proper' leaves one completely empty-handed when trying to come to terms with the fact that people do find their responses to the world changed by means other than rational argument – such conversions simply contrast with that which comes up to

¹¹ About this, cf. *Experimenting on Animals* and *Loosing our concepts*.

¹² The actual title is "Eating Meat and Eating People" (Diamond 1991f).

appropriate standards, and respects our capacities of thinking beings; thus they are not the business of moral philosophy, they are beneath the job. That it can be a problem that we are thus left empty handed is a problem which O'Neill herself does not see.

For Frankena moral philosophy trades with arguments, which deal with the application of general rules to factually described states of affairs. Yet if we take a closer look at some of the putative facts in the example above (such as 'escaping would be disobeying one's parent and teacher') we have to ask ourselves what we are talking about. In no literal sense are the laws of the city Socrates parent and teacher: Socrates is seeing things in a novel way, yet this work of moral imagination is something Frankena is blind to. Also, thinking, as he does, that facts are facts and that in describing them the job of the moral philosopher hasn't started yet (all we might disagree about is valuing), presupposes a fact-value distinction ('inherited from the golden age of meta-ethics') and which keeps us from seeing what might be involved in moral disagreement. We might not even see the same facts (do we have to think that escaping is disobeying one's parent and teacher?) and 'not seeing the same facts' is a kind of 'distance'¹³ quite different from disagreement in valuing.

The cases of Singer-Regan, O'Neill and Frankena come together in a view of the job of moral philosophers built on the mainstream, dominating even, way of looking at moral thinking, a way we may call forensic, centering on overt action and decision dealt with in terms of arguments. For Diamond such view of the job is 'in thrall of a metaphysical ideal', which makes philosophers blind to their own blindness¹⁴. It is against this that she stresses the 'non-forensic aspect of moral thought'¹⁵: the importance, in moral thought, of 'seeing things', of sensibility and receptiveness (of being overcome in contrast with acting), of the contrast between thought and thoughtlessness, focusing on problems such as 'what of kind of good concepts are' (such as being human), the role in moral thought, of moral imagination (seeing the state as parent and teacher), as well as the effort involved in seeing (risk and adventure in moral lives, *Missing the adventure*) the disparity in seeing things which goes deeper than disagreeing on

¹³ Diamond 2006

¹⁴ Diamond 1991: 317.

¹⁵ Lovibond 2007: 305

valuing actions ('*disagreement and distance*'¹⁶). We know this is where literary materials enter the job: they mark a change in how we want to moral philosophy and are supposed to achieve things as diverse as a deploring of concepts, a critique of emotivism, even a critique of Nussbaum's trust that we will have a widely agreed story of what moral philosophy is. Once literary materials enter, moral discussion is, as Sandra Laugier put it in *Concepts moraux, connaissance morale*¹⁷, reconfigured and recentered, shifting from a centering on arguments to a centering on forms of life and moral intelligence, thus changing our situation, where the 'permissibility of abortion is the paradigm of moral discussion', and which takes for granted a view of the world as comprehensible, a plain business, best left for epistemology and philosophy of science¹⁸. Against such background 'the unplainness of literary works' would appear totally irrelevant (the same way, as it were, that the unplainness of Elizabeth Costello's character in *The difficulty of reality*¹⁹ is misread by many people) but not after this change. But how is the change connected with Wittgenstein?

II. Ethical non-sense and questions to herself

As we know, Diamond's view of ethics arises from (her specific) reading of the *Tractatus* – in fact, she thinks later Wittgenstein's views on ethics essentially did not change (in its cutting ethical talk from ordinary talk, its rejection of a sole type of evaluation (for chairs and strawberries as for good and evil, its emphasis in 'reaching beyond the world')). Now if moral reflection is to go on, as it obviously does in the papers I was referring to above, the Tractarian inspiration

¹⁶ Cf. Diamond 2006, "Différences et distances morales".

¹⁷ Laugier 2006.

¹⁸ Diamond 1991: 376-378.

¹⁹ Diamond 2008. Elizabeth Costello is a character of J. Coetzee's (Nobel Prize, Literature, 2003). Cf. *The Lives of Animals* and *Elizabeth Costello*. She is an Australian writer, who travels and gives lectures, and who is 'haunted' by the way we treat (other) animals (she does not refrain from comparing it with the Holocaust, something which people around her find obscene). Costello doesn't do anything to avoid being contradictory in the way she behaves in that respect: 'I'm wearing leather, you know, I wouldn't have too much respect (for me, for my vegetarianism) if I were you', she says to other people. For Diamond, one thing is clear: Costello is not trying to come up with arguments about how we should treat animals. Besides Costello, another much discussed example of Diamond's in "The difficulty of reality" is that of a poem by Ted Hughes, from the 50s, which takes as pretext the 1914 photograph of six smiling young men who would soon be dead in the war. What Diamond is looking for when she speaks of the difficulty of reality is "the experience of the mind's not being able to encompass something which it encounters" (Diamond 2008: 44).

