TOWARDS A PHILOSOPHICAL ANTHROPOLOGY OF CULTURE

NATURALISM, RELATIVISM, AND SKEPTICISM

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2 The Grammar of Conflict

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“I am afraid we are not rid of God because we still have faith in grammar.”

I

In what follows, I discuss some questions raised by recent work of Cora Diamond in which she has criticized arguments made by Peter Winch that try to show the logical limitations of what can be said about alien systems of thought and practice. In Part II, I provide some brief historical background to my discussion. In Part III, I summarize Diamond’s main criticisms against the Winchian sort of view. In Part IV, I examine Diamond’s view and its implications for the kinds of questions we can ask about the possibility of criticism between systems of thought with different grammars. In particular, I look briefly at an intersection between her views and those of Hilary Putnam’s on the question of realism. In Part V, I address some issues and possible criticisms arising from my way of setting things out in Part IV. In Part VI, I discuss two consequences of what I take to be Diamond’s views, one pragmatic and the other historical.

II

In his now classic paper from 1964, “Understanding a Primitive Society”, Peter Winch attacked E.E. Evans-Pritchard’s (by then already classic) ethnographic work Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic Among the Azande. Evans-Pritchard had claimed to find a contradiction at the heart of the Zande system of magic, a contradiction that arises from the Zande view that witchcraft is an inherited substance. This view entails that all members of a clan with one witch are themselves witches, since the Zande clan is a group related biologically through the male line. This would mean that the whole system of witchcraft either was pointless, since asserting that someone was a witch would in effect assert nothing more than clan membership. Or it would mean that the thought that some people in the clan are witches while others are not contradicts the underlying premise about witchcraft substance
transmission. It is worth underlining that Evans-Pritchard is not at all dismissive of Zande magical practices. He writes with great sensitivity in helping the reader come to appreciate the role these practices played in Zande life: “We have to see”, he says, “how the drive behind all acts of witchcraft is to be looked for in emotions and sentiments common to all men – malice, jealousy, greed, envy, backbiting, slander, and so on”.

In the concluding chapter, moreover, we read

Throughout I have emphasized the coherency of Zande beliefs when they are considered together and are interpreted in terms of situations and social relationships. I have tried to show also the plasticity of beliefs as functions of situations. They are not indivisible ideational structures but are loose associations of notions. When a writer brings them together in a book and presents them as a conceptual system their insufficiencies and contradictions are at once apparent. In real life they do not function as a whole but in bits. A man in one situation utilizes what in the beliefs are convenient to him and pays no attention to other elements which he might use in different situations. Hence a single event may evoke a number of different and contradictory beliefs among different persons. I hope that I have persuaded the reader of one thing, namely, the intellectual consistency of Zande notions. They only appear inconsistent when ranged like lifeless museum objects.

Nevertheless, for all of the context he supplies, on a couple of occasions early in the book, and not long after having pointed out the discovery of contradiction in the system of Zande magic, Evans-Pritchard seems to betray his true view of his subject matter when he asserts, “Witches, as the Azande conceive them, clearly cannot exist”.

As if to remind us, or perhaps himself, of this consequence of the contradictory nature of Zande beliefs, we read a bit further on, “We must remember that since witchcraft has no real existence a man does not know that he has bewitched another, even if he is aware that he bears him ill will”.

Where Evans-Pritchard writes of a “conceptual system”, Winch quite naturally takes him to mean something like a modern scientific theoretical structure. Winch also takes for granted that freedom from contradiction is one of the hallmarks of such a structure and that Evans-Pritchard, qualifications about “lifeless museum objects” notwithstanding, is relying on something like this conception of a scientific theory in particular as a gold standard for judging whether or not any given system corresponds with reality. Winch criticizes Evans Pritchard’s occasional remarks to the effect that while Zande magic was to a certain extent coherent in its own terms, it failed to describe an independently existing reality as judged by the more rigorous canons of Western science. Specifically, Winch objected
that, in effect, Western science and Zande magic were incommensurable discourses, different grammars as it were, and that Evans Pritchard was attempting the impossible in relying on the one grammar to criticize the other grammar’s relation to a supposedly discourse-neutral term, “reality”. He writes,

> We can imagine a language with no concept of, say, wetness, but hardly one in which there is no way of distinguishing the real from the unreal. Nevertheless we could not in fact distinguish the real from the unreal without understanding the way this distinction operates in the language. If then we wish to understand the significance of these concepts, we must examine the use they actually do have – in the language.

> Evans-Pritchard, on the contrary, is trying to work with a conception of reality which is not determined by its actual use in language. He wants something against which that use can itself be appraised. But this is not possible.¹⁰

Winch concludes that Evans-Pritchard, in trying to import the standards for speaking about reality from one language in order to criticize the use of the same word in another, has made a serious logical blunder.

