LANGUAGE LOST AND FOUND

On Iris Murdoch and the Limits of Philosophical Discourse

NIKLAS FORSBERG

BLOOMSBURY
5

What is it Like to Be a Corpse?

Diamond, Coetzee and the Awareness of a Language Lost

‘Do you really believe, Mother, that poetry classes are going to close down the slaughter houses?’
‘No.’

5.1 Introduction: Running out of arguments?

Contrary to the received view of Murdoch’s authorship as a whole, I have argued that we should take her quite seriously when she tells us that we must not think that she employs literature to convey her philosophy. This does not mean that there are ‘two Murdochs’ – one who claims that literature is not philosophy and another one who claims that art and moral (and so literature and philosophy) have the same essence. Murdoch was happy in the quarrel between philosophy and literature, and I have tried to show that this kind of contentment is something we should try to embrace. These views of hers have guided my reading of The Black Prince. It is possible to read that novel as having a standing on its own even though we, readers familiar with her philosophy, may find it hard not to see parallels. The philosophical views we find expressed in the novel are Bradley Pearsons, not Murdoch’s; and the philosophical work that this novel does, depends on us noticing that. Her novels may be philosophically significant, do philosophy on their own, just like any novel may.

The only way in which ‘her philosophy’ shines through is in the sense that an author’s ‘Weltanschauung’ necessarily shines through. A novelist holds a mirror and the way she points it will say something about her. But what is shown in the mirror cannot be revealed by means of linking its world to doctrines and theories that the author adheres to in philosophy. This means, I take it, that her view of our times, of how the human being understands herself today, will ‘shine through’ but this is not

something she argues. In fact, this is something that is very hard to argue at all. There is a level at which argumentation fails us. 'If . . . we hold that a man's morality is not only his choices but his vision, then this may be deep, ramified, hard to change and not easily open to argument.' That we at times run out of arguments means something, and Murdoch can help us see that these moments may be the most significant ones for philosophy, for here, it may seem as if our resources have run out. At the level of vision, that which precedes and forms the ground for our rational judgements and choices, argument may have little effect. This is so not merely because ‘arguments’ tend to be specific (whereas one’s moral vision of herself, her times and her future is something muddled and may even be unclear to herself), but also because we may encounter cases where we do not know what it would mean to argue. This is, one might say, where literature comes in. In being a self-sufficient whole that can picture a particular kind of life it may show us how concepts are inflected (unknowingly or not) in this kind of life. This does not mean that philosophy should become literature or that philosophers must become literary artists, but that philosophers must be open to the eventual challenges to our conceptual certainties that literature may bring. Frame philosophy and philosophy dies (or becomes a new science). If truth as truthfulness ‘is a matter of deepening the concepts,’ and if, ‘“[b]ecoming better” is a process involving exercise and refinement of moral vocabulary and sensitivity’ then we need a life-long exercise in learning language and seeing connections. This is something we get from literature (among other places). ‘This does not of course imply abandoning the linguistic method, it rather implies taking it seriously.’

It is easy, or at least tempting, in philosophy to bypass as irrelevant the ground on which our judgements rest (since they belong to our field of vision rather than our true and justified beliefs). In that respect, philosophical judgements and theories often involve some kind of deflection from our ordinary lives with each other and a rejection of the sense of language through which we think, speak and live. In fact, we may, just as Bradley does, use such theories in order to not face reality. But the thought that theorization may be what blocks our path to philosophical clarity is a thought hard to earn.

Here, Diamond’s and Cavell’s works are helpful. The remainder of this chapter is an attempt to think further about these themes in dialogue with Diamond’s reading of Coetzee’s Elisabeth Costello. Four Murdochian themes are seen in variation here. (i) The idea that there’s register of the human life in language that may not be open to argument. (ii) That real life problems and difficulties often take on a distorted form as they ‘become philosophy.’ (iii) How a loss of one’s concepts is not something that can be reduced to a historical ‘progression’ but depends on our lives in language, on our attitude to our words and that the fall from community may be done ‘intentionally’ as it were. (iv) That the philosophical significance of a novel cannot be reduced, or explained, by the presence of ‘philosophical sentences’ in it.

---

2 Murdoch, ‘Vision and Choice in Morality,’ 84.
4 Murdoch, ‘Vision and Choice in Morality,’ 84.
5.2 Costello’s speechlessness and Diamond’s concerns

In his introduction to *Philosophy and Animal Life* – a small book containing Diamond’s startling paper ‘The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy’ and part of the bow-waves of commentaries that it occasioned – Cary Wolfe claims that ‘there is the suggestion in Diamond, I think, that imaginative and literary projection can somehow achieve this instance what propositional, syllogistic philosophy cannot achieve (the nonconceptual, nonlogical force of “I know what it’s like to be a corpse”).’

In making this claim, Wolfe points to a recurring thought in discussions concerning the relationship between philosophy and literature: There is something that philosophy cannot do – at least not in the form of linear argumentation, of ordinary propositional or syllogistic reasoning – that literature somehow manages to do. The question is, of course, what it is that literature manages to say and/or do that resists philosophical expression, and what it is with philosophical and literary language use respectively that endows these traditions of thought with their respective (but not converging) powers? Can literature really teach us what it is like to be a corpse? And if it can, then how? And how come philosophy cannot? Is literature really a ‘nonconceptual place’ where reason can grow – if indeed, we can achieve a clear conception of a non-conceptual place? And can it grow to such a point that we can come to know what it is like to be a corpse – if indeed, there is something that counts as knowing what it is like to be a corpse?

Even though it may be right to say that much contemporary philosophy has a rather narrow conception of ‘argumentation,’ there is something in the claim that ‘imaginative and literary projection can somehow achieve this instance what propositional, syllogistic philosophy cannot achieve’ that troubles me. Wolfe’s line of thinking runs the risk of turning literature’s philosophical importance into a stand-in for, or back-up to, philosophical discourse, thus blocking the task of trying to become clear about what’s wrong with the idea that everything of philosophical significance can be framed in a proposition and properly attended to by linear reasoning. Alternatively, it runs the risk of mystifying literature. For if indeed literature can teach us what it is like to be a corpse, it is beyond extraordinary – managing to speak, literally, from the other side.