cannot possibly mean that nothing ethical can be said: in fact, she says about the papers on ethics collected in *The Realistic Spirit* that they are all, themselves, «attempts to think of ethics in a realistic spirit, i.e. 'not in the thrall of metaphysical requirements'²⁰». So one does feel inclined to say things ethical (on good and evil, the will, the world as a whole, life) and one says them. Diamond does too. Yet these are things whose status she feels the need to clarify, and this is precisely the point of the many questions to herself about the status of her articulations of Wittgenstein's views on ethics in *Ethics, Imagination and the Tractatus*. Typically: 'If I am using a phrase which is simply nonsense in supposedly articulating Wittgenstein's views – such as 'attitude toward the world as a whole' - what can I think I am achieving?'²¹ what is it that I am doing? Should I be doing it? Especially: Can I do it without stepping back from the austere view of nonsense? Also crucially: How can a reading of Wittgenstein on ethics possibly make him come out as neither a mystic (committed to an ineffabilist view of nonsense) nor a positivist (explaining away ethical nonsense through one version or other of emotivism)? Clearly Diamond is not going the same direction as other Wittgenstein-inspired approaches to ethics which take ethics to be a branch of thought, concerned with right or wrong things to do (...) and with what it means to speak about such matters²². But what can ethics be then?

Diamond's wittgensteinian answer is that ethics is rather an attitude to the world as a whole, 'tied to the 'sense of life', which can penetrate any sort of talk or thought, not a branch of philosophy with a particular subject matter²³. But doesn't any attempt to speak about the world as a whole condemn us to speak nonsense? Nonsense is indeed the key here. Yet the main point is, this is not the kind of nonsense we should withhold from (obviously, here the question to herself becomes: but then does that mean that there are kinds of nonsense? And we know she doesn't want to say there are) Diamond's first step towards her wittgensteinian view of ethics is then the interpretation of ethical nonsense, in the context of the austere view of nonsense. Of course this brings in another question to herself: 'If I accept the austere view of nonsense in the *Tractatus* –

²⁰ Wittgenstein and Metaphysics: 23.

²¹ Diamond 2000: 155.

²² Diamond 1991 a, "Philosophy and the Mind", p.10.

²³ Diamond 1991 a, "Philosophy and the Mind", p.9.

“there is no nonsensical thought expressed by a nonsensical sentence” - how can I claim to keep ethical nonsense?

Part of the point of *Ethics, Imagination and the Tractatus* is to give a very elaborated answer to that question, involving the whole interpretation of the *Tratatus* and her view of Wittgenstein. This is done first by defending a difference between ‘ethical nonsense’ and ‘metaphysical nonsense’. Metaphysical nonsense is to be cleared way (that’s what the *Tractatus* does, that’s how, as it were, it addresses philosophers – it makes as if one is speaking from the perspective of the metaphysician, so as to make what he says come out as nonsense. Not only the metaphysician speaks nonsense, but the way of saying that he does, itself, i.e. the whole of of the *Tractatus*, comes off as non-sense as well. So we have nonsense number one (the metaphysician’s) and number two (the *Tractatus*’), and then there is non-sense number three: ethical nonsense which is not to be cleared away, but rather ‘remains attractive’. Again, there’s much to explain here but the main idea is that one can understand someone who ‘speaks nonsense’ and the *Tractatus* gives us the framework and the tools for this. The key is (*Tractatus* 6. 54): «He who sees that these propositions are non sense understands ME», in the sense that he makes sense out of the nonsense I utter. Yet, if a good vs. bad nonsense distinction is not to be accepted how is any distinction between nonsense to be disposed with and nonsense to be, as it were, kept going, put into the view? Diamond’s proposal is that an imaginative activity is involved, as it is involved in understanding the *Tractatus*, and that we can use external circumstances (context) to distinguish the character of the imaginative activity involved and what is being achieved in understanding nonsense. Understanding nonsense is not to stand in the outside the thinking of the utterer and describing what goes on from the viewpoint of empirical, but neither is it to be inside, as when one understands someone who makes sense (using sentences we ourselves would utter). What’s at stake is not expressing the unexpressible or expressing emotion but making (new) sense: in contrast with illusion, at stake in metaphysical nonsense, to be explained away, self-understanding is the goal. Back to literary materials: while working out such connection Diamond tells us how she does and does not see literature. She does not see it as anything like an illustration of (rational, general, ethical) principles or as providing characters

and situations as evidence of ethical issues (she puts it like this in *Missing the Adventure*²⁴, while characterizing the Raphael – Nussbaum opposition on the use of literature in moral philosophy). She is not proposing to approach philosophical texts as literature or literary texts as moral philosophy texts; she is presenting literature as a way to go on with moral reflection given the vision of ethics one gets from the *Tractatus*: «Just as mathematics can be done by proof but also (...) by drawing something and saying, “Look at this”, so ethical thought goes on in argument and also not in argument, but (e.g.) stories or images»²⁵. But is this the end of the story?

