

BOOK REVIEW

Reading Wittgenstein with Anscombe, Going on to Ethics

By CORA DIAMOND

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Among commentators on Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* Cora Diamond undoubtedly stands as one of the most significant and insightful. Her influential writings on it are associated, in particular, with what has come to be known as the 'resolute reading'. In the Introduction to this volume of essays she writes, 'I learned to read Wittgenstein by reading the *Tractatus* with Anscombe's *Introduction to Wittgenstein's Tractatus* . . . [I]n the years since then, reading Wittgenstein has frequently brought me back to reading him with her *Introduction*' (1). As with Anscombe on Wittgenstein, Diamond's sense of the importance and depth of the text she discusses (i.e. the *Introduction*) is compatible with—indeed, expresses itself in—a certain amount of disagreement with and divergence from its author's views. Diamond's own views of the *Tractatus* and of Anscombe's book have evolved over time, so that she sometimes also evinces considerable disagreement with her earlier self. This sort of intellectual honesty – the result of an unflinching and clear-eyed attention – is a hallmark of the pieces in this volume.

Seven essays are split between three Parts, each Part having its own introduction: (1) Wittgenstein, Anscombe and the Activity of Philosophy; (2) Wittgenstein, Anscombe and What Can Only Be True; (3) Going on to Think about Ethics. The two essays in Part 3 pick up on themes raised in the two essays in Part 2; the stimulus for the ethics papers was Diamond's noticing how the idea of a 'thinkable-with-no-alternative' played a role both in the sorts of 'responses to confusion' discussed by Anscombe and in David Wiggins's use of the phrase 'There is nothing else to think but that *p*', where '*p*' is (e.g.) 'Slavery is unjust and insupportable'. In both cases, we appear to have what Diamond calls 'solo propositions' (also 'asymmetric propositions') – propositions which count as in some sense thinkable, and in some sense true, attempts to negate which (however) are not really thinkable. Diamond writes in the Introduction to Part 3 that in following up the roles played by the idea of a 'thinkable-with-no-alternative', in Anscombe and in Wiggins, she came to think that there was, after all, a significant difference, relating to whether the negation of a proposition 'peters out into nothing' (to use Anscombe's phrase). But there remained an important analogy worth exploring, between 'responses to confusion' and propositions occurring in discussions (e.g.) of slavery: namely, the way in which a proposition can function as an indicator of a path of thought, or as blocker of such a path.

This last notion can be illustrated thus:

Suppose, for example, we found ourselves frequently multiplying 2 times 24 and getting 46 (perhaps because we tended to slip from multiplying 2 times 4 to

adding instead). So in these cases an inequation might come in handy: ‘ $2 \times 24 \neq 46$.’ (196)

Just as the inequation blocks a certain ‘easily trodden false path’ (Wittgenstein’s phrase) in arithmetic, so Anscombe’s “‘Someone” is not the name of someone” blocks an easily trodden path to a certain kind of philosophical confusion; and we can perhaps say that ‘All men are by nature equal’ (301) serves to block a path to a place where moral concepts would not even function (if Wiggins is right). The inequation and Anscombe’s ‘Someone’-proposition are grammatically negative, something which indicates their ‘blocking’ function. To neither of them does the Picture Theory of propositions apply. According to the *Tractatus*, this means those propositions are senseless; but, argues Diamond, one could not infer that they would be regarded by Wittgenstein either as tautologies/contradictions or as nonsensical (*unsinnig*). For there are various types of senseless proposition mentioned by him which have a genuine, albeit non-pictorial, role – such as laws of nature (see *Tractatus* 6.32–6.36).

Diamond discusses a variety of types of asymmetric propositions, all of which would be by the standards of the *Tractatus* count as senseless, including ‘preparatory’ propositions and ‘apparatus’ propositions. Frege’s notorious ‘The concept *horse* is not a concept’ is argued to be both a preparatory proposition and a path-blocker. It is preparatory insofar as it prepares us for how Frege is actually going to use the term ‘concept’. Meanwhile a certain path is blocked, one that leads to a confusion (roughly) between the logical and the psychological: more specifically, we are tempted to use ‘the concept *horse*’ both as Frege intends to, i.e. as a formal concept expression (as in ‘Dobbin falls under the concept *horse*’, which simply means ‘Dobbin is a horse’) and as if it were an ordinary definite description like ‘That picture of a horse’, the latter construal leading us to think of concepts as ‘mental entities’. The result is confusion, doublethink.