The phrase ‘I know what it is like to be a corpse’ is Elisabeth Costello’s. She is not real, and that matters. When I say that she is not real, I merely mean that she is a fictional character – not that what she says is not true, and not that her life cannot fruitfully be seen as picturing our reality in a striking and highly informative way. But the fact that Costello is a fictional character signals that there is a gap in Wolfe’s saying that needs to be, first, made clear, and secondly, bridged (if possible).

The fact that Costello knows – or claims to know – what it is like to be a corpse gives us no reason to assume that anyone who reads Coetzee’s novel *Elisabeth Costello* comes to know that. This thought strikes her occasionally, constituting a confrontation with

---

6 Coetzee, *Elisabeth Costello*, 76f.
a very real and pressing reality. Costello’s ‘knowing’ is indeed very uncertain. ‘For an
instant, before my whole structure of knowledge collapses in panic, I am alive in that
contradiction, dead and alive at the same time.’

Costello claims that poetry is capable of enlarging our imagination so that we can
picture the embodied being of the other in a way that abstract arguments about the
mind of the other cannot do, but that does not necessarily mean that poetry can teach
us to cognize beyond demise. The force of poetry that Costello cherishes is its power
to embody rather than describe the animal. She calls attention to a kind of poetry
‘that does not try to find an idea in the animal, that is not about the animal, but is
instead a record of an engagement with him.’ In the poetry she favours she claims that
even the poet finds himself ‘entranced and horrified and overwhelmed, his powers of
understanding pushed beyond their limit.’

So to the extent that Costello claims to know what it is like to be a corpse, it is
in brief moments when she is alive in a contradiction. Furthermore, to the extent
poetry can portray the embodied life of the other, the animal, it is beyond the limits
of understanding – even the poets own understanding. What kind of knowledge is to
be gained here? Must we not suspect that the concept of knowing is stretched here? Is
there a knowing that can be transmitted from the one to the other here (in whatever
form)? ‘Knowledge’ is and must be, as all other concepts are, elastic. But elasticity must
come to an end somewhere. Even rubber bands break at some point. Otherwise, there
would not be much sense to her feeling of being alive in a contradiction.

Costello does not say that it is by reading literature that she became able to imagine
what it is like to be a corpse. This kind of imagining is possible to all. ‘That is the
kind of thought we are capable of, we human beings, that and even more, if we press
ourselves or are pressed.’ Costello’s claim is about human imagination, not about the
powers of literary language use. As I see it, the question that a reading of Coetzee’s
novel Elisabeth Costello should pose to philosophy is not ‘Can literature make us think
the unthinkable?’ but, rather, ‘If this is an adequate description of human imagination,
can we see it in philosophy, or is it denied there, rejected; and if so, then, why?’

Thus, it would be a mistake to think that the issue is a competition between two
propositions (one true, the other one not):

a. Philosophy can teach us what it is like to be a corpse.

b. Literature (but not philosophy) can teach us what it is like to be a corpse.

Both these claims harbour the idea that there is a specific something which constitutes
knowing what it is like to be a corpse. The fact of the matter is already settled and all
that remains to debate are questions of pedagogy. One form of textual strategy can
represent and communicate the fact of the matter adequately, while the other one can’t.
But is the question at hand really a question of a fact of the matter? And is the question

7 Ibid., 77.
8 Ibid., 96.
9 Ibid., 95.
10 Ibid., 77.
of the fact of the matter really a question independent of, preceding, the question of the form?

Wolfe talks about a ‘nonconceptual, nonlogical force’ of “I know what it’s like to be a corpse.” An emphasis on the word ‘force’ points to what’s right in Wolfe’s thought here. But, the acknowledgement of such a force does not necessarily come to a ‘knowing what it is like.’ To say that we can see the force of a claim is, for example, to say that we can come to see how such a claim can, or might, fit into a certain form of life, or how it can affect us in different ways. We might, for example, be stunned by bewilderment, struck by a newly achieved clarity, knocked out of our seats, find ourselves angry with the bluntness of the contradiction, etc. The reality of the other can make our own certainties less certain. But the recognition of that life of the other does not entail that I know what such a life, as it were, feels like. ‘I know what it is like to be a corpse’ is not a pair of shoes that we can try on.

This means that there is something confused in Wolfe’s discussion since he, first, claims that ‘Diamond affirms Costello’s assertion “I know what it is like to be a corpse’,” and, second, applies Derrida’s philosophy as constituting a countering position holding that no one, but the other, knows what it is like to be a corpse. But does not this mean that Wolfe has removed whatever nonlogical force there was in a woman claiming to know something exceptionally peculiar and re-inscribed her saying in a debate about two alternative propositions (with supposedly clear meanings), thus performing the very manoeuvre he sought to reject?

I am less certain about the sense of these claims than Wolfe seems to be. I feel inclined to say that whatever force there is in such a claim comes from a sense of loss of sense – that what drives a person to say such a thing as ‘I know what it is like to be a corpse’ comes from a reality that rushes upon her, uncontrolled, hitting her as it were, and forces her to make claims about the world for which she has no reason. Yet, these sayings might matter immensely.

I think Wolfe would agree with me here, at least up to a point, since he notes that the difficulties under discussion in Diamond’s paper concern problems which cannot be dissolved or overcome by ever-more ingenious or accomplished propositional arguments, ever-more refined philosophical concepts. In my view, the thought that Wolfe expresses here, is yet to be appropriated by him. Wolf rightly claims that what Diamond highlights are cases where reality confronts us by either making our claims about it impossible or blunt or bland or platitudinous, or by making us entirely speechless – and that these confrontations often run far deeper than any ordinary philosophical argument can ever do. But as soon as he starts to talk about what it is that the world confronts us with, he re-inscribes that experience into institutionalized philosophical argumentation. The problem is that if we wish to say that the philosophical thrust of literature depends on the philosopher letting literature speak for itself, then the philosophical incorporation of literature in philosophical discourse will always be

---

12 Ibid. (Italics added).
13 Ibid., 5f.
problematic, since a philosopher speaking or writing about literature is in one sense not speaking on literature’s behalf. There is always a philosophical setting loitering somewhere in the background, which cannot, and should not, be circumvented.