III. Literature: ‘blindness to blindness’, and ‘the awe, wonder and reverence’

So, once a wittgensteinian perspective makes us change what we want to do in ethics, we have approaches like those of the Diamond’s papers on ethics in *The Realistic Spirit*, in general we let in literary materials. In Diamond’s own case, it is not indifferent that her examples are Henry James, Charles Dickens, W. Wordsworth, N. Hawthorne, Tolstoi, who look for depths and details of human souls in contrast for instance with works accused of being shallow and not providing us with any vision, as in the recent discussion in British letters (Josipovici vs. Barnes, Rushdie, McEwan²⁶), and we could still ask why literature? Is it that only literature can do the job? Can any kind of literature do the job? But it is clear enough how these materials are supposed to work as an antidote to blindness to blindness in mainstream moral philosophy. In *Loosing one’s concepts* she says they ‘develop our sensibility to forms of conceptual life’; or, going back to her criticism of the animals rights discussions, and what she thinks goes wrong there: “The writings of Tolstoi do not bear on the concept of the biological species *Homo sapiens*; the writings of writers can illuminate, elaborate and deepen our concept of a human being, as well as the ‘role of

²⁴ Diamond 1991e.

²⁵ Diamond, *Philosophy and the Mind*, p. 9.

²⁶ Former Oxford professor – and respected literary critic - Gabriel Josipovici accused leading contemporary British authors, such as Ian McEwan, Julian Barnes and Salman Rushdie of being ‘hollow’ and their works of lacking ambition, thus making contemporary British novel profoundly disappointing, especially when compared to ‘groundbreaking forebears’.

mystery and risk in the stories of our moral lives²⁷. Yet a number questions about the way Diamond sees the role of literature remain: the fact is, along with help for her diagnosis of blindness to blindness Diamond is keen on recruiting literature to stress the 'awe, wonder and reverence'²⁸ she finds lacking in moral thought. It is for that that she wants to keep the idiom one finds in the *Tractatus*, also in the *Notebooks* and the *Lecture on Ethics*, in which the ethical is marked off as involving 'absolute value' and 'reaching beyond the world': «We may mark our talk about it through the logical feature of cutting such talk off from ordinary talk about what goes on, not giving it entry there. That logical feature may be seen, I argued, in the fairy tales, and, in different ways, in Kant's and Wittgenstein's refusal of an empirical psychology of the evil will. And there is no reason to think that Wittgenstein's later philosophical thinking precludes us from recognizing that kind of contrast». ²⁹ Diamond's interest in 'something sinister and dark in human hearts' and in 'extreme moral phenomena which defy imagination' is not just a critique of blindness to blindness: what Diamond is doing is connecting the awe, which Wittgenstein does indeed want in ethics, with the darkness in human hearts, the unspeakability of evil, the difficulty of reality. Yet if we consider Wittgenstein himself, in those, not so many passages, where he introduces the idiom Diamond wants to keep we have to ask: is all awe moral? Or in the idiom of the *Tractatus*: is all reaching beyond the world, the attitude towards the world as a whole, ethical? What does the idiom mark off for Wittgenstein? And we may see those passages as a view on the source of value: value is not in the world (all facts are facts, nothing good or bad about them) The emphasis on receptiveness in contrast with action and decision, the emphasis on something that comes over us, not something we do, in its connection with (absolute) value is certainly there. But it is in precisely this context that Wittgenstein famously says that 'ethics and aesthetics are one', and along with the shift of attention from action to responsiveness (being overcome, marked by 'the awe') we don't find anything like Diamond's 'dark and sinister in the human heart, unspeakability, difficulty of reality, but rather happiness and acceptance in the eye of the artist. I quote: «Aesthetically the miracle is that the

²⁷ Diamond 1991 h: 371.

²⁸ Diamond 1991: 306.

²⁹ Diamond, *Ethics, Imagination and the Tractatus*, 170.

world exists. That there is what there is. It is the essence of the artistic way of looking at things that it looks at the world with a happy eye (*Tagebucher*, 20.10.1916)». As S. Lovibond comments: «The aesthetic/contemplative response (to the world as a whole) has been commended here for respecting our attachment to those moments of consciousness that reveal to us a value not of our own making (...), in contrast to those in which value is realized through the good exercise of our own will in the face of some natural resistance.»³⁰. This may be worth considering if we think literature has a claim to be thought of as art and not just moral education. For the present purposes all I want to suggest is that Diamond's emphasis on dark and sinister in the human heart and the difficulty of reality as unspeakability connected to this can be separated from the specific criticisms of blindness to blindness I started with. Since Diamond recruits literature for both purposes, 'philosophers who wouldn't dream of counting literature as part of their job' might be rejecting any of various things.

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³⁰ Lovibond 2007: 319.

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