

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

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*Not*, “which is so simple to use,” “is utterly mystifying to think about”; “no theory of thought or judgement which does not give an account of it can hope to be adequate.” The remark is Elizabeth Anscombe’s, in her *Introduction to Wittgenstein’s Tractatus*.<sup>1</sup> I quote it from Cora Diamond’s quotation of it in her engaging, deep, and important new book (52), which is, among other things, an introduction to Anscombe’s *Introduction*.

At the very least—and time may show more than this—Diamond has produced a remarkably good book about Anscombe’s wonderful book about Wittgenstein’s great book. It brings together essays by Diamond spanning fifteen to twenty years of reflection on some central themes of the *Tractatus*. The original essays are presented largely as written, with some “second thoughts” in the linking materials that have been added to stitch them together. One pleasing feature of Diamond’s writing, which gives one the feeling of listening to her thinking aloud or giving an informal presentation in a study group, is its studied provisionality. “It turns out to be more complicated than I had realised” (10) sets the book’s tone, and to the end Diamond remains happily immune to contemporary philosophy’s fetishization of depersonalized definitiveness.

The book’s title may seem rather cumbersome, but it accurately describes the narrative arc of the book, which ends with ethics and the problem of *not* but starts, as I will here, with the *Tractatus* and the problem of *not*.

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1. Elizabeth Anscombe, *Introduction to Wittgenstein’s “Tractatus”* (London: Hutchinson’s, 1963), 19, henceforth cited as *IWT*.

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## I

What is the relationship between any proposition and its negation? With some complications (see Sec. III), we may say that *Reading Wittgenstein* is a movement away from a first answer to this question and toward a very different one. I, too, begin with the first answer, which, following Diamond, I will call the *bipolar* view of negation. I will get to the other answer, which she calls the *asymmetrical* view, by Section IV.

The bipolar view of negation is the one given in the main argument of the *Tractatus*. On this view (as nearly everyone reads the *Tractatus*), a proposition is a (more or less complicated) arrangement of discrete parts that could have been arranged otherwise. To take a simple example, a proposition says, for example, that Jane is to the left of Kane; here the discrete parts are Jane and Kane and the relation *is to the left of*. I shall abbreviate this proposition as L (J, K).

Using just these three ingredients, we can swap Kane and Jane round and get a second proposition which is just as sensical, and just as truth-apt, as the first one: “Kane is to the left of Jane,” L (K, J). These two propositions are a bipolar pair, that is, they have the interesting properties of being (1) exclusive (the one of them is true if and only if the other is false) and (2) exhaustive—between them, they “reach through the whole of logical space” (*Tractatus* 3.42; cf. 2.0124, 2.013), that is, they fill all the possibilities there are for these three ingredients (or so we might naturally think; I ignore, for present purposes, the imaginable counterexamples where, say, Kane and Jane are arranged so that they are equally on the left [or right], perhaps by one of them being behind or on top of the other). As Anscombe says, these propositions have “true-false poles” (*IWT*, 82): “It is essential to [the picture theory of the ‘significant proposition’] that the picturing proposition has two poles, and in each sense it represents what may perfectly well be true. Which of them is true is just what happens to be the case.”

So Jane and Kane and \_\_\_ *is to the left of* \_\_\_ are the three ingredients of this proposition pair. (Or more strictly: they are the ingredients of the possible-fact pair; words for them are ingredients of the proposition pair.) But it is obvious that the English language, like any human language, has a large stock of similar possible ingredients. There are indefinitely many other individuals whom we might have talked about besides Jane and Kane; there are indefinitely many other relations in which we might have put Jane and Kane, or other individuals, besides \_\_\_ *is to the left of* \_\_\_. (Not all of them two-place, of course: some of them will have more than two places, like \_\_\_ *is better at* \_\_\_ *than* \_\_\_; some of them will have only one place and so will be simple predicates of the form \_\_\_ *is F* rather than relations.)

This preliminary sketch of bipolar propositional structure is readily extensible in a very straightforward way because there will be indefinitely many other proposition pairs very closely analogous in structure to the pair

L (J, K) and L (K, J). Moreover, for each such pair there will be something clear and definite to say about negation. The negation of L (J, K) is expressible in one way by  $\neg$  L (J, K). But if, as stipulated above, the propositions in the relevant pair are exclusive and exhaustive, we can say the same as  $\neg$  L (J, K) another way: namely, by saying L (K, J). In other words, “Jane is not to the left of Kane” is logically (and semantically?) equivalent to “Kane is to the left of Jane”:  $\neg$  L (J, K)  $\equiv$  L (K, J).

Now might we not call this (sketch of a) general account of the proposition, and of negation, a *picture theory* (*Tractatus* 4.01, 4.012)? The idea would be that when things stand in the world as picture (1) shows them—

(1)  
Jane                      Kane

—then the proposition L (J, K) is assertible: it is the proposition of which (1) is the picture. Whereas when they stand as picture (2) shows them—

(2)  
Kane                      Jane

—then the proposition L (K, J) is assertible: it is the proposition of which (2) is the picture. Moreover, of course, it is also true that  $\neg$  L (K, J) is assertible of picture (1) and that  $\neg$  L (J, K) is assertible of picture (2). For the assertion of L (K, J) is the assertion of the negation of L (J, K), and vice versa. The assertion of L (J, K) and the assertion of  $\neg$  L (K, J) are descriptions of one and the same state of affairs—that pictured in (1). Contrary and contradictory are identical for propositions like these. The assertion of L (K, J) and the assertion of  $\neg$  L (J, K) are descriptions of one and the same state of affairs—that pictured in (2).

If this “picture theory” gives us at least the rudiments of our account of the proposition and of negation, then we are well-placed to respect what is often taken—including, it seems, by Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus*—to be a truism of logic, namely, the idea of bipolarity itself: that “p” and “not p” cannot be different in their truth-aptness. If it makes sense to say anything, then it must make equal sense—even if it is not true—to say its negation; for the negation of any proposition is simply the opposite of that proposition. And so we have a ready answer to a question that Anscombe closely pursues—in among other quarry—through two entire chapters: the question of why we can “take for granted, about any proposition, that there is exactly one proposition which is true if it is false, and false if it is true” (49).