Diamond’s main concern is the pressing fact that we do encounter a reality which we cannot think (clearly about). Her first example is that of a poem of Ted Hughes’ which describes a photograph of six vital young smiling men, killed within six months after the picture was taken. This picture can be seen as representing both vitality and death in one single snapshot. Diamond starts off with a discussion of this example since it highlights: ‘the experience of the mind’s not being able to encompass something which it encounters. It is capable of making one go mad to try, to bring together in thought what cannot be thought: the impossibility of anyone’s being more alive than these smiling men, nothing being more dead.’

The fact that reality, at times, does confront us with facts which render us speechless, is what Diamond calls ‘the difficulty of reality’: ‘experiences in which we take something in reality to be resistant to our thinking it, or possibly to be painful in its inexplicability, difficult in that way, or perhaps awesome and astonishing in its inexplicability.’ The fact that we do recognize segments of reality as resisting expression still doesn’t prevent us from trying to express that which we deem inexpressible; it still doesn’t prevent us from trying to think that which we claim to be unthinkable. But this urge to think the unthinkable is not inevitable and neither is it evident that we must think of ‘it’ as unthinkable.

It’s a photo of men who died young, not long after the picture was taken. Where is the contradiction?—Taking the picture that way, there’s no problem about our concepts being adequate to describe it. Again, one might think of how one would teach a child who had been shown a photo and told it was a photo of her grandfather, whom she knows to be dead. If she asks, “Why is he smiling if he’s dead?,” she might be told that he was smiling when the picture was taken, because he wasn’t dead then, and that he died later. The child is being taught the language-game, being shown how her problem disappears as she comes to see how things are spoken of in the game. The point of view from which she sees a problem is not yet in the game; while that from which the horrible contradiction impresses itself on the poet-speaker is that of someone who can no longer speak within the game. Language is shouldered out from the game, as the body from its instant and heat.

The ‘difficulty of reality’ that ‘impresses itself on the poet-speaker’ has a few characteristics that make it philosophically interesting. There’s a difference between the

---


15 Ibid., 45f.

16 Ibid., 45.
child and the ‘poet-speaker’: the child is ‘not yet in the game’ whereas the poet-speaker is ‘someone who can no longer speak within the game.’ This means that one might say that ‘the difficulty of reality’ has its beginning in a loss of language (earlier attained and appropriated). One might also say that this beginning pictures the one ‘shouldered out from language’ as deflecting from, or repudiating, the ordinary. A particular ‘difficulty of reality’ is not necessarily everyone’s difficulty.

If this loss of language is a crucial element of the difficulty of reality, it should be evident that this loss of language, more often than not, goes unnoticed, since we should assume that the one struck by a difficulty of reality is a ‘competent speaker’ of the language in question. We must assume that the person in question knows how to speak in the game, knows that his or her words usually make sense, and that there is no evident reason why they should no longer do so. It is the feeling of ‘I know all the words, and their place in the sentence is OK, and I am in familiar surroundings and the words do not seem to be misplaced here. Yet something is not right: the words no longer carry their weight.’ It is no surprise that we find it hard to acknowledge that we do not mean what we mean, that we fail to mean what our words mean since we (think we) know our language. This is a reason why it is hard, very hard, to notice that one’s language is idling.  

Diamond’s description of the difficulty of reality resembles the opening words of Kant’s first Critique: ‘Human reason has this peculiar fate that in one species of its knowledge it is burdened by questions which, as prescribed by the very nature of reason itself, it is not able to ignore, but which, as transcending all its powers, it is also not able to answer.’ Thus, one might think that we at this point have both difficulties – that of reality and that of philosophy – in play already. But it is not entirely clear that Diamond thinks so. At a much later stage of her paper, Diamond introduces the opposing difficulty, that of ‘philosophy.’ But in her description of that difficulty, the profundity and intensity of the problems we might have with a difficulty of reality are surprisingly absent. A difficulty of philosophy is, in Diamond’s description, something we encounter only in philosophy departments, where we ‘learn how to discuss hard problems, what constitutes a good argument, what is distorted by emotion, when we are making assertions without backing them up.’ Diamond initially separates her two difficulties and this is a problematic aspect of her essay, for it invites misunderstandings and may seem to force Diamond to think ‘un-Diamondian’ thoughts. Her thinking as a whole is not, in my view, leading her in that direction. (I will return to this.)

I think it is pivotal to recognize that this intolerable breakdown of reasoning – the sense of a language lost – is Diamond’s primary concern. The human/animal relation is approached by means of a long reflection on a very striking and convincing picture of a woman who is indeed haunted by this very ‘Kantian’ breakdown. This picture is Coetzee’s novel. In that novel, Elisabeth Costello is facing a reality that confronts her with questions or concerns that she indubitably is, to speak with Kant, ‘unable

---

18 Kant, Critique of Pure Reason, 7.
to ignore’ but that she feels she ‘is not able to answer.’ Her inability is not due to a
deficient intellectual capacity or a lack of information. In fact, she claims that we all
know the horrors of the meat industry, but we do nothing about it. Nor does she lack a
philosophical language to speak about the intellectual difficulty.

When I say that she does not lack such a language, this is only true with some
reservations. Costello claims to be searching for ‘a way of speaking which is cool
rather than heated, philosophical rather than polemical.’ This is the language
that she claims to have at her disposal, the language of Aristotle and Porphyro, of
Augustine and Aquinas, of Descartes and Bentham, of, in our day, Mary Midgley and
Tom Reagan. Clearly, Costello knows how to speak ‘philosophy.’ So she wants a cool
and philosophical language, but she already knows such a language – so what is she
searching for? Well, to begin with, this passage occurs at a place in the story at which
Costello has most clearly failed to be cool rather than heated. She has just compared
meat factories with the Holocaust and she feels that she has crossed the line. (‘Pardon
me. I repeat. This is the last cheap point I will be scoring.’) Thus, even though she
knows a cool language, she does not think that this ‘language’ offers the right kind of
coolness. Furthermore, she is invited as a novelist to give a public lecture and a seminar
for literature students. She feels that this is not the place to rehearse philosophical
theories. In fact, it is not clear that she thinks much is to be gained by repeating
philosophical arguments. Indeed, her view is that the very idea of treating matters
such as these in a purely abstract way distorts the reality and neglects the gravity of
the subject. Arguments about the pros and cons of various philosophical theories are
precisely the ‘cheap point-scoring’ that she wants to move away from. Costello is also
very hesitant about the powers of philosophy’s precious ‘reason.’ Though not in line
with Kant’s view, but still within a Kantian idiom, she claims that ‘reason looks to me
suspiciously like the being of human thought; worse than that, like the being of one
tendency in human thought.’