> It is noteworthy . . . that the Azande, when the possibility of this contradiction about the inheritance of witchcraft is pointed out to them, do not then come to regard their old beliefs about witchcraft as obsolete. “They have no theoretical interest in the subject.” This suggests strongly that the context from which the suggestion about the contradiction is made, the context of our scientific culture, is not on the same level as the context in which the beliefs about witchcraft operate. Zande notions of witchcraft do not constitute a theoretical system in terms of which Azande try to gain a quasi-scientific understanding of the world. This in its turn suggests that it is the European, obsessed with pressing Zande thought where it would not naturally go – to a contradiction – who is guilty of misunderstanding, not the Zande. The European is in fact committing a category mistake.¹¹

### III

Before I turn to discussing the upshot of Diamond’s arguments, there are two points that I want to make about her interpretation of Winch. The first point is that she does not take his position to be merely an expression of anti-scientism. Given the way Winch formulates his objection to Evans-Pritchard in the previous section, that would be an easy conclusion to draw. Winch was anti-scientistic, and famously so, but as
Diamond makes clear, his main point is also meant to cut a good deal deeper. She writes,

I am suggesting that the issue for Winch was not specifically a matter of using *scientific* standards to criticise the Zande but of what he takes to be the failure to recognise that there are two different concepts of reality involved, in two different “languages.” What Winch regards as illegitimate is taking one such concept to be the correct one. And this is what he takes to be at stake if one says, after noting the parallel position of the Europeans and the Zande, that the Europeans are right and the Zande wrong.\(^{12}\)

In other words, Diamond is pointing out how Winch thought it was incoherent to privilege in any absolute sense the idea of “reality” at work in *any* discourse over the idea of “reality” at work in another discourse, *regardless* of whether one of them was scientific. That is, Winch thought in order to criticize a particular conceptual scheme, cultural system, or domain of discourse, one must already be “moving within the system”.\(^ {13}\)

This is because he thought it was a logical requirement of such debates that all parties are in agreement as to the meaning of (perhaps a weighted portion of) their terms. Presumably, for example, Winch would have found it as logically suspicious for someone to make pronouncements on the reality of Zande magic from a Christian standpoint, as he found the sort of assertions that Evans-Pritchard made. This is because, as the previous passages make clear, Winch found the idea of a discourse-neutral conception of the meaning of the sign “reality” to be confused. This view involves the idea that criticizing certain elements of social and intellectual systems of thought and practice from the “outside” deprives these elements of the very identity and content they have only within the “inside” of a particular social context. Because such criticism would violate the purported boundaries of intelligible speech, someone who engaged in it could be met with the response “you can’t say *that*”, i.e. criticism from “outside” literally makes no sense.

The second preliminary point concerns the fact that it is *Diamond’s interpretation* of Winch that is my primary focus in this chapter. This accounts for why I move fairly quickly in the last section through the details of Winch’s attack on Evans-Pritchard on to Diamond’s criticisms of Winch’s position in this section. I am aware that there is a very large and still growing literature both on Winch’s 1958 book on the social sciences and his 1964 paper criticizing Evans-Pritchard; that literature merits a substantially longer treatment than I can provide here. But my interest is not in providing anything like a scholarly synopsis and analysis of this material. My purpose, rather, is to investigate what I see as some of the consequences of *Diamond’s* reading of Winch. I happen to believe, as a matter of fact, that her interpretation and analysis rely on a faithful
understanding of his actual arguments. But if that somehow turns out not to be the case, that should not have much or any bearing on what I write next when I examine the consequences of her views.

Diamond attacks Winch’s position on the grounds that it imposes a dubious logical or metaphysical requirement on the conceptual resources available to language users, and so unnecessarily restricts the possibility of criticizing a system of thought such as an alien world view in which one does not participate. The dubious requirement is, of course, the idea that the content of terms like “reality” (and relatedly, “true”) must be articulated only within the pre-given logical spaces provided by existing discourses. At the time he wrote his paper, this may have seemed to Winch like a bit of philosophical obviousness, made so by his way of reading later Wittgenstein at the time. But quite apart from questions concerning Wittgenstein interpretation, Diamond finds this view anything but obvious. She asks, “[W]hy should there have to be an ‘established universe of discourse?’ Why can one not be making, giving articulation to, a kind of thought about reality in thinking about the conflict?”

She elaborates the thought behind these questions in the following passages:

[W]e can take the situation here to be one in which what is real is contested; and this idea of reality as contested is a different notion of reality from that which is involved in either of the two forms of thought themselves. If the conflict is understood in this way, the space for the dispute between the two forms of thought is not given in advance; it is not provided by either of the two modes of thought that are in conflict. . . . There is thus an important sort of contrast between the way the notion of real and unreal works in the dispute and the way that notions of real and unreal work in the two systems of thought that are at odds. . . . [I]n such systems of thought, there are standards that operate independently of any particular move that someone makes; but in the kind of conflict with which we are concerned. . . ., giving what one takes to be rational grounds for one’s judgement is itself part of the articulation of the logical space here, the space of reasons in this conflict.

