



## REVIEW

Diamond Cora, *Reading Wittgenstein with Anscombe, Going On to Ethics* (Harvard University Press, 2019). 331 pp, price £28.95 hb.

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'Reading Wittgenstein with Anscombe, going on to Ethics' is a collection of articles that deals, in parts 1 and 2, with Anscombe's reading of Wittgenstein, especially her introduction to the *Tractatus*,<sup>1</sup> and the problem of propositions that can-only-be-true, and in part 3 with questions of truth in ethics, as stated in the title. Although seemingly different at first sight, all three parts of the book are attempts to deal with a similar issue. This is the issue of 'thinking about *thinking*, [...] about the ways we may respond to thinking that has miscarried or gone astray' (p. 2), and 'the connection between *thinking truly* and the *business of thinking being done well*' (p. 3). If this had been reflected on the title, the book could have been called 'Thinking truly' or 'Thinking guided'.

Diamond examines throughout the book the issue of guidance, both in theoretical thinking through Wittgenstein's and Anscombe's views on philosophical clarification and method (part 1), and in thinking in ethics. In both areas, we find propositions that act as guidance, that have a propaedeutic function, what she also calls 'path blockers' or 'path indicators': such propositions 'block paths of thought we may be tempted to take, [or] indicate open paths of thought which may be important for us to be aware of, but which habits of ease-in-thinking make invisible to us, or enable us to go on not seeing' (p. 267). Diamond calls these propositions 'solo propositions', to highlight that they lack a significant negation and to distinguish them both from ordinary ones that come in pair (T-F) and from tautologies and contradictions, 'a limiting case of paired propositions' (p. 255). It is important to stress that this is not a

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1. (Anscombe 1965).

distinct set of propositions but rather a use or role that propositions can take. Can we regard propositions that take this kind of function as true? And if so, what is the nature of truth in such propositions? (p. 224) Diamond follows what she calls an ‘Anscombean–Aristotelian account of truth, based on the idea that it is part of the business of thinking to guide the business of thinking, and that when this guiding is done well, we have truth.’ (p. 267)

The question of solo propositions is first introduced through a discussion of Anscombe’s can-only-be-true propositions in relation to the *Tractatus*. As Diamond discusses, Anscombe is wrong to take the picture theory in the *Tractatus* to exclude all can-only-be-true propositions except for tautologies and equations. Diamond, instead, proposes that with his picture theory Wittgenstein is laying out a use of signs, and this, as such, does not exclude other uses of signs. The centrality of propositions representing situations in the world does not necessarily mean that when something is not a senseful proposition, nor a tautology, nor a contradiction, it is nonsense (p. 184). In that sense, according to Diamond, and contrary to Anscombe, the *Tractatus* does not exclude solo propositions.

To show this, Diamond revisits, among other examples, two main examples that Anscombe has discussed as problematic cases for the picture theory, cases where there is an asymmetry between the proposition and its negation: ‘Red is a color’ and ‘Someone is not the name of someone’. She writes, for example, about ‘Red is a color’: ‘Anscombe’s idea seems to be that ‘Red is a color’ is *stuck* with its nonsensicality because it is *stuck* with its inability to express anything that might be false. But how is it any more stuck with nonsensicality than ‘Socrates is identical’ –which [...] can be used to express a perfectly good sense, if an appropriate *Bedeutung* were given to ‘identical?’ (p. 31)

Her disagreement with Anscombe about how restrictive the picture theory is in the *Tractatus* rests on the idea that the criterion for meaningfulness in the *Tractatus* is having a linguistic function, and that the superficial outer form of a proposition tells us nothing about what the use is, hence nothing final about the meaningfulness of the proposition (p. 184). Their disagreement also reflects a greater disagreement on how to understand the *Tractatus*, which is discussed at length in the first part of the book, a disagreement on what she calls the unRussellianism of the *Tractatus*, on the context principle (remarks 3.3), and the saying–showing distinction. It ‘reflects [Diamond’s] resolute reading on nonsense’ (p. 5), although there is no direct discussion on the resolute reading.

Diamond offers a different reading of can-only-be-true propositions, viz., as propositions that can serve the guidance of thinking and may belong to a preparatory (as opposed to an engaged) use of language.

She discusses several examples of preparatory uses: definitions that work as rules of translation, such as Frege's 'The concept horse is not a concept', general statements in science as 'representational techniques' (p. 174), mathematical equations as indicating useful paths, but also statements that can help one return to engaging in ordinary life, such as the phrase 'I am not dead' when uttered by a person who suffers from Cotard's delusion as a guide 'to talking and thinking in a way not prevented by mental disturbance' (p. 218).