As Anscombe herself describes them (*IWT*, 71), these are (some of) the attractions of such an account:

In negating a proposition we use the prepositional sign [of negation, i.e.,  $\neg$ ] to form another; and we tend to feel that both say something; and hence want an account that would justify this feeling. Both prop-

ositions mention exactly the same things in the same relation to one another. The picture-proposition we have imagined gives us a very clear idea of structures for which these points hold. And it is also true that the non-existence of a configuration of things is a clear and intelligible idea. What constitutes the truth and falsehood of the picture-proposition; its opposed positive and negative senses; its possession of these senses independently of whether it is true or false (i.e. of which truth-value it has)—all this is extremely intelligible: and what is intelligible here is precisely the logical character of the picture-proposition.

## II

Now suppose that someone wants to say something like not “Jane is to the left of Kane” but “Kane Jane Kane,” or “Is to the left of is not to the right of is not to the left of,” or “Jane is to the left of \_\_\_\_.” They want, in short, to say something that does not fit the syntactical framework of the picture theory. What are we to say about this?

The obvious thing to say is that they are making a mistake. We might want to tell them that by, for example, giving them this sort of syntactical instruction or rule: “You take the relation *\_\_\_\_ is to the left of \_\_\_\_* and you put a name in each of those blanks; you can’t have a syntactical sentence that is relations only, or names only, or that has any blanks in it.” (I have deliberately picked examples where the syntactical error is very simple, so that it might seem needless or trivial to make such points. Of course, the syntax of our language could be very complicated in some cases, and then a syntactical error might be far from obvious, and proving it anything but trivial.)

But can we make this sort of corrective point within the framework of the picture theory? Apparently not; the world is the totality of facts, but facts are pictures of states of affairs, and facts are not themselves states of affairs, so there are no facts about facts. Hence, it is hard to see how the picture theory can have room for the apparently perfectly good sentences that are about sentences and nonsentences, such as “‘Kane Jane Kane’ is not a well-formed sentence.” Or how it can have room, come to that, for more general remarks of logical grammar that explain why “Kane Jane Kane” is not a well-formed sentence, for example, the (true) remark that “A well-formed sentence ascribes a predicate to a subject.” As Anscombe insists (*IWT*, 85–86), such sentences seem perfectly in order. For one thing, we can certainly make sense of their negations (false and/or muddled though they are). So it is odd that the picture theory seems to be committed to rejecting them as nonsense.

Wittgenstein’s account of propositions is inadequate, correct only within a restricted area. For it hardly seems reasonable to prohibit the formula “‘Someone’ is not the name of someone”; nor, of course, is this logical truth in any sharp sense. It is, rather, an insight; the

opposite of it is only confusion and muddle (not contradiction). According to Wittgenstein, however, since what our proposition denies does not turn out to be anything, it itself is not a truth; for there is not anything which it says is not the case, as opposed to the equally possible situation of its being the case. Therefore, Wittgenstein would either have looked for a more acceptable formulation (which I think is impossible) or have said that it was something which showed—stared you in the face, at any rate, once you had taken a good look—but could not be said.

What, then, can the picture theorist say about any of these sentences? Here we reach a crucial divergence between two different readings of the *Tractatus*. One reading (or family of readings), the “Standard Reading,” goes all the way back to Russell in his introduction to the first English edition and is found (in various forms) in the work of a large number of scholars since: for instance, Brian McGuinness, Elizabeth Anscombe, James Griffin, Michael Kremer, and Chon Tejedor. On this Standard Reading, Wittgenstein’s aim is first to present a theory of what sensical propositions are—this is “the picture theory”—and then use it to motivate a distinction between two kinds of propositions. One kind is the sensical propositions, the ones that fit the picture theory, the ones that can be said. The other kind is the nonsensical propositions, the ones that the picture theory cannot accommodate, the ones that can only be shown, such as the problem propositions that I have listed above.

For the Standard Reading, the task of the *Tractatus* is centrally one of the regimentation of all propositions along the lines dictated by a theory, the picture theory. The project is to come to see first the necessary truth of that theory, as what must (at least in an ideal language) be the case about the meaning of any proposition, eliminating all other possible theories—and then finally to see that this theory eliminates itself as well, at least as something that can be said rather than just shown. The *Tractatus*’s own theory turns out to be true but unstateable—and unstateable because true.

By contrast, for the Resolute Reading—the alternative reading promoted in all Diamond’s work on the *Tractatus*, including *Reading Wittgenstein*, and also by Janes Conant—the central task of the *Tractatus* is not, in this sense, regimentation with a view to self-refutation. Rather, it is elucidation. And once the nature of elucidation is properly grasped, it becomes clear that there is no self-refutation at all in the famous injunction to “climb up the ladder then throw it away” (*Tractatus* 6.54). For Resolute Readers, the *Tractatus* is not centrally about propounding a metaphysical theory from which conclusions follow about what propositions can be stateable and straightforwardly meaningful and about what propositions are only showable and, while meaningful, by no means straightforwardly so. The *Tractatus* certainly begins by stating some truths that Wittgenstein takes to be obvious about what meaningful propositions have to be like,

and from beginning to end it offers a variety of considerations about what is required if propositions are to have sense. But, in general, for the Resolute Reading, propositions have meaning, not if and only if the picture theory says so, but when we are able to give them meaning.

On this view the “picture theory” of meaning is not really a theory of meaning at all—or at least it was not intended as a theory, though Wittgenstein may have later come to see it as rather too close to being one despite his intentions. The picture theory is an account of meaning, but it is a flexible, undoctrinaire, and context-sensitive one—in spirit much more like the later Wittgenstein’s account than the Standard Reading admits, and always open to the crucial thought that “everyday language is a part of the human organism and is no less complicated than it is” (*Tractatus* 4.002). And for the Resolute Reading, what the picture theory says about meaning is supposed to be obvious to the point of truism—if we can get ourselves into that elucidatory state of mind where we grasp both the truisms and the fact that truisms is what they are.