Further on we read,

What is questionable about Winch’s arguments is that he repeatedly emphasises there being understandings of real and unreal internal to the modes of thought that may be in conflict, as if that implied that any understanding of real and unreal at work in judging that Zande thought about their oracle (say) is deeply wrong must involve illegitimately misapplying one of the prior understandings of real and unreal. Whereas one can say instead: in bringing out the irreconcilability of the principles involved in two modes of thought, and in
reasoning about such cases, we may be developing an understanding of real and unreal.\textsuperscript{16}

Thus, against Winch, Diamond holds that making new conceptual and linguistic moves, including new modes of evaluating other discourses, can emerge as part of a conflict, so that indeed in many cases one can intelligibly criticize another system. This means that one can, for example, criticize another culture’s practices as confused or false, or in some cases even delusional without invoking a traditional “view from sideways on” metaphysics of rationality that is unconnected to any linguistic practice at all. This is not an invitation to linguistic imperialism. Our criticism may be hasty, sloppy, or based on sheer ignorance or prejudice; coming to understand the meaning of what people do and say may take enormous effort. What Diamond is questioning, however, is that there is a ready-made, a priori condition on meaning that rules out the very idea of making new conceptual and linguistic moves, especially new modes of evaluating other discourses with regard to questions of reality and truth. Indeed, her view seems to be that the intelligibility of such an evaluative practice is already internal to our grammar, just as we find it, so that one can say “that”, except that “saying that” in such a case may have some new, perhaps unpredictable features that no a priori argument about meaning can preclude.

I should just briefly note here that exploring Wittgenstein’s relation to the idea of what is supposedly logically out of bounds to thought and thus to criticism has been utterly central to Diamond’s interpretative work on Wittgenstein for the last 30 years. Much of this writing has been devoted to developing the details of the so-called “resolute reading” of the \textit{Tractatus}. Greatly simplified, this way of reading that book involves an attempt to draw out what Diamond takes to be the implications of the thought expressed in this passage from the preface:

\begin{quote}
[T]he aim of the book is to set a limit to thought, or rather – not to thought, but to the expression of thoughts: for in order to be able to set a limit to thought, we should have to find both sides of the limit thinkable (i.e. we should have to be able to think what cannot be thought). It will therefore only be in language that the limit can be drawn, and what lies on the other side of the limit will simply be nonsense.\textsuperscript{17}
\end{quote}

As Diamond reads it, a major aim of the \textit{Tractatus} is to deconstruct the very idea that one could employ special kinds of language, more specifically special kinds of nonsense, to convey otherwise ineffable thoughts that lie on the other side of the limit of the ordinarily sayable, and so thinkable. In the present context the more relevant text is of course \textit{Philosophical Investigations}, as it is largely from that and other later writings
that most philosophers have drawn inspiration for their views about the logical-grammatical (im)possibility of criticizing, or even understanding at all, from “outside”. Yet Diamond is no less adamant that Wittgenstein’s later work not be read as lending support to any arguments purporting to establish the “bounds of sense”. And with good reason, for such a reading would land the later Wittgenstein in precisely the confusion against which he warned of in his earlier book.

IV

I agree with Diamond’s main criticisms of the kind of view put forth by Winch. In what follows, I discuss what I take to be some of the implications of her analysis, even though I am very unsure whether she would regard them as genuine implications. I take Diamond at any rate to be committed to something close to the following two claims: 1) systems of thought may contain logical resources for making various types of criticisms that go beyond what is clearly visible to their current participants and 2) these conceptual resources can be developed, brought out, made manifest, by, among perhaps other things, conflicts with other systems of thought. I think that Diamond is certainly correct in claiming 1), while I think 2) raises some complicated issues. In particular, it is unclear to me whether Diamond thinks that the logical space that may be articulated in the course of a conflict must be understood as a result of mutual features of each conflicting system’s logical resources, or if it is enough for coherent criticism that only one of those grammars has this potential openness in its self-understanding of “reality”. As I will try to show, it is difficult to argue that only the first possibility is permissible and allowing for the second possibility reveals some interesting complications.

The main issue between Winch and Diamond here runs both deep and broad in the history of 20th century philosophy. Its depth is a function of its importance, which I believe is great. By “broad”, I mean that despite substantial philosophical differences among them, the list of those who have held positions with strong affinities to the one Diamond finds in Winch is a venerable one. Indeed, on the list of eminent thinkers targeted in his “On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme”, Donald Davidson includes, in addition to Winch, Quine, Kuhn, Feyerabend, Sapir/Whorf, and Strawson. Surprisingly absent from this list, however, is the Rudolf Carnap, whose thought as much as anyone’s proved a source for many of the central ideas in various iterations of 20th century linguistic relativism. In particular, Carnap’s distinction between questions that are “internal” and those that are “external” to a linguistic framework, with his rejection of the latter as lacking cognitive significance, bears more than a little resemblance to Winch’s insistence that we can only ask questions about the meaning of words, “reality” for example, in the language.
The kind of realist views Diamond defends in her dispute with Winch are quite close to those represented by Hilary Putnam during the last 35 years or so of his philosophical life. During that span, Putnam pushed back hard against the kind of anti-realism inherent in the Carnapian view and what he sometimes referred to as the “tired pseudo-Wittgensteinian philosophy of language” he found typical of many verificationist interpreters of Wittgenstein, especially Norman Malcolm. In light of these connections, I want to begin my examination of Diamond’s arguments against Winch with a passage from a paper by Warren Goldfarb, where he is discussing Putnam’s attack on ideas that were central to the work of Carnap in the early 1930s, in particular Carnap’s defense of a principle of tolerance and its sanctioning of linguistic pluralism in *The Logical Syntax of Language.*