Diamond concentrates on Elisabeth Costello’s description of herself as a ‘wounded
animal.’ Costello is a person who feels that the way we treat animals is utterly and
truly horrific, and she feels alone in thinking so. She is surrounded by scholars
approaching her horrors in a detached manner, as if nothing was at stake at all. Her
fellow humans, family, friends and foes, all treat her horrors ‘as the mere accepted
background of life.’ There is no point in arguing – her sense of horror is beyond
reach, and she knows it.

“It’s that I no longer know where I am. I seem to move around perfectly easy
among people, to have perfectly normal relations with them. Is it possible, I ask

20 Coetzee, Elisabeth Costello, 66.
21 Ibid.
22 Ibid.
23 Ibid.
24 Ibid., 67.
26 Ibid., 47.
myself, that all of them are participants of a crime of stupefying proportions? Am I fantasizing it all? I must be mad! Yet every day I see the evidences. The very people I suspect produce the evidence, exhibit it, offer it to me. Corpses. Fragments of corpses that they have bought for money.”

“Yet I’m not dreaming. I look into your eyes, into Norma’s, into the children’s, and I see only kindness, human kindness. Calm down, I tell myself, you are making a mountain out of a molehill. This is life. Everyone else comes to terms with it, why can’t you? Why can’t you?”

Costello is portrayed as far from confident, well aware of the fact that she is the odd figure. Indeed, she calls her own sanity into question. Since Costello is the one who can no longer partake in the form of life that surrounds her – is hers, was, at least, hers – she is the one whose words seem to be hard to fill with sense. Where the rest of the world says ‘Yummy!’ she cries ‘corpses!’ It is the sense of her words that are in question – they seem so outrageous that they are best spoken into a pillow or into a hole in the ground, like King Midas.” If there is a language lost here, it is Costello’s. She is not at home in her language, in her form of life. Costello and her opponents cannot really be said to be talking ‘the same language,’ and so there is not enough agreement to make argumentation successful. On that note: any reader who merely takes Coetzee’s novel to be a set of philosophical arguments presented in a literary setting, misrepresents the book and partakes in the very activity that the book as a whole rebukes: the idea that our moral lives with animals is a question that could be settled by means of philosophical argumentation (which is not to say that philosophical argumentation is of no use at all). On this point, Diamond’s reading departs from earlier attempts to appropriate the philosophical significance of Elisabeth Costello’s lectures.

A clear contrast can be drawn between the commentators we find in The Lives of Animals and Diamond. Even though some of them find it hard to know who they really are arguing with (Coetzee or Costello), they all lean towards treating Costello’s lectures as a set of philosophical arguments presented in a literary setting, misrepresents the book and partakes in the very activity that the book as a whole rebukes: the idea that our moral lives with animals is a question that could be settled by means of philosophical argumentation (which is not to say that philosophical argumentation is of no use at all). On this point, Diamond’s reading departs from earlier attempts to appropriate the philosophical significance of Elisabeth Costello’s lectures.

Moments when philosophy calls upon literature are always problematic, especially if the literature in question has some obvious links to philosophical discourse, or if it, at least seemingly, partakes in an ongoing debate. In such cases it is, I believe, easy to avoid thinking about the fact that it is literature and not philosophy that we are

27 Coetzee, Elisabeth Costello, 114f.
28 Ibid., 114.
confronted with. After all, there is a ‘position’ there, regardless of who its author is! Right?

Of course, Coetzee’s lectures might indeed be intended to grapple with that ethical issue; but since he has a character in the story he tells, for whom it is as problematic to treat this supposed “issue” as an “ethical issue” for serious discussion as it is problematic to treat Holocaust denial as an issue for serious discussion, one can hardly, I think, take for granted that the lectures can be read as concerned with that “issue,” and as providing arguments bearing on it. If we see in the lectures a wounded woman, one thing that wounds her is precisely the common and taken-for-granted mode of thought that “how we treat animals” is an “ethical issue,” and the knowledge that she will be taken to be contributing, or intending to contribute, to discussion of it.31

If we see the novel more as a picture of a woman who can’t come to grips with her surrounding world than about Coetzee presenting arguments in disguise; then, what we get is a picture of how a particular form of life looks, and of how that form of life is at odds with contemporary culture at large. Instead of being a contribution to an ongoing philosophical debate, the book is a criticism of the intellectual climate of which the philosophical debate is an expression. For one important aspect of our cultural climate is that we tend to treat our moral lives as something that can be properly and fully attended to with mere rational reasoning – with argumentative philosophy. This, however, is precisely the orientation of thought that Costello can be seen as challenging.32

5.3 The exemplary bat

Let us now turn to how Costello engages with Nagel’s classical paper:

Merely to imagine what it is like to live as a bat does, says Mr. Nagel – to imagine spending our nights flying around catching insects in our mouths, navigating by sound instead of sight, and our days hanging upside down – is not good enough, because all that tells us is what it would be like to behave like a bat. Whereas what we really aspire to know is what it is like to be a bat; and that can never be accomplished because our minds are inadequate to the task – our minds are not bats’ minds.33

Diamond claims that Costello does not want to partake in the philosophical argumentation. But what is this reference to Nagel then doing here? It seems evident that Costello is arguing with Nagel. But argumentation comes in many forms and there

31 Ibid., 51.
32 Ibid., 52.
33 Coetzee, Elisabeth Costello, 76.
are at least two ways in which Costello refrains from arguing with Nagel. First, she
denies that knowledge must take the form it does in Nagel's argumentation. Secondly,
she transforms Nagel's thought-experiment by twisting it, employing it for other
purposes than Nagel intended.