This does not mean that the Resolute Reading rules nothing out. On the contrary, when it rules things out, it does so a great deal more emphatically than the Standard Reading. The Standard Reading, remember, divides propositions into those that can be said (because they fit the picture theory) and those that can only be shown (because they do not). By contrast, the Resolute Reading proposes no division whatever among propositions. If anything is a proposition at all, then there will be a way of giving it sense, and this will be a matter of showing how the proposition is a picture of some reality (for again, that any proposition is a picture of some reality is, for the *Tractatus*, a truism). But there are no stipulations about what kind of reality, or how exactly the proposition pictures it, and the way the proposition makes sense will not necessarily be a way that is obvious in advance of considerations of the use and the context of the proposition. (On this crucial matter of context see in particular *Tractatus* 3.327: “The sign determines a logical form only together with its logical-syntactic application.”)

Now what stands contrasted with sensical propositions that in one way or another give us a picture of how things are, according to the Resolute Reading? The answer is not nonsensical propositions that do not picture reality. For the Resolute Reading, what is contrasted with sensical propositions is not propositions at all but elucidations, *Erläuterungen*.<sup>2</sup>

Here is how Diamond herself put the contrast between the Standard and Resolute Readings at this point, in her classic article “Throwing Away the Ladder”:

2. I say this (and more to the point Diamond says it; 173–74) despite the claim in *Tractatus* 3.263 that “elucidations are *propositions*” (*Erläuterungen sind Sätze*). The remark is not decisive evidence against the view that elucidations are not genuine propositions because Wittgenstein’s word *Satz* is an ambiguous one.

[Standard Reading:] You can read the *Tractatus* as containing numerous doctrines which Wittgenstein holds cannot be put into words, so they do not really count as doctrines: they do not have what counts as sense according to the doctrines in the *Tractatus* about what has sense. If you read the *Tractatus* this way, you think that, after the ladder is thrown away, you are left holding on to some truths about reality, while at the same time denying that you are actually saying anything about reality. Or, in contrast, [Resolute Reading] you can say that the notion of something true of reality but not sayably true is to be used only with the awareness that it itself belongs to what has to be thrown away. One is not left with it at the end, after recognizing what the *Tractatus* has aimed at getting one to recognize.<sup>3</sup>

For Wittgenstein, to get to a place where you are ready to throw away the ladder is the point of the activity of philosophy. As he was to put it at the other end of his career, “The real discovery is the one which enables me to stop doing philosophy when I want to. The one that gives philosophy peace, so that it is no longer tormented by questions which bring *itself* into question” (*Philosophical Investigations* I:133). What gets you to that point, in the *Tractatus*, is elucidations. And on the Resolute Reading, elucidations, not propositions (of any kind), is what the *Tractatus* consists of (4.111–4.112). “The object of philosophy is the logical clarification of thoughts. Philosophy is not a theory but an activity. A philosophical work consists essentially of elucidations. The result of philosophy is not a number of ‘philosophical propositions’ but to make propositions clear.”

On the Resolute Reading, then, elucidations are not just unstateable or unsayable propositions—a shadowy second class alongside the stateable and sayable first-class propositions. They are not propositions *at all*; they are what “makes propositions clear.” Or at any rate they are not propositions “at the end,” though along the way to the end, to the moment of “peace,” they may well look and seem and behave like genuine propositions. Elucidations do not give us a “second realm,” a Platonic one perhaps, of propositions about propositions. They are simply stage directions along the way to getting propositions clear. Hence Diamond’s suggestion (175) that at least some of the entities that are not “senseful propositions” are nonetheless “things that look like propositions and that have a role in what we do with senseful propositions”: “Wittgenstein speaks of such expressions as *Behelfe der Darstellung*”—not representations, but “aids to representation” (see *Tractatus* 4.242).

Talking of stage directions, we might compare here how two pianists might talk about how to play a tricky section of a piano piece when there is no piano around to demonstrate on—or even, sometimes, when there is. (I have seen musicians do this sort of thing myself; so, no doubt, did the

3. Cora Diamond, “Throwing Away the Ladder,” *Philosophy* 63 (1988): 5–27, 8.

intensely musical Wittgenstein.) “It’s [descending intonation] *ba ba ba ba NAAA*, then [vigorous chopping hand gestures] *BAM-ta-t-ta-ta BAM-ta-t-ta-ta*.” What the one says to the other here is certainly not, in any straightforward sense, music; after all, part of what is said are the hand gestures. And though, of course, this little performance does relate closely to features of the score that the pianists are discussing, it makes no literal musical sense at all. And yet it helps clarify what the music means, and how to play it. This is not music. But it is a musical elucidation.

Or compare this, from Caryl Brahms and S. J. Simon’s marvellously funny Blackadder of the 1940s, their coauthored comic novel *No Bed for Bacon*:

Shakespeare smiled. “What is it, Obadiah?”

The little man studied his toe. “Just a thing I have been thinking about,” he said. “I could be very funny in it.”

“Aha,” said Shakespeare. He leant back. “Proceed,” he invited.

The little man broke into a babble. A mosaic of words, gestures, and mimicry filled the room. Soon the little man was acting all over it. Bacon looked at him in some disgust. It didn’t even make sense. But Shakespeare was listening with that intentness that a wise playwright will never grudge his clown. From time to time he nodded. He did not need adjectives and verbs to translate the thought in a player’s mind. He did not need rhetoric and couplets to tell him that his clown was offering him not only an interpretation but a creation. He had not yet made friends with this creation, but already he was making room in his mind to receive it.<sup>4</sup>

What Obadiah offers Shakespeare here, taken literally and taken cold, is, as the disgusted Bacon observes, no more than nonsense. This private performance to Shakespeare is not comedy, and it is not drama. But it is, in its context, a comic-dramatic elucidation.