As Goldfarb has described it, the issue here concerns Putnam’s assertion that the principle of tolerance already presupposes the (to Putnam, at any rate, dubious) verification principle. If a prior commitment to verificationism (in Winch’s context this would be a use-theory of meaning) cannot be justified, then Carnap cannot easily deflect “external” questions about how “the world truly is” merely by appealing to tolerance. While not endorsing Carnap’s verificationism per se, Goldfarb seems to think that Putnam’s dismissal of it is a bit too quick. Goldfarb asks,

How would Carnap react to Putnam’s argument? In the argument, Putnam assumes that the notion of “The world as it truly is” is antecedently understood, so that Carnap needs to adduce powerful enough considerations to undercut it. In my view, though, Carnap would simply point out that the notion should not be assumed as understood, and is in fact rather unclear, so it would be best to start by clarifying it. There seems little way for Putnam to clarify it except by telling us what the world, as it truly is, is. That is, he will wind up giving us his theory of what the world is. Putnam’s argument then dwindles to an assertion (or a proposal) that a linguistic framework be deemed correct only if its rules include Putnam’s theory of the world. This is hardly an argument at all; it is just the outright rejection of Carnap’s pluralism.

Assuming for the moment that Putnam was correct in rejecting Carnap’s verificationism, then his rejection of the principle of tolerance and his commensurate suspicions of Carnap’s rejection of “external” questions concerning the meaning of terms outside of any linguistic framework may seem well motivated and natural. But, as I take Goldfarb to be bringing out, if we broaden our perspective from the narrow issue of verificationism per se to a much more ecumenical and non-theoretical understanding of linguistic practice, so that our view of meaning is informed by the close conceptual relation (even if not identification) between meaning and *use,*
then the sort of dogmatic tone that Goldfarb is bringing out in Putnam’s position vis-à-vis Carnap becomes far less attractive as a general view.

With Goldfarb’s point against Putnam in mind, we can return to Diamond’s criticisms of Winch by posing an issue in the following way: While it is unclear how Winch (or Carnap) can insist that no language can have the grammatical resources for engaging questions about ‘reality’ (or “the world as it truly is”) in a manner not already given internally by the grammar of the language itself, it seems equally unclear to me whether such questions are always appropriate, and so whether there is any non-dogmatic basis for insisting that every language must have such resources for asking them. Previously, we saw Diamond ask, “why should there have to be an ‘established universe of discourse’? Why can one not be making, giving articulation to, a kind of thought about reality in thinking about the conflict?” I am asking a different, perhaps symmetrical, question: what if one of those conflicting systems has no such resources for envisaging a conflict about reality outside its already established universe of discourse? In other words, what if there were cases where the logical space or spaces for resolving the conflict only came from one of the two conflicting systems (for example, ours)? Is that something we can rule out a priori? I think the idea that every discourse must be open to the sort of conflict under discussion here is just as murky as Winch’s insistence that no discourse can be. Is it legitimate, that is, simply to rule out the possibility of a grammar in which “reality” (and perhaps other terms like “truth”) only has meaning within the domain of the grammar itself? What if, in other words, there were “natural born Carnapians”, or better still, “natural born Winchians”? Judging by their indifferent reaction as described by Evans-Pritchard when he pointed out a contradiction in their system of magic, perhaps this is even an apt way to describe the Azande.

V

A

There are three points relating to the last section that I want to address before moving on. First, I have not made any specific demand that the reader imagine a group of language users who cannot extend their sense of reality based on the development of their own conceptual resources or through their encounters with other forms of life. My point has not been that any language, as a matter of logic, cannot so develop, but that it is dubious business to insist, as a matter of logic, that each one must be able to develop this way. How the anthropological and linguistic facts play out is of course another matter. In making this point, moreover, I am merely drawing some implications from what Diamond herself writes. As we have seen, she asks why there should have to be an ‘established
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universe of discourse' for the deployment of a concept like reality. This question seems to leave completely in place the coherence of the idea that while there might be such a practice, contra Winch and others, there doesn’t have to be. I have not felt particularly obligated so far to give a background story that describes what this might be like, precisely because my point here relies on an argument based on symmetry: if it is dogmatic to insist with Winch, that talk of reality always must be confined to an established domain of discourse, then it is equally dogmatic to insist that it never can be thus confined. If Diamond had wanted to argue that she found it impossible to imagine such a language, she could have written something very different from what she actually wrote.