Nagel places certain restrictions on the phrase ‘knowing what it is like’ that Costello
distances herself from. This ‘rejection’ can be seen if we attend to the fact that even
Nagel claims that it is possible (albeit very difficult) to imagine what it would be like
to be a bat in the sense that he can imagine himself orienting with radar, eating insects
and hanging upside down in a cave during day time. But this is not enough for Nagel.
‘In so far as I can imagine this (which is not very far), it tells me only what it would
be like for me to behave as bats behaves. But that is not the question. I want to know
what it is like for a bat to be a bat. Yet, if I try to imagine this, I am restricted to the
resources of my own mind, and those resources are inadequate for the task.’
Nagel's argumentation depends on a recognition of the importance of embodiment. He decided
to go with bats ‘instead of wasps or flounders because if one travels too far down the
phylogenetic tree, people gradually shed their faith that there is experience there at all.’
‘Knowing what it is like' requires, in his view, embodied recognition, a similarity
of sensory organs, so bats were chosen because they are bodily different from us but
not different enough to disable our imagination of what that kind of embodied life is
like. But Nagel is concerned with refuting materialism, so he needs to downplay that
sense of embodiment. A sympathetic sense embodied bat-life is precisely the life of the
other that Nagel does not want to know. Embodiment is introduced as indispensable,
only to be denied.

Costello focuses on the imaginative powers that Nagel actually had (but felt obliged
to deny). One of the most important formulations here is when Costello says: ‘I know
that Nagel is only using bats and Martians as aids in order to pose questions of his own
about the nature of consciousness. But like most writers, I have a literal cast of mind, so
I would like to stop with the bat.’ In saying so, Costello removes Nagel's bat from the
context of philosophy of mind, sidesteps its designed function as a counterargument
to materialism, and rebukes the philosophical function of the thought-experiment.
She, as a writer, has ‘a literal cast of mind,’ and so the fictionality of the philosophical
thought-experiment – the fact that it is designed for a particular purpose – is denied.
She wants to focus on the real imaginative powers of the human that the idea of a
thought-experiment only incorporates as a minor detail. Here we can see, in a fictive
setting, how the philosophical function of narrative literature cannot be reduced
to fiction being, as Mulhall describes it, ‘a container for philosophical arguments.’
Thought-experiments are often 'explicitly designed so as to strip away the complexity
and detail of real-life situations, in order to isolate a specific theoretical issue in as stark
and plain manner as possible.'

35 Ibid., 438.
36 Coetzee, Elisabeth Costello, 76.
37 Mulhall, The Wounded Animal, 22.
38 Ibid., 24.
Costello does not enter into a dialogue with Nagel precisely because she does not want to ‘strip away the complexity and detail of real-life situations.’ She wants to highlight the imagination that Nagel’s mind actually was able to create (if only to deny), thus suggesting that the philosophical separateness between individuals, the human and her other (be it another human or an animal), depends upon a deflection from a more original community.

Here it is possible to see how Coetzee’s *Elisabeth Costello* may have philosophical significance precisely because it is not a piece of philosophy, precisely because it does not really engage in ongoing discussions of the human/animal relation or the debates about which theory of consciousness is the better. By picturing a woman who denies a crucial step that the philosophical debate requires, Coetzee can be employed as showing us that this step has been taken and that it is problematical. Something happens when something of blood and heart is removed from its natural surrounding and turned into a representation of a ‘position’ in a philosophical debate. Nagel is exemplary precisely because he seems to be denying his own imagination, more or less deliberately, for the ‘benefit’ of philosophical clarity. This is a kind of deflection that so much philosophy depends upon.

Furthermore, Costello does not have set of arguments that run ‘We shouldn’t be cruel to animals, because . . .’ Costello can thus be seen as making an implicit claim: we misrepresent our moral lives if we focus too much on this ‘because.’ Such thinking invites us to make lists of properties or capacities which are then put to use in order to warrant that ‘because.’ But Costello’s sense of horror and her vegetarianism is not a ‘stance’ that she has taken for a number of ‘reasons.’ In a sense, she does not have the ‘belief’ that vegetarianism is right. Her ‘convictions’ run far deeper than that. In fact, the way we treat animals is incomprehensible to her, our cruelty inexpressible. We are pushed into regions of vision rather than one of affirmations or negations of propositions.

“But your own vegetarianism, Mrs. Costello,” says President Garrard, pouring oil on troubled waters: “it comes out of moral conviction, does it not?”

“No, I don’t think so,” says his mother. “It comes out of a desire to save my soul.”

Now there truly is a silence, broken only by the clink of plates as the waitresses set baked Alaskas before them.

“Well, I have great respect for it,” says Garrard. “As a way of life.”

“I am wearing leather shoes,” says his mother. “I am carrying a leather purse. I wouldn’t have overmuch respect if I were you.”

“Consistency,” murmurs Garrard. “Consistency is the hobgoblin of small minds. Surely one can draw a distinction between eating meat and wearing leather.”

“Degrees of obscenity,” she replies.39

Even when we have drained our argumentative recourses, the fundamental questions seem to remain. ‘No consciousness that we would recognize as consciousness. No

awareness, as far as we can make out, of a self with a history. What I have in mind is what tends to come next. They have no consciousness therefore. Therefore what? Therefore we are free to use them for our own ends? Therefore we are free to kill them? Why?'\textsuperscript{40} Costello is not challenging the correctness of the arguments, but the understanding of ‘understanding’ presupposed in the contemporary intellectual climate of today. ‘Understanding a thing often looks to me like playing with one of those Rubik cubes. Once you have made all the little bricks snap into place, hey presto, you understand. It makes sense if you live inside a Rubik cube, but if you don’t . . .'\textsuperscript{41}

Costello’s exclamation, ‘I know what it is like to be a corpse,’ can hardly be seen as a counterargument to Nagel’s claim that he cannot know what it is like to be a bat, even though Costello at one point says ‘If I can think my way into the existence of a being who has never existed, then I can think my way into the existence of a bat or a chimpanzee or an oyster, any being with whom I share the substrate of life.’\textsuperscript{42} This is not to be seen as an argument designed to enable a reader to say ‘It is true that x, therefore . . .’. According to Costello, ‘The question should not be: Do I have something in common – reason, self-consciousness, a soul – with other animals?’\textsuperscript{43} How we treat the other, she claims, should rather be a question of sympathy than of likeness, and ‘Sympathy has everything to do with the subject and little to do with the object, the “another”.’\textsuperscript{44} The moral question of our relation to others is thus not so much a question about the facts of that other, as it is a question about my attitude towards ‘it.’ This brings us back to her imagined corpse-life and to the problematic comparison between the Holocaust and the meat industry.

