



Andrew Gleeson and Craig Taylor (eds.), *Morality in a Realistic Spirit: Essays for Cora Diamond* (Routledge, 2020). vi + 260, price £ 120 hb

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This is a rich collection, containing a great deal of beautiful philosophy. It opens with a long essay by Cora Diamond, followed by essays relating, more or less closely, to her work, primarily in moral philosophy. The (comparative) unity of themes serves to bring into relief the differences of style and intellectual temperament of the different contributors, hence the richness. The beauty comes from the deep reflectiveness of many of the essays, as well as their use of powerful examples.

Cora Diamond's essay, "Ethics and Experience," raises the question in what sense it could be said that ethics for us human beings are conditioned by human experience. She introduces the topic by citing an observation by Jonathan Glover, who points out that we may devote huge resources to the rescue of people in immediate peril, even though more lives could be saved in the long run by investing that money in safety measures. However, as Diamond points out, such considerations would usually not move us. This, then, is an instance in which our way of experiencing things, rather than a cost–benefit calculus, will shape our ethical outlook. As Duncan Richter succinctly puts a related point in his essay, "Thinking with Animals," concerning the way argument enters in moral philosophy: "Arguments that ignore the significance that things (people, death) have cannot convince people in a strong or lasting way..." (p. 234).

Diamond investigates various ways in which the relation between experience and ethics is or is not to be understood. The essay is exploratory, like notes from a journey, zigzagging from topic to topic; even if it appears somewhat disjointed, Diamond has intriguing points to make about each of those topics, challenging the reader to think about them for herself.

Diamond makes it clear that the ethical significance of experience is not to be understood along the lines of traditional empiricism. Thus, she disagrees with philosophers like John McDowell, who argued at one time that moral features are like secondary qualities such as colour, that is present to the senses. Her objection is that one can judge that someone acted courageously on the basis of a description, and this judgment

is not in need of corroboration through direct observation. Still, Diamond rejects the conventional idea of values as logically marked off from facts. That idea is grounded in the cultural prejudice which singles out and privileges one specific idea of what it means to speak about reality, an idea typified in what, slightly facetiously, she calls “tourist-and-scientific contexts,” that is in the language we encounter in texts like tourist brochures but also in scientific articles, etc (p. 34). In considering such impersonal texts, it may seem natural to accept a sharp distinction between *thoughts* – matters that are, apparently, “sharable and communicable through language” – and matters belonging “only to the individual” (p. 32). In tourist-and-scientific contexts, what is said can be understood as pure information. This view of language overlooks the rich variety of ways we may use language to speak about reality. Diamond advances examples such as the names of the fallen on a war memorial, the significance of which is clearly not exhausted by the information they carry.

The English word “experience” actually brings together two different ways in which reality may impress itself upon us, which are (more or less) clearly distinct in languages like German (Swedish, Finnish). Thus, in German the word *Erlebnis* typically stands for the way we are struck, at the time, by what confronts us, whereas *Erfahrung* rather tends to indicate the long-range consequence of being involved with some ongoing activity or some aspect of reality. Most of the cases of experience Diamond discusses seem to be of the *Erlebnis* variety, whereas when she brings up Wittgenstein’s remark about experiences educating a person to belief in God, or when D. H. Lawrence talks about the experience of sex within the Catholic church, this clearly concerns forms of *Erfahrung*. The presence or absence of this distinction is an accident of linguistic variation, but attention to it might have helped make clearer the relation between the different parts of Diamond’s essay.

Questioning the distinction between neutral language and language expressing our moral responsiveness is a recurrent theme in several contributions. Alice Crary, in “A Brilliant Perspective”, delineates some ways in which Diamond’s ethical thought goes against the grain of contemporary academic ethics. Invoking Diamond’s account of the thought of Iris Murdoch, Crary draws into question the predominant idea of a “hard” world constituted by facts that are “given for, or given prior to, moral thought and life” (p. 113 f). The significance of concepts like life, death, human being, animal, etc., she points out, is not determined by biology but is shaped by moral thought and imagination.

The common acceptance of the fact–value dichotomy is eloquently shown up by Simon Haines in his essay, “Shakespeare, Value and Diamond.” Invoking Bernard Williams, he questions the commonly held

view that in “thick value concepts” a factual and an evaluative element can be separated off from one another. “Instead of clarifying our values language [which Haines amply illustrates], let alone strengthening it,” Haines notes, “philosophy has relativized it to a prescriptive code, or relativized it into triviality” (p. 151). The reflective richness of values-language as against the poverty of prescription is a Diamondian theme well worth contemplating.