B

Second, a critic might nevertheless object that the real point Diamond could or should have made is that the idea of grammar that my symmetry argument relies on, a grammar in which unlike our grammar there simply is no talk of reality and related concepts without an established universe of discourse, is absent more concrete detail or special explanation, not something we can really imagine. This objection might draw inspiration from a point made long ago by Stanley Cavell that projectability of words into new contexts is something internal to language, because the criteria by which we apply our concepts just have, qua criteria, this kind of openness to them. Another way to put this point would be to note with Cavell that criteria aren’t just self-applying in some general mechanical sense. There must be a specific context for the employment of a concept, and this requires a language user in the context who sees to it, and so must take responsibility, that the criteria connected to certain words are applied in that given context. Cavell’s wonderful example of the natural extension of the word “feed” from “feed the kitty” to “feed the parking meter” illustrates the point well. In short, someone could argue against my story thus far that the projectability of grammatical criteria is essential to language, and that my symmetry argument requires that we imagine language users for whom precisely such projectability is lacking.

In responding to this Cavellian criticism from ordinary language, I want first to note that if projectability of criteria is internal to a language, then insisting that the concepts of any language must have this feature makes as much sense as insisting that a triangle have three sides. If we are talking about a language at all, then the criteria governing the use of its concepts are projectable. More to the point, there is something potentially misleading in the critic’s use here of Cavell’s original example. The example of feeding the meter nicely shows what it means to say that criteria are not closed by showing how they can be projected into a novel context. But of course it is also true, for otherwise much of Cavell’s diagnosis of external world skepticism in the Claim of Reason falls away,
that everyday application of criteria governing everyday concepts also requires relevant projection; even in the most mundane of circumstances they are not self-applying. Even pointing at my cat and telling my son to “feed the kitty” requires such projection of criteria and uptake on both of our parts. Cavell’s diagnosis of skepticism relies on the idea that the skeptic’s claim to know the existence of a generic object lacks any specific context to make it coherent. There is no suggestion by him that providing such a context would require Descartes to describe unusual contextual features of his sitting in front of the fire. He just has to say *something* that would make it relevant for him to remark that he is holding a piece of wax. In effect, language users are condemned to projecting criteria in context all the time; some examples like “feeding the meter” just make this activity more apparent.

This makes it evident that the objection of my imagined critic is not really about projectability per se. It is about the actual projection of particular concepts by actual language users into particular kinds of new contexts. (One could equally characterize the dispute as being about certain facts being taken to stand in as representatives, schemata if you will, of the legitimate projection of certain concepts into these new contexts.) At any rate, projectability in a language per se and the actual projection of particular concepts into new situations are not the same. In the cases we are looking at here, not only will the ordinary language philosopher’s appeal to the question “what do we say when?” not be of much use, what “we” say and “when” is just what is at issue, in particular in light of there not being an obvious “we”. If therefore, there is no disagreement about the pertinence of the very notion of projectability for grammar, but only about its extent, we seem to have a dispute about the grammar of “grammar”. As we will see, symmetry considerations will come into play here as well.

As we have seen, there may be certain “new” contexts such as the logical spaces between two already existing grammars of which Diamond speaks, where one side finds itself ready to explore the projection or extension of its concepts pertaining to the nature of reality, but where members from the other group of language users do not accommodate such an investigation. Of course, it’s obvious that we ourselves don’t cotton on to just any projection of concepts; no one is claiming that criteria can be extended willy-nilly. How then should we describe cases where our own concepts are *not* extended? On some occasions, an attempt at a new use may be almost universally perceived as so wrongheaded that it just falls silently flat. Other times, perhaps in the case of “feeding the meter”, the new use immediately catches on. Still, in other cases, we end up in conflicts, where one side sees the point or correctness of the new use, while another side does not. (Such cases seem to be everywhere at the moment.) I think there is a strong temptation to describe such cases, especially but not only those concerning morals and politics, as
characterizable as cases in which the side for whom the new use does not seem natural is “withholding” its assent, where “withholding” is taken to refer to some sort of semi-conscious repression of something that, were it not for some inculcated shame, resentment, or bigotry, the extension might be gladly granted. Yet if, as Cavell made so forcefully clear many years ago, “voluntary” and “involuntary” present us with a misleading and inadequate set of options for thinking about action, so perhaps do “assenting” understood as projecting and “withholding” understood as “repressing” for thinking about extending grammar.29

A number of years ago Sabina Lovibond coined the term “transcendental parochialism” to denote an ideal state of affairs where a society’s critical resources for reform were fully extended, at their limits so to speak, yet where the language or discourse so arrived at would still be a recognizably human one. She contrasted this with what she called “empirical parochialism”, which she characterized in effect as the parochialism of repressive conservatism.30 One might wish that this pair of concepts could be of some help in the context of our current discussion about the nature of a possible extension of each of our two imagined group’s grammars into uncharted logical space. The idea could be that the side willing to explore the extension of its grammar into new logical spaces would be overcoming empirical parochialism and striving towards a more enlightened transcendental parochialism, while the other side would be seen as failing in such a task. Unless, however, one wants to take on what I regard as some fairly substantial metaphysical baggage about the nature of rationality, I don’t think this terminology gets us any further. If we are not just dealing here with a self-righteous and logically unmotivated call for permanent linguistic revolution, where the aim seems to be change for the sake of change, we might wonder how one ever knows whether one is being transcendentally parochial or merely empirically parochial. How, relatedly, does one determine that the other side is being empirically parochial? More to the present point, where comes the certainty in the kind of conflict we are envisaging, that either group is guilty of empirical parochialism, should the conflict about whether to explore the new logical space go unresolved? Maybe there could be any number of concrete conceptual logjams, stable configurations of unresolved conflicts consistent with neither side’s being guilty of “empirical parochialism”.