The particular horrors of the camps, the horror that convinces us that what went on there was a crime against humanity, is not that despite a humanity shared with the victims, the killers treated them like lice. That is too abstract. The horror is that the killers refused to think themselves into the place of their victims, as did everyone else. They said, “It is they on those cattle cars rattling past.” They did not say, “How would it be if it were I in that cattle car?” They did not say, “It is I who am in that cattle car.” They said, “It must be the dead who are being burned today, making the air stink and falling in ash on my cabbages.” They did not say, “How would it be if I were burning?” They did not say, “I am burning, I am falling in ash.”\textsuperscript{45}

Sympathy requires a willingness to ‘embody’ the other. Imagination lets us do that. We are capable of it. This is what Costello seems to be saying. But she is denying that we can learn how to relate to the other by (merely) studying philosophical arguments. Is she thereby claiming to know what it is like to be a corpse? Is she thereby saying that she understands the Holocaust? That she thinks that the way we treat animals is

\textsuperscript{40} Ibid., 90.
\textsuperscript{41} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., 80.
\textsuperscript{43} Ibid., 79.
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., 79.
incomprehensible but the horrors of the holocaust is not? I don't think so. That would be a return to the argumentative form that she rebukes: ‘It is true that x, therefore . . .’

In a sense, Costello is running out of arguments; her recourses are drained. But to call for further reasons here is incomprehensible to her. ‘Arguments’ are out of place, not only because Costello’s form of life (in language) differs from her opponents, but because it is unclear to her what an argument could do. There is, as it were, nothing here that she has misunderstood.46 She is speechless. But to call something ‘inexpressible’ is not to say nothing. It is to give the world a description too. The expression ‘I’m speechless’ is part of our common language too. Ted Hughes’ poem might be said to be such a description. Coetzee’s novel pictures many such moments of speechlessness. Costello can talk endlessly about cruelty to animals. It is when she tries to give voice to her own separateness that her words fail her. Why should we not say that this portrayal of a woman running up against the ‘limits’ of her language is philosophically significant?

Peter Singer notices that Costello is running out of arguments, that she criticizes reason and appeals to emotions.47 A very dangerous line of thought in Singer’s view, and he argues vehemently that the distinction between feelings and ‘moral data’ must remain intact.48 It is true that Costello appeals to emotions. There is a sense in which we can take the story about Costello as representing that fact that feelings at times express knowledge, are knowledge. But this need not result in a subjectivistic form of ‘emotivism.’ It is not to say that feelings are the ground on which our moral judgements rest. Philosophers often shy away from anything that even remotely resembles ‘mere feelings’ – thinking that they cannot play any significant role in any real philosophical (rational, objective, scientific) investigation. But I think that Cavell put his finger on something important when he said: ‘The idea that passion and reason are antithetical to one another seems to me a libel on human nature and conduct. As if passion were a form of superstition.’49 For feelings connect with understanding in, at least, this way: In some situations, to not feel something particular is to have failed to understand the situation. For example, if you don't feel hurt if your loved one leaves you, you have undoubtedly not understood (but probably denied) that she actually has left you. If you don't feel disgust in the face of an ongoing, bloody, pointless and torturous murder, you do not understand that you are facing such a murder (or you're mad, your understanding blocked by insanity or the mere incomprehensibility of the fact in front of you; or you’re watching a movie . . . ). If you don't feel, say, warm, calm and happy if the one you love tells you

46 What is important to note about these moments of speechlessness is that although there might be a certain kind of failure involved in many such moments, they should not to be seen as failures to understand in the same sense that we often fail to understand because an issue is easy to misunderstand. Lars Hertzberg makes this point clearly in ‘The Limits of Understanding’ in Sats – Nordic Journal of Philosophy, 6(1): (2005), 8f.
48 Ibid., 89.
49 Andrew Klevan, “‘What Becomes of Thinking on Film’: Stanley Cavell in Conversation with Andrew Klevan,” in Film as Philosophy: Essays in Cinema After Wittgenstein and Cavell, eds. Rupert Read and Jerry Goodenough (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 177.
that you mean the world to him/her, you probably have a hard time facing the fact that such a wonderful creature can love a lowlife like yourself (and, hence, you have a bundle of issues to come to terms with). This is not to say that what makes an action right or wrong is the feeling that it induces in most humans (backing that up statistically), or that morality consists of nothing more than feelings, but it is to say, with Murdoch, that our uses of language are coloured.

At the heart of the difficulty that Costello is facing in trying to communicate with her audience lies a sense that there is something confused in the way philosophers tend to talk about these matters. It is not that their arguments are unsound, but that they seem to be neglecting, or downplaying, many crucial regions of our lives in language in order to turn something of great personal and moral importance into something that can be ‘debated.’ Costello’s line of thinking challenges the importance of philosophical argumentation (of a certain kind) as it shows why the philosophical desire for a ‘because’ misfires. It will not matter much if (however unlikely) we could rationally establish moral rules, for it will always be up to me whether or not I am to follow that rule or not. If rational argumentation about which principle or rule of conduct hold up against most argumentative attacks is all there is to moral philosophy, then, in a sense, all moral questions will remain when moral philosophy is done. Arguments enter and have their proper place when we are in agreement about how our concepts are to be turned.