The role that 'thinking guides' play in our thinking and the question how these can be described as true connects what might seem like a more technical discussion in the first two parts with the more 'applied' issues of the third part. Part 3 discusses thinking guides through a focus on ethics, and more specifically through the example of slavery: 'What do we need in order to be able to think well about such 'extraordinarily significant human matter[s] such] as slavery'? (p. 284) Diamond shows not only great clarity and care in her thinking about the issue, but also a deep and impressive knowledge of the history of slavery. Using David Wiggins's example, she discusses what it means for the proposition 'Slavery is unjust' to not have a thinkable alternative. Wiggins argues that 'there is nothing else to think but that slavery is unjust and insupportable', and he compares its truth to that of a proposition from elementary arithmetic - ' $7+5=12$ '.

Diamond explores the Wigginsian suggestion that 'Slavery is unjust' can be like ' $7+5=12$ ' and attempts to defend the idea that propositions without a thinkable alternative can be regarded as true. Diamond does not want to speak of two distinct uses of the word 'true', one in the strong sense of the word and one 'in some sense'; she does not want to say that thinking guides, for example the proposition 'men are by nature equal' - a proposition that has guided thinking in response to the problem of slavery - are true *in some sense*. Based on Anscombe's reading of Aristotle as advocating the univocity of 'true' in practical truth, and Wittgenstein's idea in the *Philosophical Investigations* that having two uses does not necessarily mean having two senses of a word, she wants to think of thinking guides as true in the strong sense of the word, and true thinking guides are the ones that 'can guide thought [...] well' (p. 228).

Guiding thought well is, according to Diamond, a case of being useful and significant, given what reality is like: 'things about us -things in our lives and our surroundings- [...] make it extremely useful to us, important to us, to have the word [or the proposition]' (p. 212). Now, which things are useful for us humans is, of course, the problem and Diamond is well aware of this: 'Some of these concepts, metaphors, stories, and other things are (reality being what it is) enormously useful, while others we could do well without, others may be disastrous, as elements in our

lives, others may be somewhat useful and somewhat baneful. *Which, in any case, any of these things is, is something we can consider.*' (p. 212, my emphasis)

Diamond seems to want to defend a non-relativist view of truth in thinking guides (and in thinking guides in ethics), against, for example, Bernard Williams's idea that all we can have in ethics is that there is nothing else to think *for us* but such and such. However, it is not clear to me whether the concept of usefulness is successful in defending a non-relativist view of truth. Given that, as she says, 'tools of thought may be significant in human lives for a very long time and in many different cultural contexts, or perhaps for just a short time, perhaps only in very limited sorts of context' (p. 213), I am left wondering how precisely to understand usefulness. For example, it can be argued that the proposition 'all men are by nature equal' has never come to fully correspond to historical (social and political) reality, yet it is something humans (some of us) aspire to and have fought for. This inconsistency between the proposition 'all men are equal by nature' and the way we actually live, could be, I think, an argument against the truth of that proposition. Diamond may be aware of this difficulty when, in her discussion of slavery, she stresses that defenders of slavery also had their own seeming thinking guides, and one such thinking guide could be that 'men are not born equal'.

Given the Aristotelian background of Diamond's approach to truth in thinking guides, I wonder whether a suitable concept for this more complex understanding of truth in ethics could be the Aristotelian concept of flourishing. The Aristotelian consideration 'what makes humans flourish' could be one that combines a study of the kinds of creatures we are and prioritizes as significant the kinds of things that allow us to fulfil the potential of the creatures we are. However, perhaps Diamond would think that the Aristotelian way of examining the human being risks being a sideways-on view. In any case, I think that there are difficulties that the concept of usefulness faces *qua* possible guide to truth in guiding uses of language that could have been pursued further in the book.

Finally, a few words about the form and the style of the book. For those who are familiar with Cora Diamond's work, most papers, 6 out of 7, have appeared before elsewhere but have also been revised and made to fit the narrative of the present book; whole paragraphs or parts have been rewritten for this volume (p. 177). Chapters refer to each other in a way that allows the reader to draw connections and think the issues from different perspectives. This is also characteristic of the pace of the book. It is a steady pace, where the analysis of an issue deepens and then the focus widens again to connect with the rest of the book. In addition, often get reminders of what has been discussed so far - Cora

Diamond's characteristic way of laying out the steps of her thinking very clearly and methodically (which is also shown, I think, in her choice of title). This leaves the reader with a sense that Diamond is actively thinking with her, rather than having worked something out and announcing it.

I think this is the strongest trait of this significant and worthwhile book. It is an invitation to think with Diamond, who thinks with Anscombe and Wittgenstein, among others, through the complexity of the issues without simplifying or rushing into easy conclusions.

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#### References

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