What of the propositions of the *Tractatus*, those propositions which Wittgenstein famously said at the end of his book could be *thrown away*, like a ladder one has climbed up? Wittgenstein calls them ‘nonsense’; but evidently they are meant to be useful. What use do they serve? ‘[T]he usefulness of the *Tractatus* propositions depends on our first being taken in by them, and our then recognizing that they are not what we took them for’ (198). Mathematical equations and inequations, Frege’s ‘horse’-proposition, Anscombe’s ‘Someone’-proposition – all these may be *kept* by us for their continued usefulness, notably as path-indicators/blockers. But

propositions may have different uses [sc. at different times, on different occasions]. There is no reason why a proposition in the *Tractatus*, the role of which there is to lead us on, and which indeed (in order to play that role) needs to appear misleadingly to be an a priori assertion of some sort, should not also come to have a use as a path-blocker (for example). (199)

Tractatus propositions are to be thrown away in the sense that they are *not* to be ‘kept’ in the same way that equations or inequations may be kept. But what is thrown away may be a *role* – that of leading us on etc.; for the same *Tractatus* propositions may come to have, for the person or persons who now see(s) things aright, a new role, for example that of path-blocker. Diamond would perhaps allow the following sort of example as apposite: ‘A picture is a fact’ (*Tractatus* 2.141) may serve us well when we are trying to lead someone *away* from thinking of a proposition or picture as standing in the same relation to a possible state of affairs as that in which a name stands to an object.

Diamond subjects Anscombe's thoughts on her 'Someone'-proposition to penetrating and fine-grained analysis. Anscombe saw the proposition as expressing an obvious truth, and for that reason found the Picture Theory wanting. It is intended as a proposition about a symbol, not a sign: 'we are not intending to deny that anyone in the world has the odd name "Someone"' (Anscombe 1959: 85). But there is no thinkable situation in which the *symbol* 'someone' is a name; so our proposition lacks true-false poles. In 'Saying and Showing: An Example of Anscombe's' Diamond persuasively shows how "'Someone" is not the name of someone' fails to achieve anything more, or better, than 'Look at these uses!'", said in connection with proper uses of 'someone' together with inferentially related propositions. But this is not to say that the 'Someone'-proposition fails to achieve anything; indeed, as we saw above, it may function as a path-blocker.

Moreover, Diamond was later to be impressed by the Aristotelian thought that 'truth is the business of everything intellectual'. If it is 'part of the business of thinking to guide, or help put back on track, the business of thinking' (227), and if 'for theoretical thinking, the "well and badly" are truth and falsehood' (162), then the 'Someone'-proposition may, after all, be counted true. The same will go for other asymmetric propositions. Diamond makes that point in connection with ethical propositions, for example about slavery; she could, I think, have made it also in connection with such *Tractatus* propositions as have taken on the role of path-blocker (say). They will have 'taken on' that role only for those who can *use* them as such, that is who have 'seen through' their apparent substantialness. In *that* role, 'The world is the totality of facts, not of things' could perhaps be counted true. Of course, the Aristotelian equation of truth and falsehood with the 'well and badly' in thinking is not quite at home in the *Tractatus*; but at this point, our concerns are philosophical, not textual.

In the Introduction Diamond admits that 'because this is a collection of essays on topics that are closely related to each other, it has been difficult to avoid some repetition' (5). There certainly is overlap between some of the essays, but this is justified by Diamond's aim 'to leave the individual essays so that they are understandable on their own', as also by the intensely interesting character of the essays themselves. It can indeed be helpful to have an argument or thought expressed anew in a different setting and in different words.

The essays in this volume explore sense and nonsense, the nature of philosophy, thinking, truth, ethical disagreement, and of course Wittgenstein and Anscombe. Other philosophers discussed include Frege, Russell, Geach, Wiggins and Williams. It is at once a focused and a wide-ranging book, if that is not too paradoxical; and it well conveys the depth and power of Cora Diamond's thought.

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Reference

Anscombe, G.E.M. 1959. *An Introduction to Wittgenstein's Tractatus*. London: Hutchinson.