Response to Diamond

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Where two people differ about the application of some term to a particular object, to what can they appeal to settle their disagreement? In my paper I suggested that the disputants can legitimately draw attention to various features of the contested case to try to show the continuity, or lack of it, between this case and other instances that fall under the concept. In so doing they are offering reasons to justify their judgement in this particular case.

I am now inclined to think that such an approach is only likely to be successful if the disagreement between the parties is not too radical. This is so where they share a common understanding of the term in question but disagree about a hard case. Here, the features to which they appeal, and the significance those features have, will be determined by that shared understanding. But their disagreement may go deeper. They may have competing conceptions of the same term which give each of them a quite different approach to the case in question. In particular, what is a hard case on one approach may be a paradigm case of the concept on the other. Lacking a shared conception, it is likely that neither disputant will be able to appreciate the significance of the features of the case in hand to which the other draws attention. Each will be an outsider to the other’s practice. (I am not suggesting that there is a sharp division between these more and less radical kinds of disagreement; it is clearly a matter of degree.)

Diamond’s disagreement with Marshall is of this more radical kind. For Marshall, the more retarded someone is the more difficult it is to see her as having a human life to lead. But for Diamond the retarded are not at the periphery of the concept; they fall squarely under it. (On this, see her remarks about Rorty and the Orthodox on p. 54 of her paper.) My suggested reading of her response to Marshall was based on the model that I now think is only suitable for disagreements of the less radical variety. It fails to address their disagreement adequately, for the kind of reason that Diamond gives at the end of her reply to me. A Kantian could not be struck by the life of the retarded as one of deprivation, which merits a certain range of response, since there are no resources in his conception for thinking of those who lack rationality in that way.

That does not mean, however, that what I offered might not be a helpful response to someone who was closer to my particularist con-
ception of what it is to see some being as an object of moral concern. Think, for example, of someone who cannot understand the pity we feel for the congenitally retarded. They have not suffered a loss, he might say, since they never had normal mental capacities, nor are they capable of appreciating that they are without them. Reminding him that, had things gone normally, they would have led lives like ours, can be a way of helping him understand that there is another way of seeing them as having lost something, and thus as deserving sympathy and a certain kind of treatment. Here Diamond’s objection does not apply. It is not necessary that my interlocutor already see the retarded person’s life as one with ours, in order for him to be struck by its deprivation. Rather, I offer him a way of seeing it as, in some ways, continuous with cases that do elicit our sympathy at what has been lost. To be struck by that continuity is, at the same time, to see that kind of concern as appropriate.

What resources can we draw on in trying to settle the more radical form of disagreement? It is, I think, common ground between Diamond and myself that we have to address our opponent from within our tradition, practice, or form of life. There is no common, practice-free conception of rationality, no Archimedean point which we could utilise to aid understanding. This point, I take it, underlies our opposition to the orthodox approach to moral justification. It also, I presume, lies behind Diamond’s strategy of responding to Marshall by using ‘the language of human connectedness’ so that he can ‘recognise the way of speaking as something possible for himself’ (p. 83 in her response). But what if, as in the present case, that way of speaking is seen by the other person as deeply puzzling?

All that can be done, I believe, is to give a persuasive articulation of the whole practice, and ultimately of its place in one’s world-view, in such a way that the other person may be led to see how this represents an attractive way of understanding the disputed concept. This is what I take Diamond to have been doing in her discussions of Conrad and Dickens. This brings me back to a worry about her position in her Appendix. In an articulation of a particular conception of leading a human life how could one avoid appealing to features of human beings which helped to explain the attractiveness of the view one was advocating? Diamond mentions, for example, in her discussion of Conrad, our ‘mysterious origin’ and ‘uncertain fate’ (p. 83). What purpose does drawing our attention to those features serve if it is not to offer reasons, from within the practice, that help to explain and justify the attitudes and responses embedded in that practice?