I have tried to show that a breakdown of reasoning is a central concern of Diamond’s and that such breakdown often comes with a loss of language, a loss of a (previously attained and carried) sense. Costello’s exchange with Nagel holds a double importance here. First, because it captures well how something which might look like the beginning of a philosophical discussion, is stalled by the pressing feeling that they are no longer talking the same language. Secondly, it brings into focus a complicated and far from innocent move that many philosophers make – the move to withdraw words from circulation, to deny, reject, put in parentheses, projections of their wordings, intimacy with our words’ surrounding and community with one’s other. So if Coetzee’s Costello is exemplary since she is someone who is shouldered out, well aware of the fact that she is so, Nagel, in turn, is exemplary because he is shouldering out, not aware (enough) of the fact that this deflection of his guides and forms his investigations. For Costello – the aware – this is tragedy. For Nagel it is progress, clarity. The ‘nagelian’ sense of clarity is achieved by means of a certain directedness of thought. The bat is employed

50 I take these examples to be in line with Diamond’s view that ‘In a sense, someone who has not learned to respond with the heart in such ways has not learned to think (‘thought with him/Is in its infancy’); for thinking well involves thinking charged with appropriate feeling.’ Cora Diamond, ‘Anything but Argument?’ in The Realistic Spirit: Wittgenstein, Philosophy and the Mind (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1991), 298.

51 Murdoch, Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals, 495.

52 Diamond observes that: ‘if we proceed by giving arguments, we presumably do not expect to be able to convince anyone who is incapable of following our arguments, or who is too prejudiced to consider them. And if we are talking about convincing human beings, surely it is a fact about many of them that one certain way of not convincing them is to try to arguing the case.’ Diamond, ‘Anything but Argument?’ 292.
so that we should reach a specific idea if we follow Nagel’s train of thought. Costello’s sense of tragedy is the flip side of the same coin. As we, philosophers, tend to have a particular goal in view when we call imagination to our service, we thereby also block our possibilities of taking in the world. This is a form of ‘deflection.’

### 5.4 Understanding deflection

‘Deflection,’ as it is put to use here, can be described as the idea that many philosophical problems depend on us rejecting, or deflecting from, our ordinary ways of talking. This is a true but misleadingly simplified description. True because it is so, but misleading since it invites understandings according to which ‘the ordinary’ (whatever and wherever that is) may be regarded as too safe, as if ‘it’ was philosophically neutral or innocent. But it is not obvious that the use that departs from ordinary language is wrong, unhappy, false or misplaced. This is another reason why the life of Elisabeth Costello becomes philosophically instructive. She finds herself shouldered out from the ordinary, but it is not obvious that she is wrong in insisting on her specific employments of our words (even though one might easily picture someone disagreeing with her).

Diamond claims that facts of the world often are distorted when they are incorporated in philosophical discourse. Being misrepresented, they cannot be dealt with properly. She also suggests that ‘understanding can be present in poetry, in a broad sense of the term.’ Diamond employs Cavell’s notion of ‘deflection’ to describe ‘what happens when we are moved from the appreciation, or attempt at appreciation, of a difficulty of reality to a philosophical or moral problem apparently in the vicinity.’

Cavell employed the notion of ‘deflection’ in ‘Knowing and Acknowledging’ while discussing (philosophical responses to) scepticism. His original take on scepticism tries to do justice to the very human and common worry that the other’s inmost feelings at times are out of reach. That fact is not what needs philosophical refutation. Rather, in order to fully understand the philosophical temptation of scepticism it must be taken at face value. ‘I am filled with this feeling – of our separateness, let us say – and I want you to have it too. So I give voice to it. And then my powerlessness presents itself as ignorance – a metaphysical finitude as an intellectual lack.’

This is where the distortion comes in. Reality is transformed so as to be possible to approach philosophically, intellectually. In all simplicity: the difficulty of reality here is the fact that we sometimes feel that we cannot reach the other. The difficulty of philosophy is this fact transformed into an intellectual ‘puzzle’ requiring philosophical scrutiny. The intellectual puzzle presents the others’ inner life as if it is out of reach in a similar sense that a plant on the other side of a wall may be. Philosophical scepticism builds

---

54 Ibid., 57.
55 Stanley Cavell, ‘Knowing and Acknowledging,’ in Must We Mean What We Say? A Book of Essays (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1976).
56 Ibid., 263.
What is it Like to Be a Corpse?

on a deflected understanding of a real, ordinary, concern. The academic response to that scepticism becomes doubly deflected since it denies not only the sceptic the sense of his words, but also the sense of our ordinary human separateness from which the philosophical scepticism departed.

Cavell’s treatment of scepticism is an attempt to resolve the problem without denying the experience that the others’ inner life can be out of reach (which is not to say that that is the ‘normal’ or standard scenario). This means that philosophy must be attentive to the non-deflected sense of otherness if we are to come to terms with scepticism. Philosophy has to struggle to find ‘a way of hearing these voices that puts them back into the situation within which the humanness of the other seems out of reach, and thereby shows us where and how philosophy has to start,’ as Diamond puts it. To disregard the genuineness of these experiences is a form of a repudiation of the ordinary. It is no surprise that the philosopher might want to repudiate the ordinary, since such experiences often are (or seem) hard to handle, difficult to understand, muddled with emotional frustration, deeply rooted in the soil of one’s particular form of life, and they can, at times, be ‘deadly chilling.’ This kind of hardness functions as a motivation for philosophical simplification, intellectualization, deflection – the ‘shared desire for a “because”’. Thus, the repudiation of the ordinary can often ‘be heard as expressing such-and-such position in an intellectual debate.’ The Cavellian line of thought that Diamond follows requires that we should not be too hasty to assume that the transformation of a muddled ordinary concern into a ‘position’ is leading us in the right direction. Since the root of this philosophical problem lies in a genuine ordinary (though not necessarily common) experience, any philosophical representation that does not rely on a rich enough understanding of this, will fail to respond to the problem at hand adequately. It is a misunderstanding to think of our human separateness primarily as an epistemological concern.

Or to speak with Murdoch: if philosophy consists of ‘a two-way movement . . . , a movement towards the building of theories and a move back again towards the consideration of simple and obvious facts’ then philosophy is not done if the return to the beginning is not made.