A number of essays take up the theme of “the realistic spirit”, which is what Diamond has been exhorting philosophers to adopt (see especially *Realism and the Realistic Spirit*, chapter 1¹ and “The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy,”² henceforth DRDP). The theme is clearly articulated by Crary and by Craig Taylor in his essay, “Diamond on Realism in Moral Philosophy.” Crary recalls that Diamond connects the realism she is talking about with the sense in which a novel may be realistic, that is drawing attention to particulars. The realistic spirit is to be clearly distinguished from “philosophical realism,” a philosophical stance to which it is opposed. (But neither should it be equated with “philosophical anti-realism” – both realism and anti-realism impose *a priori* claims on reality. Crary, p. 121.) On the philosophical-realist account, the distinction between appearance and reality is beyond our reach, hence can never be applied; the realistic-minded philosopher, on the other hand, urges us to look at the various ways the distinction is made in practice. (Taylor, pp. 242 f.)

The realistic spirit is illustrated in several essays. Andrew Gleeson has written a thoughtful and thought-provoking essay on religious belief and understanding, starting from Diamond’s essay, “Riddles and Anselm’s Riddle.” A lack of realism is manifested in assuming that one can understand *a priori* what is meant by concepts like the greatness of God, rather than by reflecting on the way they are connected with “the practice of faith, humility, goodness” (p. 133). In conclusion, Gleeson writes, “The wise way to philosophize seeks always to understand the phenomena it aims to study. Or better, it is *willing to be instructed by its subject matter* (and not merely to instruct it)” (p. 144). That is the spirit of realism in a nutshell. In addition to being philosophically illuminating, this essay is written in a powerful, lucid style that could serve as a model for many others.

Another aspect of the spirit of realism is the resistance to philosophical deflection, a concept which Diamond, in DRDP, borrowed from

¹. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991.

². In *Philosophy and Animal Life*. Ed. Stanley Cavell, et al. New York: University of Columbia Press, 2008.

Stanley Cavell³. He was talking about the philosophical tendency to turn difficulties in life (such as the sense that I am tragically separated from other human beings) into intellectual conundra (such as arguments for and against other minds skepticism).

“Reality, Skepticism and Moral Community” by David Macarthur, “Thinking with Animals” by Duncan Richter, as well as Taylor’s essay all provide thoughtful clarifications of the idea of deflection in Diamond’s thought. The temptation to deflect is a response to what Diamond calls a difficulty of reality: “the experience of the mind’s not being able to encompass something which it encounters.”⁴ The concept of deflection becomes important above all in Diamond’s discussion about J. M. Coetzee’s Tanner lectures⁵. Coetzee’s protagonist Elizabeth Costello is haunted by the horror of what we do to animals, but philosophers who have commented on the lectures have taken her to be calling for a discussion of “animal rights” – with the sense that by agreeing on acceptable principles for the treatment of animals, we can lay the horror to rest. Commenting on this, Richter speaks of “the philosopher’s tendency to think not wisely but too much” (p. 235). One instance of this type of deflection is the proposal that we should identify the “marks and features” of an animal justifying or prohibiting specific ways of treating it. Another instance is found in Michael Leahy’s suggestion, quoted by Diamond, – no source given – that “the practices within which we use animals in various ways . . . ‘dictate the criteria for what constitutes needless suffering’”, an idea which, as quoted here, seems clueless in its naked anthropocentrism. (See Taylor, p. 249.) Another aspect of deflection, or as we might say, the academization of the horror, attempts to rank the factory farming of animals against the Holocaust – a theme thoroughly discussed by Talia Morag in her essay, “The Holocaust and Factory Farming,” as well as by Taylor. All these forms of deflection, it seems, illustrate the declination of values-language into prescriptivism that Haines is talking about.

Another recurrent theme, broached, along somewhat different lines, by Agan-Segal, Cray, Macarthur and Read, is the question of the nature of argument in and outside philosophy. Central to this is Diamond’s rejection (in “Anything but Argument?”⁶) of the idea that the only legitimate method of trying to change a person’s outlook is through

³. In his *The Claim of Reason*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979.

⁴. Another example of this would be Laura’s reaction at the end of Katherine Mansfield’s short story, “The Garden Party”, where she is reduced to stammering “Isn’t life” . . . “Isn’t life –”.

⁵. J. M. Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals*. Ed. by A. Gutmann. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999.

⁶. In *The Realistic Spirit*.

argument in the narrow sense, where the conclusion is supposed to be seen to follow from the premises independently of one's individual responsiveness, to paraphrase Crary. (Though I think Crary gives a good account of Diamond's thinking here, I wondered about her speaking of Diamond formulating a conception of *rationality*, given that this is a term Diamond studiously avoids, apparently in recognition of its metaphysical overtones. What is at issue are questions about thinking well, and the criteria for this are not to be laid down in any general way, but must be adjudicated case by case.)

Argument is the main focus of Reshef Agan-Segal's essay, "Cora Diamond and the Uselessness of Argument." He criticizes what Cavell called the "Manichean" conception of rules – the idea that language games or thought systems are sharply distinct, and that argument is only possible within the limits of a system. Agan-Segal counters that our use of language is shot through with *connections* we draw between different ways of talking, everyday ones as between first and third person claims about beliefs and sensation, or present and past tense assertions, etc., as well as more imaginative extensions of our grammar (such as metaphors). Agan-Segal gives numerous examples of different sorts of connectings. (Indeed, it could be claimed that each time we repeat a word again we could be considered to be drawing a connection to previous uses.) The upshot of this is that the whole notion of "Manichean" systems of thought and speech – and hence of fixed limits to possible argument – is dissolved. (Agan-Segal, too, tends to frame these issues in terms of the term "rationality".)