### III

Alongside the indubitable propositions that the *Tractatus* characterizes as pictures of facts (*Tatsache*; *Tractatus* 1.1), there are also the putative propositions (*Scheinsätze*; *Tractatus* 4.1272; there translated as “pseudo-propositions” both by Ogden and by Pears and McGuinness) that are the main content of the *Tractatus* itself: putative propositions like “We make to ourselves pictures of facts” (*Wir machen uns Bilder der Tatsachen*; *Tractatus* 2.1). On Diamond’s own Resolute Reading, all such *Scheinsätze* are not merely a secondary or by-your-leave kind of proposition. They are not propositions at all but elucidations in the sense just illustrated. As we might now expound it, “Philosophy is not a doctrine but an activity” (*Tractatus* 4.112) means that philosophy is a training in how to handle propositions. But this training

4. Caryl Brahms and S. J. Simon, *No Bed for Bacon* (London: Penguin, 1941), 15.

is not, itself, propositional in form: “All propositions are of equal value” (*Tractatus* 6.4) means that no particular proposition can guide us on how—and how not—to grasp the logical form of all propositions. And so the *Scheinsätze* of the *Tractatus* are not propositions either. Instead, they are, as it were, gestures or mimes or stage directions that help us to understand what it is for there to be propositions, which is what the *Tractatus* means by “logical form” (*Tractatus* 2.2).

Now the elucidations that musicians and actors might use to get across to each other how a piece of music or theater should be performed are not themselves part of the performance. Rather, they get us on our way to the performance, and they are discarded once that is ready. The closer we get to the performance, the more they fall by the wayside, become scaffolding—or a ladder—that we are increasingly ready to throw away. Yet with elucidations it makes perfect sense to speak of right and wrong. Elucidations can help or hinder, enlighten or mislead; a good director or conductor is someone whose elucidations are to the point (not unhelpful), maybe even true (not false). Here, then, we come to a second sense of true and false, and so also to a second sense of negation, one that seems profoundly different from the “bipolar” sense of negation applicable to picture propositions, as discussed in Section II.

This talk of multiplicity in the notions of truth/falsity and negation will remind some readers of some other recent philosophical debates, including some in metaethics; and from where we are now, there is certainly a bridge that gets us to those discussions. We might begin the bridging movement with a regress argument that concludes not only that elucidations are not propositions but also that they cannot be. For suppose something P were a proposition—not a merely apparent proposition, but a genuine one—that purported to guide us in the way that the *Tractatus* says elucidations do. Then, the question would immediately arise how this allegedly elucidatory proposition P itself is to be constructed, parsed, and understood. P cannot itself be the answer to this question, on pain of circularity. But neither can some further elucidatory proposition, P-prime. For the same dilemma would arise about it, thus launching a vicious infinite regress—an infinite regress because there is no point at which we would stop needing a further proposition in elucidation (P-prime  $n + 1$  times) of the previous elucidation (P-prime  $n$  times), and a vicious infinite regress because every new step in the regress is a further deferral of any real elucidation, which depends not on any “specially valuable” proposition but on an attitude to all propositions.

This line of argument might remind us of the problem raised in Lewis Carroll’s “What the Tortoise Said to Achilles.”<sup>5</sup> A valid argument form,

5. Lewis Carroll, “What the Tortoise Said to Achilles,” *Mind* 4 (1895): 278–80. Originally published under the name “Lewis Carroll”—Dodgson was famous as such by 1895. Reprinted in a Centenary Edition of *Mind*: *Mind* 104 (1995): 691–93.

modus ponens, for instance, cannot be buttressed by the addition, alongside the premises (1) “p” and (2) “If p then q,” of a third premise asserting the propriety of that argument form, for example, (3) “From ‘p’ and ‘If p then q,’ infer q.” On the contrary, if this premise is added, then *pari passu* we also need a fourth one—(4) “From premises 1–3, infer q”—and then a fifth premise to get us from (1–4) to “q,” and so on into the regress.

In his short, playful, and enormously suggestive article—given those three adjectives, perhaps he would struggle to get it published today—Carroll himself offers no remedy to this problem. But the remedy, clearly, is to distinguish sharply between the argument’s premises and its rule of inference and to insist that the argument’s rule of inference can never, on pain of just this sort of regress, appear within the argument as a premise. The rule of inference is not one of the statements that are premises in the argument, and chaos results if you try to insert it there. The rule of inference says what we do with those statements; it lies, so to speak, outside the argument. Or if you prefer to use the T-word again, the rule of inference is transcendental.

Generalizing the point, we might say that knowing logical rules is not a matter of knowing propositions but of knowing what to do with propositions. And this already begins to sound like a normative claim, of either of two kinds that are very familiar today. It begins, that is, to sound like one of these two positions:

*Expressivism about logical norms:* Logical norms express not propositions of logic but attitudes to propositions of logic;

or

*Practicalism about logical norms:* Our knowledge of logical norms is not propositional knowledge, knowledge that, but practical knowledge, knowledge how (to be backed up, presumably, by a denial that knowledge how is reducible to knowledge that)

—or, since there is nothing obviously inconsistent about these two views, maybe both.<sup>6</sup>

6. Further support for the idea that the *Tractatus* might lead us in something like an expressivist direction might come from David Wiggins’s 2004 summary of some of the central ideas of *Tractatus* 6—though I doubt anything like expressivism was Wiggins’s intention: “Intrinsic value or that which confers it is not to be found in the world. Value can only enter then through the subject—through the attitude of the subject’s will towards the world. Goodness enters through a transcendental will’s acceptance of the world (which is happiness). Evil enters through the will’s rejection of the world (which is unhappiness).” See David Wiggins, “Wittgenstein on Ethics and the Riddle of Life,” *Philosophy* 79 (2004): 363–91, 368.

## IV

To sketch these possibilities is to go further in one way than Diamond goes in her book, and in another way, less far. It goes further because it connects what Wittgenstein says with positions in modern debates about normativity that are, as I say, extremely familiar to contemporary philosophers.<sup>7</sup> Diamond, however (though I do not mean this as a criticism), does not have much to say directly about the current state of play over either expressivism or knowledge how.