Is it always reasonable to suspect bigotry or ignorance if a group of speakers simply does not respond to a particular “invitation” to extend or change its practices? Does this always call for some special explanation or justification in terms of something like repression that accounts for their withholding an extension of their concepts? There is a difference between, on the one hand, making the merely abstract grammatical point that any given parochial view could, at least in theory, be extended at a particular point, and on the other hand, saying that people must always
push the limit at that point on pain of being an irrational reactionaries. Prima facie, someone or some peoples not projecting some of their concepts into new logical spaces no more needs a special explanation than does our willingness (or is it now an insistence?) on doing so. If this is true, then it may not always be clear whether lack of assent must be regarded as a failure or refusal to project one’s concepts into new logical spaces, so much as being regarded as something that just never seemed apt to some people. Naturally, language users may sometimes actively resist changes. And in such cases, there may well be some background story which explains what happens: some ethical or social sensitivity or hope or worry. But we don’t have to look at everything through the lenses of a Weltanschauung that seduces us into regarding every such case as a result of what some imagined clan of old, conservative elders forbids. Allowing the projection of criteria implicates us no less than preventing such projection implicates others. Both are equally signs of a value commitment. We may call the new space a result of an appropriate extension of the same grammar. They may not even have so much of an idea of this space. To insist on attributing bad faith to those who resist exploring new logical spaces, not to mention those to whom doing so doesn’t show up as a live option, is just political metaphysics. Grammar is embedded in practice, and without a practice, talking about what grammar per se calls for or doesn’t call for is useless. Others may not have our same practice(s) of extending particular concepts beyond certain uses. If someone were to ask whether, as a matter of logic, a group of language users must have this or that practice, how might one answer? It is very unclear that we have anything like a pre-given notion of what constellation of practices and concepts are necessary for a grammar to be “complete”. Wittgenstein writes at On Certainty §611 and §612,

Where two principles really do meet which cannot be reconciled with one another, then each man declares the other a fool and heretic.

I said I would ‘combat’ the other man, – but wouldn’t I give him reasons? Certainly; but how far do they go? At the end of reasons comes persuasion. (Think what happens when missionaries convert natives.)

These passages can be, and most likely have been, read as expressing a kind of relativist cum incommensurability thesis. As I made clear earlier in her discussion of Winch, I agree with Diamond that there are deep confusions with this type of view. Nor do I see any convincing reason for attributing such a view to Wittgenstein, based on these or any other passages. But more to the present point, these passages do not suggest that there is any kind of guarantee in the nature of things such that all empirical parochial views, or, even all transcendental parochial views, are
harmonizable, either into one big overarching transcendental parochial view or even into some more modest, transitional harmony. If anything, Wittgenstein’s mention of “persuasion” and his subsequent reference to what missionaries do does not strike me as though he was particularly sanguine about the idea that, whatever eventual harmony might arise between conflicting grammars or colliding forms of life, it must be necessarily describable as a transcendental parochial view arrived at through the *mutual exploration and articulation* of conceptual resources. The symmetry idea comes in here again with the following consideration: someone can indeed ask “why can’t there be a merging of empirical parochial views into a larger empirical parochial view and finally into something like Lovibond’s idea of a transcendental parochial view?” The answer is that there is nothing like a knock-down philosophical argument showing why this question is out of bounds. But someone may ask a different, symmetrical question: “Why **must** there be a harmonization of empirical parochial views, tending to a harmonized transcendental parochial view?” The answer here too is that there is nothing like a conclusive philosophical argument ruling this out as somehow illegitimate. In effect, we are back to my symmetry-based question about Diamond’s question about the nature of grammar and the contours of logical spaces between conflicting grammars. We seem to be at an impasse.

C

Third and finally, before I turn to some of the consequences of Diamond’s view, it is worth emphasizing that I don’t believe that her idea has to be read as entailing that grammars containing the resources for a logical space of conflict outside of themselves also contain the actual correctness of some particular view or set of views held *in spe* by those who speak a language with such a resourceful grammar. Rather, the grammars with such resources may be understood to contain the bare concept that some as yet unspecified view is correct. This is the idea of the sheer possibility of getting things right in a way not yet fully intelligible from within any of the discourses of the parties to a conflict. To arrive at some contentful view of what is in fact right, much more in the way of various sorts of practical and scientific resources from one (or both) of the conflicting discourses will have to be brought into the picture. So, in an important sense, I believe this concept of reality as being something to be worked out is basically formal and empty of content (or at least empty of any clear content). Individual claimants in a dispute might gain some solace from the logical possibility that their *currently* held view may resemble what turns out to be the right one at a later stage. In many cases, especially where something like their views have prevailed in a given conflict, it may even be reasonable for them to describe those views and their attendant concepts as always having been the right ones *all along* and thus to share a kind of organic lineage with prior established truths. But by itself the
grammatical feature whose possibility Diamond and Putnam are pointing to, while I believe intelligible, won’t support anything else in the way of specific concrete or empirical claims. The grammatical possibility may be important for maintaining a certain self-critical attitude towards epistemic practices, making clear that we can always do better, but the grammar doesn’t really add any empirical content to the view we arrive at in any given case. Once it is evident that the realism we are concerned with here amounts to a kind of regulative idea, in effect a formal feature of our grammar and perhaps the grammar of others, the insistence that “somewhere out there, there must be a way things really are” sounds more like the making manifest one’s commitment to a historico-grammatical artifact, however important this may be legally, ethically, or scientifically.