In these discussions, there is a shift (not, I think, fatal) between the position that there are acceptable forms of persuasion which do not take the form of argument, and the position that argument is a wider concept than allowed for in many traditional philosophical accounts of good thinking. These are, perhaps, simply two different ways of making a similar point.

The remaining essays are thematically somewhat separate from the rest. Sarah Bachelard, in her contemplative essay, "The Importance of Being Fully Human", raises the question of the significance for moral life of the Christian conception of what it is to be fully human. According to Bachelard, Christ has both revealed and enabled what this means: we become more human as we become more Christ-like. This centrally involves receiving our life as a gift, an insight which will be truly manifested in our being prepared to give our lives to others – if need be, to sacrifice it.

Christopher Cordner's essay is called "Different Themes of Love." It is a lucid discussion, starting from Plato's conception of love. According to Cordner, what is missing from that conception is the idea of

cherishing and of being cherished – ideas which Cordner lays out in an insightful manner.

Sophie Chappell writes about “How to Be Somebody Else.” She argues that what she calls “imaginative identification” – defined as “understanding, getting a feel for, learning . . . to inhabit . . . other people’s points of view” – is a condition for genuine goodness (p. 82). Alternatively, she speaks of this in terms of the question “What is it like to be another person?”. What she neglects to consider, however, is the different ways in which the relevant expressions are used, some of which, I would argue, have no direct ethical importance. One may also ask: is inhabiting another person’s point of view to be thought of as a route to attentiveness, or a manifestation of attention? These questions being left open, it is not quite clear what Chappell’s argument is. (She might also have taken account of Diamond’s “The Importance of Being Human”⁷, which addresses the very same issues.) Something I do like about this essay, however, is that it conveys a sense that the writer enjoys doing philosophy.

Oskari Kuusela’s essay, “The Asymmetry of Truth and the Logical Role of Thinking Guides in Ethics”, is the only one which takes up Diamond’s recent book *Reading Wittgenstein with Anscombe, Going on to Ethics*. He discusses her notion of thinking guides, that is, statements, the function of which is to guide one in thinking well, which can be said to be true but have no meaningful negation. Diamond proposes, as a possible *ethical* thinking guide, Wiggins’s claim, “Slavery is unjust and insupportable.” Kuusela’s claim is that the word “truth” is not being used here in the same sense as with regard to assertions that may be either true or false. He proposes applying instead Wittgenstein’s distinction (in various manuscripts) between temporal and non-temporal statements. Thus, the assertion that slavery (as involving ownership in a human being) is unjust, is not a claim about the form taken by slavery in such and such a society in such and such a period, but is meant to apply to all forms of slavery anywhere. This truth, Kuusela argues, is not threatened by the possible existence of those who have different concepts in the light of which slavery does not seem unjust. Apparently, the word has a different meaning for them. Now, I am unsure how Kuusela would handle the following issue: in the ante-bellum United States, there were those who held that the statement condemning slavery had not only a meaningful but a true negation. So the question arises: were the two sides of the conflict over slavery talking about the same thing?

⁷. In *Human Beings*. Ed. by David Cockburn. Cambridge University Press, 1991.

Rupert Read, in “Two Conceptions of Community,” reads Wittgenstein as arguing that there “is a certain sense in which language itself binds us together, closer than close” (p. 217). A case in point: pain language would never get off the ground (cp. *Philosophical Investigations* § 244) but for people’s concern for others’ suffering. Read points out that on the received view, solipsism starts from the self, separated from others through a gulf. Yet, as he interestingly observes, what it means to be a self is dependent on membership in a community. Hence, the starting point cannot be the self, but the gulf – a gulf which may be preserved while the inside is extended to include those found to be relevantly like me. Thus racism (speciesism, etc.) can really be regarded as a form of extended solipsism. Read is a bold and vigorous writer, yet maybe somewhat optimistic about the conclusions to be drawn from Wittgenstein’s insights about the communal nature of language. Unless there is something I am missing, Read seems to ignore the fact that sharing a language brings no guarantee of social harmony – rather, there are brutal types of conflict which are only possible *within* a shared social framework. Read distinguishes between an exclusionary sense of community which is defined by what it *is not*, and an inclusive sense which is defined by what it *is*. But this sounds like a distinction without a difference (e.g. “not coloured” vs. “white”). I am surprised that Read thinks the inclusive community needs to be defined at all; should one not rather say: it includes everybody, to the extent that they commune?

I have not, of course, been able to do justice to all the essays in this volume in the space available. However, I do hope they will be read by everyone who wishes to be realistic about philosophy, especially about ethics.