It goes less far, because the two possibilities that I have just sketched are, so far, only positions about logical norms, and Diamond's concern, at least by the end of her book, is to explore a broadly Tractarian view that applies to ethical norms (and perhaps, by implication, to all norms whatsoever). What we say about one sort of norms, for example, the logical, might also apply—either directly or by some kind of analogy—to other sorts of norms too, for example, the ethical. But there is uncertainty here, because there again it might not, and it is crucial to remember something that Anscombe emphasizes (*IWT*, 79–80)—just how dauntingly vast and various are the areas of philosophy and the types of claim that, at least at first sight, are not legitimated by the picture theory of the *Tractatus*:

Laws of inference, and, generally, logical truths; statements that one proposition implies another; generality, i.e. propositions containing “all” and “some”; propositions giving logical classifications of terms and expressions, e.g. “‘to the right of’ is a relation,” “‘a is to the right of b’ is a proposition”; propositions that are important in the foundation of mathematics such as “a is the successor of b”; statements about the possibility, impossibility, necessity, and certainty of particular states of affairs; statements of identity; propositions apparently expressing functions of propositions, such as “it is good that p,” or “p is possible,” “p is necessary,” or again “A believes p” or “A conceives p”; and perhaps even statements about e.g. the beauty of pictures; propositions stating probabilities; propositions of mathematics; propositions stating laws of nature; propositions about space and time; egocentric propositions; propositions about the world as a whole, about God and the meaning of life.

A second uncertainty that I have about how Diamond's argument develops is this. So far in this review I have spoken of her Resolute Reading's contrast between (genuine) propositions and elucidations, and I have said something about what right/wrong and true/false might mean for various

7. For connections between Carroll's argument (as applied to practical inference) and expressivism, see Simon Blackburn, “Practical Tortoise-Raising,” *Mind* 104 (1995): 695–711. On knowing how and practicalism, see Jeremy Fantl, “Knowledge How,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/knowledge-how/>.

kinds of elucidation, including philosophical elucidation, that we can imagine. But by the time we get to the ethical part of her book—its part 3—Diamond’s focus is not so much on the notion of an elucidation as possibly helpful or misleading, but rather on the notion that a proposition might be such that it has no intelligible negation: attempts to deny that proposition just “peter out into nothingness” (Anscombe’s words; *IWT*, 85). This, of course, is why she contrasts “bipolar” propositions with “asymmetrical” ones: the former are those at the center of the picture theory of the proposition, whereas the latter are the putative (or pseudo-)propositions of logic—and, she contends, of ethics. But the right/wrong contrast for elucidations and the true/nonsensical contrast for asymmetrical propositions look to be very different indeed from each other. The worry is that we have simply moved from one topic of discussion to another.

Of course, there are ways to allay this worry. Might Diamond’s suggestion not be that these two different contrasts are at one in the case of logic—that in that case the two things, which can be so much at odds elsewhere, come together? Indeed, it might, and in fact that seems like quite an interesting and plausible idea to develop. Perhaps it is the idea that Diamond is developing, though she does not ever put it this way, and I do not know—yet—whether she would approve of this version of her idea.

So might the idea also be that the good elucidation/bad elucidation contrast and the true/nonsensical contrast are at one in the case of ethics too? Again, yes indeed. But here my complaint is not that this is an implausible or a straightforwardly wrong proposal. It is merely that it is an enormous proposal—and I scarcely know where to begin in trying to get a feel for it and to assess it for plausibility or otherwise.

Perhaps the best place to begin is simply to turn back to the text. So I focus in what remains of this review on what Diamond has to say about how to make the contrasts that interest her in the specific case of ethics, and in particular on her application of her findings to a well-known debate in ethics between David Wiggins and Bernard Williams.

## V

To class ethical propositions as asymmetrical is to class them, following the *Tractatus* on Diamond’s reading, with syntactical and logical and grammatical propositions. Propositions of those sorts are asymmetrical in that, when true, they constitute guidance, knowledge how, the expression of (correct) attitudes, or the like. But their false negations cannot be described, as the negations of true bipolar propositions can, as equally truth-apt but they just happen not to be true, like the claim “L (K, J)” when “L (J, K)” is true. Rather, to reflect clearly on the negations of these propositions is to engage in the activity, characteristic of philosophy and illustrative of its nondoctrinal nature, that can also be called logic “taking care of itself” (*Tractatus* 5.473).

It is to come to understand that their negations do not even make sense. To use the language of Anscombe (*IWT*, 85–86), such propositions lack “the true-false poles.”

Anscombe’s example of a proposition like this—and, with some reservations, the example is central to Diamond’s own development of the notion of asymmetrical propositions—is “Someone’ is not the name of someone.” And here we find ourselves back with Lewis Carroll, because Anscombe’s example arises from Antony Flew’s discussion of a logical joke in *Through the Looking Glass*:

“I see nobody on the road,” said Alice.

“I only wish I had such eyes,” The King remarked in a fretful tone. “To be able to see Nobody! And at that distance too! Why, it’s as much as I can do to see real people, by this light!”<sup>8</sup>

Anthony Flew comments that the joke turns on treating “Nobody” as if, like “somebody,” it named someone.<sup>9</sup> Anscombe pounces on this to point out that “somebody” is not a name either:

This [proposition that says “Someone’ is not the name of someone”] is obviously true. But it does not have the bipolarity of Wittgenstein’s “significant propositions.” For what is it that it denies to be the case? Evidently, that “someone” is the name of someone. But what would it be for “someone” to be the name of someone? Someone might christen his child “Someone.” But when we say “Someone’ is not the name of someone,” we are not intending to deny that anyone in the world has the odd name “Someone.” What then are we intending to deny? Only a piece of confusion. But this sort of denial may well need emphasizing. . . . When we say “Somebody’ does not refer to somebody” . . . a statement which appears quite correct is not a statement with true-false poles. Its contradictory, when examined, peters out into nothingness.<sup>10</sup>

8. Some parallels between Wittgenstein’s thought and the logical jokes in the works of Lewis Carroll have been collated by George Pitcher, “Wittgenstein, Nonsense, and Lewis Carroll,” *Massachusetts Review* 6 (1965): 591–611, who reminds us that Wittgenstein explicitly cites Carroll twice in *Philosophical Investigations*, at I:13 and II:169. Anscombe quotes “The Hunting of the Snark” at *IWT*, 76.