I thus take Diamond to have argued convincingly that such a grammatical artifact shows how criticism from “outside” can be entirely in logical order. But the considerations I have brought out in the last two paragraphs do, I believe, mean that such criticism may sometimes have a quite particular, even peculiar shape and will depend on some rather precarious facts. In what follows, I want to discuss two issues in particular that may arise when two sorts of grammars, one with the more “Putnamian” view of the “world as it truly is”, conflicts with the more “Winchian” or “Carnapian” view where that phrase only has a use within a framework.32 The first issue is mainly pragmatic, while the second involves some deep philosophical questions concerning the nature of intercultural conflict.

VI

In this section, I want to look briefly at two important consequences of Diamond’s arguments. The first is pragmatic, the second is ethical and historical. Diamond is correct to oppose the claim that the nature of reality can in all cases only be debated from within a given system of thought. Nevertheless, her argument leaves me uneasy in a certain pragmatic sense. I can sum up my sense of what I find unsatisfying by merely pointing out that her argument about what our grammar allows us to do in the way of criticism licenses a conflation of the observer and participant points of view in certain debates, making “us” as it were both judge and party to the same dispute. For many people, these are roles that other important practices that we hold strongly incline us to keep separate. Consider, in this light, the following scheme for visualizing the two situations:

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Case 1

Judge/Jury

Party A    vs.    Party B
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Case 1 is supposed to represent something like a normal trial or formal dispute in our culture, where judge/jury, Party A, and Party B are three different individuals or groups belonging to that culture. Case 2 is supposed to represent the sort of cross-cultural or trans-historical judgements with which Diamond and Winch are concerned. While my diagrams may strike one as vastly oversimplified in relation to our real world experience of conflict, I don’t believe that their formal structure fatally misrepresents how conflict can look in other contexts, especially ones concerning certain intercultural conflicts. In fact, given the relevance for cultural and social anthropology of the very recent colonial past, where colonial rulers routinely collapsed the observer and participant standpoints, Case 2 seems especially pertinent to the issues under discussion here.

I agree with Diamond that there is not some logical requirement that Party A in Case 2 fails to fulfill (though there could be an institutional one). And so, I think she is correct that we can’t just exclude the possibility of practices for making precisely these kinds of judgements. So, Party A’s judgements in Case 2 can be completely in order, which is to say, in Case 2, Party A can make judgements überhaupt about Party B’s view. But it is not surprising either, if people feel there is something fishy or unsatisfying with Case 2, precisely because there is something deeply embedded in our practices, even if not our logico-grammatical practices, that suggests the two roles that Case 2 collapses ought rather to be kept separate as an ideal of objectivity. I feel sure Diamond is aware of this, but I believe nevertheless that it is worth underlining that while Case 2 is coherent, it also is different from Case 1, and its logical coherence does not erase that difference. Consequently, regardless of how Party A comports himself or herself in relation to Party B, there is an implicit paternalism in Case 2 that is somehow less than satisfying, even though not incoherent.

The second issue concerns what I believe to be a more philosophically interesting and to some degree neglected point, both in Diamond’s discussion and in the literature generally. It seems to follow that if we cannot rule out grammars of both types, one grammar that allows for the bare notion of “reality” having a use outside of its own already articulated conception, and another type without such a notion, or at least with a much more restricted notion, then we are led to the idea that the feature of the grammar of Party A that makes criticism from outside intelligible is not a given, but rather has a contingent dimension to it. Such a grammar can be regarded as a sort of historical achievement. This fact, in turn, would suggest that there is not likely to be any stand-alone argument showing that the grammar with the feature that makes criticism from
outside or exploration of new logical spaces intelligible is, or ought to be, immune to change. This does not imply of course that once we realize the historical contingency of our grammar’s containing things like the “concept of an object as independent of that concept”, we could simply shake ourselves loose of this concept through an act of will, even if for some reason we found ourselves wishing to do so. To say that a feature of our grammar is historical or conventional is not to say that it is arbitrary or easily dropped. Things are much more complicated than that. But like any other concept or feature of a grammar, this one must be articulated and thus supported in practices if it is to remain available to us. And this fact about the historical embeddedness of grammar can raise, in turn, the normative question as to whether this feature is worthy of that continued support. That is to say, the very fact of the existence of a feature of a grammar can’t by itself be used in any non-circular way to justify our continued reliance on that very same feature. In our present context, this does not imply, however, that no defense at all can be articulated of the value of the idea of reality conceived as independent of any discourse. Our practices make this kind of internal argument available to us as well. For example, Diamond makes clear that in the case of witchcraft and witches, more is at stake than questions of reality and possibility. How we think about those questions may have serious ethical consequences, which, while not exactly providing our ontology with an “external” justification, do suggest the difficulties involved with the view that a choice of what to take as real is somehow arbitrary. She writes,