9. Anthony Flew, *Essays on Logic and Language* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1951), 7–8. Name/quantifier-confusion jokes are not, of course, Carroll’s own invention. As a well-educated Victorian gentleman (Rugby and Christ Church), Carroll himself would undoubtedly have been aware of Homer, *Odyssey* 9.408, where Odysseus tricks the Cyclops into taking *outis* (“no one”) as a name.

10. Here I have the temerity to suggest that Anscombe is slightly running together a logical point with a verbal one. That the word “someone” means what it does in English is as plainly a bipolar truth as could be—as witness the fact that English actually has an

Part 3 of Diamond's book is devoted to exploring how this idea of "petering out into nothingness" might apply in ethics. She focuses in particular on the question of how the idea might apply to the case of slavery. Here her starting point is this:

By drawing upon the full riches of our intersubjectivity and our shared understanding, such a wealth of considerations can now be produced, all bearing in some way or other upon the question of slavery, that, at some point in rehearsing these considerations, it will become apparent that there is *nothing else to think* but that slavery is unjust and insupportable. Of course some may think something else—just as some may think  $7 + 5 = 11$ . But this is not to say that there is anything else to think. At some point in running through these considerations, the cognitivist claims, it will appear that the price of thinking anything at variance with the insupportability of slavery is to have opted out altogether from the point of view that shall be common between one person and another.<sup>11</sup>

The idea that Wiggins develops—in this 1989 paper, in the somewhat fragmentary comments that he added in his uncompleted 1995 paper,<sup>12</sup> and in "Truth, and truth as predicated of moral judgements"<sup>13</sup> before it—is that for at least some ethical truths T, there is nothing else to think but T. That is, the denial of T is impossible to think if we are thinking clearly. If we attempt to think the denial of T, then there has been a "miscarriage of our thought" (293; cf. Plato, *Theaetetus* 148e–152c); our thinking has "gone off the rails," "gone profoundly astray," there "is a kind of misuse of our thinking capacity" (289)—in just the way, as Wiggins himself suggests, that our thinking would be going off the rails if we thought or tried to think that  $7 + 5 = 11$  rather than  $7 + 5 = 12$  (cf. Plato, *Theaetetus* 196d–200d).

Diamond explores the version of objectivism that Wiggins builds around this basic idea—and it would misrepresent her book to say that she does anything more definitive than explore it—by comparing what Wiggins says in defense of his objectivism with what Williams says in criticism of it, in the paper that Williams contributed to the same Reading conference and special edition of *Ratio*.<sup>14</sup> While she does not pretend to

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alternative word playing the same role, "somebody." It is merely a matter of historical contingency that we have these two words, and not just one of them, or something else altogether. Presumably the proposition that Anscombe means, to which the alternative "peters out into nothingness," is a proposition about the logical function that, as it happens, is played in English by the word "someone"/"somebody." That function is not a naming function. And it would indeed be mere confusion to take it to be.

11. David Wiggins, "Moral Cognitivism, Moral Relativism, and Motivating Moral Beliefs," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 91 (1989): 61–85, 70.

12. David Wiggins, "Objective and Subjective in Ethics," *Ratio* 8 (1995): 243–58.

13. Essay IV in David Wiggins, *Needs, Values, Truth* (London: Aristotelian Society, 1987).

14. Bernard Williams, "Truth in Ethics," *Ratio* 8 (1995): 227–36.

settle the issue decisively in Wiggins's favor, her comments make it entirely clear that she is "on his side" rather than on Williams's (e.g., she says that what "is great about Wiggins' argument is that it leads us into an examination of what we need to be able to think about moral matters"; 284).

As I understand her, Diamond has four main complaints about Williams's critique of Wiggins. The first complaint is that Williams shifts the argument's center of gravity by switching from Wiggins's own example in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* (1989), the injustice of slavery, to a different example, one introduced into metaethics by Gilbert Harman,<sup>15</sup> about the cruelty of some cat-burning hooligans. This complaint seems sufficiently dealt with by observing (as Diamond herself observes at one point; 273) that Wiggins discusses both Harman's case and the slavery case.<sup>16</sup>

Diamond's second complaint is that Wiggins usefully undermines the relativist's "insidious presumption of symmetry" between true and false first-order ethical views,<sup>17</sup> whereas Williams's response to Wiggins tends to reinstate it. I think that Diamond underestimates Wiggins's resources for resisting the slide into symmetry that she thinks follows on Williams's view. As a matter of fact, I think she underestimates Williams's resources too; I do not think that it is at all obvious that the slide into symmetry does follow even for Williams.

Thirdly, Diamond complains that to Wiggins's discussion of Harman's case, Williams is too tempted by the quick retort that "there is something else to think but that [burning the cat to death] was a cruel thing to do—for instance that it was fun, which is what the boys think."<sup>18</sup> Diamond thinks that this is too quick because it mistakes a change of subject for a genuine ethical disagreement: as she puts it, reverting to the slavery example, "if someone thinks that slavery is profitable, this is not disagreeing about whether slavery is unjust" (273). But that seems to me to miss Williams's point, which is about what thick concepts are salient to different groups of people. To say "Burning cats to death is fun" will usually be to presuppose, and implicate, the claim "And fun is what counts here," just as, among slave-owning classes in the Confederacy, to say "Slavery was profitable" was to presuppose and implicate "And profit is what counts here," and just as, for most people in Europe today, to say "But bacon is really tasty" is to presuppose and implicate that it is the pleasures of pig eating that count, and that the pain, distress, and demise of the eaten pig are at most a secondary consideration, and more likely erased altogether from practical thinking, simply not considered at all. In practice

15. Gilbert Harman, *The Nature of Morality* (New York: Oxford University Press), 1977.

16. The Harman case is his particular focus in Wiggins, *Needs, Values, Truth*.

17. Wiggins, "Moral Cognitivism," 73.

18. Williams, "Truth in Ethics," 237.

and in psychology, the change of subject that Diamond objects to does key ethical work. Real-world debates about thick concepts are typically not only about how far some concept applies, and whether that is far enough to generate a right/wrong verdict, but also about which concepts we should be applying to some situation in the first place. But this point about salience is a point that Williams himself can and should make. To the extent that he does not make it in the 1995 response to Wiggins, Diamond is right that Williams is being too quick. In the interests of consistency with things that he himself says elsewhere, Williams could and should have retrenched on a more cautious, more nuanced, and in fact more plausible and interesting position. For on a closer look, it is clear, first, that Williams himself has resources to make the point about salience; secondly, that he is himself committed to making it; and thirdly, that, thus adjusted, his position moves substantially closer to Wiggins's position.

This brings us to Diamond's fourth complaint, which is that Diamond is resistant to Williams's tendency to reframe Wiggins's argument in Williams's own terms, as an argument about thick concepts. I agree with her that Williams does this. But I do not see it, as Diamond does, either as "fishy" (275) or as something that needs to be resisted by those who take Wiggins's side in this debate. On the contrary, I think not only that Wiggins should accept the thick-concepts gambit but also that he clearly does accept it.

In Section VI, I give some further explanations of these reactions to Diamond on Williams on Wiggins, by taking a closer look at the details of the Williams-Wiggins exchange.

## VI

First, then, why is it not "fishy" for Williams to frame Wiggins's argument as an argument about thick concepts? Well, because it *is* an argument about thick concepts, and because Wiggins himself treats it as such.

For sure, when Wiggins states his argument, whether he builds his argument on his slavery case or on Harman's case, he does not use the term "thick concepts." On the other hand, he does use thick concepts. In *Ratio*, for example, Wiggins says this:

Why, [when Clarkson and Wilberforce] attended to the institution that we call 'slavery', [did they] (a) grasp or categorise it as slavery and (b) [see] it as brutal, inhuman, exploitative, unjust and wrong [?] The claim of Ethical Objectivism [is] that the best explanation of this attitude of [theirs is that] for moral purposes, there is no other way to categorize slavery than as slavery and, given [numerous detailed moral considerations], there is nothing else to think, in the world as it is or was, but that slavery is brutal, inhuman, exploitative, unjust and wrong: so no wonder that Clarkson and Wilberforce,

perceiving it in the world as it was, and aware [of those considerations], grasped or categorized the institution as slavery and saw it as brutal, inhuman, exploitative, unjust and wrong.<sup>19</sup>

This is clearly and straightforwardly an application to the slavery case of Williams's classification, in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* and elsewhere, of ethical concepts as thick and thin.<sup>20</sup> Wiggins starts at the thick end, with "brutal," "inhuman," and "exploitative," all of them names for what Williams himself explicitly classes as thick concepts.<sup>21</sup> In that passage Williams also explicitly says that "unjust," the next term in Wiggins's list, names an intermediate concept that "lies between the thick and the thin,"<sup>22</sup> and that "wrong," Wiggins's final term, names a thin concept.

Given that Williams puts the point this way in "Truth in Ethics," which is the very paper to which Wiggins's "Objective and Subjective in Ethics" is written as a response, it seems clear that Wiggins not only accepts Williams's way of framing the question but also appropriates it for his own purposes. That Wiggins also wants to speak, as we shall see, of convergence and vindication is further evidence that he is working with and even within Williams's framing of the issues in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*. What Wiggins wants to say is that there are thick concepts that force themselves upon us—concepts to which there is no thinkable alternative in the situation, so that there is "nothing else to think" but that some "socially thick" action or institution is to be rejected because of the thick concepts that are truly applicable to it.

Notice that up to this point we have not yet reached any disagreement between Wiggins and Williams. Not only can Williams say all of this too; he does say it, repeatedly and with great emphasis, in work that Wiggins may not have referenced directly but certainly knew. In particular, Williams says this kind of thing in his famous and groundbreaking work on shame, necessity, guilt, regret, blame, and the unavoidability for particular agents of particular conceptions of what is possible or impossible

19. Wiggins, "Objective and Subjective in Ethics," 251.

20. Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (London: Penguin, 1985).

21. Cf. Williams, "Truth in Ethics," 234.

22. Full disclosure: I am on the record myself as arguing that "there are no thin concepts" (Timothy Chappell, "There Are No Thin Concepts," in *Thick Concepts*, ed. Simon Kirchin [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013], 182–96), i.e., that the internal logic of Williams's own arguments pushes us toward the conclusion that actually all ethical properties are thick properties, even the supposedly "thinnest" ones, for example, "right" and "ought": ethical properties all have crucial historical determinants and "descriptive" correlates. I also think that Anscombe is making something like this same point in "Modern Moral Philosophy" (*Philosophy* 33 [1958]: 1–39): even "ought" is a thick property, for her. These points may add some background interest to my discussion here—which does not, however, depend on them: I can be read, if you wish to, as waiving them here for the sake of argument.

for them in their situations.<sup>23</sup> If, then, Wiggins and Williams agree that “there are thick concepts that force themselves upon us,” what is the disagreement between them?

The disagreement is not, either, about whether we can speak of right and wrong when we consider the further question that is raised by Diamond’s third complaint as listed above: the question of which concepts force themselves upon which people. On his own terms—see again his writings on shame, guilt, regret, moral necessity, and moral incapacity—Williams can and should agree with Wiggins that Harman’s cat-burning hooligans are wrong to see their action under the thick description “fun” and would be right to see their action under the thick description “cruelty.” Moreover, going in the other direction, Wiggins can agree with Williams that to say here that the hooligans are wrong is to speak out of a particular sensibility and from an ethical viewpoint that is structured so as to produce that kind of verdict, and that there is no telling what verdict on the hooligans, if any, there might be if we were to speak—if we could—from that ambiguous and protean thing, “the point of view of the universe” or “the absolute conception.”

But perhaps we will get to a difference between Williams and Wiggins if we now ask what kinds of further things can be said to justify this verdict on Harman’s hooligans. Williams famously argues, in chapter 8 of *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, that there is a contrast between science and ethics about the possibility of knowledge. Over time, beliefs about science display convergence toward the truth, basically for the reason that science is about reality “as it is anyway.” But we have reason to think that our ethical beliefs will not converge in anything like the same way. This reason comes from understanding how our ethical beliefs (and ethical knowledge) arise: in particular, from understanding that they arise more like our etiquette beliefs (and knowledge) than our scientific beliefs and knowledge.