When we are confronted by contemporary systems of thought and practice involving the identification and punishment of supposed witches in Africa, Saudi Arabia and elsewhere, we may indeed reject these systems as appalling, but we may also take it that they involve hideous injustice to vulnerable people who are punished for doing occult harm, where the accusations and punishment depend on a system of false beliefs about what human agents can do and what can constitute good evidence of what they have done. Our thought about our own and other people’s systems of thought and practice, and our rejections of such systems, are not isolated from judgements of injustice; and our judgements of what is just and what is unjust may be connected with judgements about whether people are capable of having done what they are accused of doing and with judgements about the methods of supposedly establishing that they have done what they are accused of doing.33

Anyone appalled at the injustice involved in these practices of punishing innocent individuals, who nevertheless claimed that these powerful considerations had no bearing on what to think about reality, would likely be engaged in a form of self-deception. The question is whether these
considerations having to do with reality, truth, and justice settle the matter. Is there anything profound remaining for philosophy to say?  

Notes

4. Although for the purposes of my discussion I do not distinguish magic, witchcraft, and the use of oracles, I don’t believe that this has any serious philosophical consequences.
5. Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft*, 3. In fact, Evans-Pritchard claims to have found a second contradiction, or near contradiction, in the following Zande ideas. Since all death is due to witchcraft, and therefore not by vengeance magic, knowing the names of victims of vengeance magic would make the latter activity futile, because it would mean that such victims were both the victims of magic and witchcraft. Most people are of course not privy to the names of victims of vengeance, so for them the contradiction is not apparent. However, princes are thought to know such details. When Evans-Pritchard pointed this out to a prince, “he smiled and admitted that all was not well with the present-day witchcraft system”. Ibid., 5–7.
9. Ibid., 43.
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15. Ibid. (emphasis in original). Diamond’s and Elizabeth Anscombe’s ways of reading Wittgenstein, especially some of his remarks in On Certainty, are very much in the background of her discussion, and so I will leave them mostly in the background for my own discussion. The remarks from On Certainty she refers to in particular are §147 and § 608–12. She gives them a more realist inflection than I think they bear in context.
18. Because it is not a given that everyone agrees with Diamond’s reading of Winch’s work, I should make it clear that for the purpose of my argument here I am simply assuming the correctness of her interpretation.
26. I am grateful to Reshef Agam-Segal for raising the question addressed here.
28. My use of “symmetry” here borrows from and is meant to allude to Diamond’s discussion of a dispute between David Wiggins and Bernard Williams about the conditions for ethical judgement, in particular in making judgements concerning slavery. See “Truth in Ethics: Williams and Wiggins,” in her Reading Wittgenstein with Anscombe, Going on to Ethics (Cambridge:
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Harvard University Press, 2019). I make so presumption, however, that Diamond would sanction my use of the idea of symmetry here.


32. In “Criticising from ‘Outside’” Diamond’s arguments against Winch and Dilman are made from a position she describes as “Anscombian”. I believe Diamond’s Anscombian position is very close to what here I am referring to as “Putnamian” and that this is borne out by the way Putnam’s and Anscomb’s views intertwine in “Putnam and Wittgensteinian Baby-Throwing”. See Introduction, note 10 for reference.

33. “Criticising from ‘Outside’,” 124. In “Truth: Defenders, Debunkers, Despisers”, Diamond argues against Richard Rorty’s epistemological behaviorism by recounting the way in which Primo Levi’s training as a pharmaceutical chemist, and his believing in the objective truth of the periodic table of the elements, was crucial for his spiritual and psychological survival in Nazi concentration camps. Diamond brings out well the significance which this knowledge of an independent objective truth had for Levi during his experience with the worst consequences of Nazi lies. See “Truth: Defenders, Debunkers, Despisers,” in Commitment in Reflection, ed. Leona Toker (New York: Garland, 1994), 195–222. In defense of Rorty, it’s worth pointing out that, to my knowledge at least, he never suggests that our best epistemic practices amount to accepting whatever the political authorities say, and in any case the Nazis were a long way from adhering to these practices. And of course, we should recall that this historical example of the value of what I have called a grammatical artifact, in this case concerning “truth” instead of “reality”, does not by itself provide any empirical content. What we call “truth” in any given case is closely connected to what we are going to agree upon after taking account of our (hopefully) best epistemic practices, and this will surely capture, extensionally at least, Levi’s periodic table. Unless we believe in the idea of a finished science and that chemistry was already one of them during the Second World War, we will have to agree that Levi’s belief in the truth of the periodic table was at most in line with the best epistemic practices of his time.

34. On the question of religious truth, see the Appendix.