Ethics is like etiquette, for Williams, in the following sort of way: we can know that at a tea party it is rude for a guest to help herself to a slice of cake and a cup of tea, because it is the hostess’s role to pour and cut for the guest, and the guest’s role to sit and be served. This kind of thing is knowledge about etiquette. But the foundations of such knowledge run no deeper than the historically conditioned social institution of etiquette itself; what counts as etiquette, if anything does, varies across time and space; and there are plenty of disputes about etiquette about which there is no more to say than simply to note this variability. There is no reason to expect etiquette beliefs to converge on some objective reality about “what is *really*

23. See here, in particular, Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); and Bernard Williams, “Moral Incapacity,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 93 (1993): 59–70.

or *objectively* good manners”; historical reflection on the genealogy of etiquette beliefs is (Williams would presumably say) more likely to be corrosive and destructive of those beliefs than vindictory. Ethical beliefs are obviously less dispensable than etiquette beliefs, and Williams can admit that point too. Still, it does seem fundamental for Williams that ethical beliefs are like etiquette beliefs and unlike scientific beliefs in that ethical beliefs are mostly nonconvergent and their genealogies in large part nonvindictory.

Here, then, we seem at last to have reached a definite disagreement between Williams and Wiggins. What is certainly true is that Wiggins speaks confidently of convergence and vindication in ethical belief, whereas Williams speaks confidently only of confidence in ethical belief. Central for Wiggins is the thought that an explanation of a belief is vindictory where what it explains is that one has the belief because it is true: “One can come to know that *p* only if one can come to believe that *p* precisely because *p*.”<sup>24</sup> So I come to believe that slavery is unjust and that torturing cats is cruel because slavery is unjust and torturing cats is cruel: there is nothing else to think but *p*, because *p*.

The challenge for Wiggins—Williams will surely say here—is how to spell out this “because.” What is the exact causal-explanatory route between the truth of “Slavery is unjust” and my coming—whether or not unavoidably—to believe or know that “Slavery is unjust”? (Compare a question that Williams famously presses about our motivating reasons: what is the causal-explanatory route supposed to be between the [supposed] truth of any external-reasons statement and someone’s actually being motivated by that truth?)

However, Wiggins has a number of good possible responses to this challenge from Williams. One—which Wiggins takes some steps toward making out—is to articulate further the detail of the evidence base that brings people to think “what there is nothing else to think” than about various ethical questions. Another—which he does not go into, as far as I am aware—is to point out that Williams faces the same question. For as we have seen above, Williams also accepts that there are ethical framings, ways of seeing, saliences, that can force themselves upon us, that can be such that there is nothing else to think. How does Williams account for this phenomenon? He, too, has to say something to explain it, and on pain of obvious implausibility, not everything that he can say will be explaining it away. Just like Wiggins, Williams will certainly need to say that when an ethical belief “forces itself upon us,” there is some measure of contextual determination involved. Just like Wiggins, he will also need to agree that, for the agent in the situation, and for us as her observers, there also at least seems to be a kind of rational traction that derives from the

24. Wiggins, “Moral Cognitivism,” 67.

ethical considerations themselves. Here too the real differences between Williams and Wiggins prove much more difficult to state carefully than one might initially expect; here too it looks like both of them are committed to at least some degree of both subjectivism and objectivism and also, in particular, to a kind of asymmetry between the particular ethical beliefs that force themselves upon us, the ethical beliefs than which “there is nothing else to think,” and the negations of those beliefs, which in one way or another “peter out into nothingness.”

## VII

The conclusion that I want to draw from this closer look at Williams and Wiggins on there being “nothing else to think” is simply that, in Williams, Diamond has—more than I think she realizes—a substantial and interesting ally for her own research project. The question of asymmetrical truths is orthogonal to the question of objectivism and subjectivism in ethics, and anyway, whenever one tries to give an account of the objective/subjective distinction that has anything like the subtlety that is needed, the question of what is actually at stake becomes more and more puzzling. All of this is reason to think that Williams (like other interesting nonobjectivists) has resources that can be deployed by Diamond in her work to spell out exactly what it might mean, in any area of philosophy, to say that there are asymmetrical truths, truths such that there is nothing else to think.

Vast differences, of course, remain between the different ways in which there can be “nothing else to think”; compare my earlier point that the right/wrong elucidation contrast does not seem guaranteed to turn together with the undeniable truth/petered-out nonsense contrast. It would be rash to suggest that there is anything simple and quickly stateable in common between, for example, the nothing-else-to-think-ness of “ $5 + 7 = 12$ ”; of a correct account of the quantifier for which the English word is “someone”/“somebody”; of (perhaps<sup>25</sup>) an adequate formulation of the internal reasons thesis; of “Red is a color”; of “Whales are mammals”; of Kripkean necessities (if there are any) such as “The atomic number of gold is 79”; of “If p, then p”; of “All thoughts have a thinker”; of Pythagoras’s theorem; and so on and so on through indefinitely many other examples before

25. “Perhaps,” because Diamond takes the example from me (189; see Timothy Chappell/Sophie Grace Chappell, “Bernard Williams,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/williams-bernard/>; first published in 2010, substantive revisions in 2013 and (with Nicholas Smyth) in 2018. I continue to think that Williams intends his internal reasons thesis to be what Diamond would call an asymmetrical truth, one such that the negation of it is merely confused. I no longer think, as I used to, that the internal reasons thesis is true, but possibly a trivial truth; I nowadays think (thanks mostly to Brad Hooker) that it is determinately false.

we even get to the particularly vexed cases, some of which are explicitly discussed by Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus* and/or by Anscombe in her *Introduction*.

Diamond in her book is naturally looking for some kind of commonalities between different cases of asymmetrical truth—and different kinds of elucidation; however, she makes no such rash suggestion. Here, too, as she herself would no doubt readily agree, things turn out to be more complicated than we had realized. Her book is a report on work in progress, work of the most adventurous and speculative kind. It is a book of the first importance for ethics, because it is a book of the first importance for pretty well every area of philosophy. I recommend it very warmly to the reader.