One way in which the limitations of an epistemological approach to human separateness and knowledge are rephrased is Cavell’s idea that we are ‘exposed’ to the other. Exposure means that knowing or understanding the other is not a thing that can be settled, as it were, objectively or externally. So philosophy must try to ‘accept’ our exposure, which, Cavell argues, ‘seems to imply an acceptance of the possibility

57 Diamond, ‘The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy,’ 68.
58 Ibid., 58.
59 Ibid., 68.
60 Ibid.
61 Of course, this is not to say that my relation to the other has nothing to do with knowledge. For further references and reflections on the relationship between acknowledgement and knowledge, see Cavell, The Claim of Reason, 428.
that my knowledge of others may be overthrown, even that it ought to be. Instead of thinking that a well-established singular sense of our terms would solve our problems, Cavell suggests that we need to take on board the fact that our wordings can and should be challenged and that they are necessarily elastic. This is not to be understood as ‘Cavell’s theory of meaning.’ Rather, Cavell claims that these are real features of our lives in language that must be taken into account, otherwise sense and knowledge may remain obscure. In fact, we may say that this emphasis on the openness and flexibility of language is not only a course to a more adequate understanding of language, but is also a way to start thinking more fruitfully about what conditions morality. In all simplicity: If it were not possible that I could fail to understand the words of my other – the weight of them – then, all promises would be empty, love would be physics, and tragedy impossible. But it is not so.

Deflection means that we take a real difficulty and bend it so as to fit the methods and tools available to philosophical theoretical reasoning. But does this not also mean that a difficulty of reality is a difficulty of philosophy? Cavell certainly thinks so. Indeed, he claims that a Diamondian ‘difficulty of reality’ is ‘a difficulty that philosophy must incorporate.’

This brings us back to my abovementioned worry that Diamond might make too much of the distinction between her two difficulties. At this point, where it is acknowledged that much philosophy begins in a deflection and hence a neglect to take in reality in full (a neglect to accept our ‘exposure’ as it were), Diamond becomes somewhat irresolute. Even though she argues that ‘[p]hilosophy characteristically misrepresents both our own reality and that of others, in particular those “others” who are animals’ and that literature often manages to represent the human’s relation to her others in a way that does not distort reality, her response to the question ‘Can there be such a thing as philosophy that is not deflected from such realities?’ is indistinct. This indistinctness is in fact not especially surprising.

As noted by Alice Crary, Diamond’s own descriptions – up till the very concluding section of her paper – ‘seem to have implied the answer “No” to [Diamond’s] question whether there can be a non-deflecting practice of philosophy.’ Now, Diamond does not want to deny that ‘there could be such a practice, and that argument may have an essential role to play in it.’ But it would be wrong to say that Diamond thereby has answered the question, and one might see how that question is hard to answer. Indeed, it remains unclear to me what it would mean to say that this problem is solved, for two reasons.

First: if indeed ‘deflection’ is a pathway into philosophical difficulties, then the idea of a ‘philosophy that is not deflected from such realities’ is the idea of a philosophy that

---

64 Cavell, The Claim of Reason, 439.
67 Ibid. 74.
68 Ibid., 86n.22.
69 Ibid.
never begins in deflection (from our everyday language and all the complexities that that form of life brings with it). Can we even make sense of that idea? To the extent that this is an accurate description of how many philosophical problems originate, then the idea of a non-deflected philosophy comes close to the idea of a world without that kind of problem. Concerning philosophical problems of this type, the philosophical work should rather be the struggle to understand and become clear about the fact that we are dealing with a deflected (and so a distorted) picture of our world and to understand how that deflected picture took hold on us, than a search for a non-deflecting practice of philosophy. To my mind, the closest we will ever get to the idea of a non-deflecting practice of philosophy, are those short, few and rare moments when a specific philosophical problem disintegrates on us (is dissolved, if you like).

The other reason why we shouldn't be surprised by the sense of inconclusiveness that seems to characterize Diamond's position at the end of her paper lies in the everlasting quarrel between philosophy and literature (or poetry). There is a sense in which the question 'Can there be such a thing as philosophy that is not deflected from such realities?' is analogous to the question if philosophy can become literature. But is that a clear enough question? Indeed, the question itself seems to suggest that (a) we know what philosophy is and (b) we know what literature is. But is that true? Suppose that we would have distinct definitions of these practices at our disposal; would we even then be able to say what their 'marriage' would be like? That is, I am not sure that we can know what would happen if philosophy and literature were to become one. This means that if we wish that philosophy should become literature, we don't know what we wish for. Rather, we need to come to terms with that fact that philosophy, like literature, is an open-ended practice, constantly under its own investigation, and that it dies if it is (too) unbendingly framed.

One may say that Diamond's paper can be read as pointing in two directions. According to the first, it's a call for a philosophical practice that strives to make clear how philosophical problems originated, that tries to take philosophy back to its common but pressing origin in real human concerns in order to make clear how philosophy may have distorted its own problem. (The 'may have' is important since this is not a result that one can reach without doing the work, and it is not necessary that philosophical problems are rooted in deflections. Neither problems nor their resolutions can be stated in advance.) Literature here only comes in as something that philosophy must be open to and its force is that it may be able to take us back to an understanding of our difficulties that are (still) grounded in our everyday lives. Diamond’s indistinctness is thus not really a problem, but something that follows from her investigation. This is the direction that I think of myself as pursuing.

Wolfe, representing the other direction of thought, does not seem to recognize anything indistinct in Diamond’s position. Diamond’s view is simply that there are forms of thought that can be dealt with in philosophy and there are others that require literature in order to be conveyed. So some ‘thing’ is out of philosophy’s reach. Wolfe takes the distinction that Diamond leaves us with (where it is unclear if philosophy

---

I take this remark to be in line with what Cavell says in *This New Yet Unapproachable America*, 4f.
could become a non-deflecting practice) to invite a picture of a doubled world. He seems to take Diamond to be suggesting that she has encountered a collision between two 'spheres of reason.' There is one in which we argue, that philosophy knows how to handle, and then there's one of, say, 'existential vertigo' which literature and poetry (but not philosophy) take care of. Two forms of representation are assigned a sphere of phenomena each.

But clearly, 'deflection' does not suggest that we have two worlds, but marks a typical desire to escape our (only) world: and we can be sure that Diamond does not want to suggest that there is something unspeakable that philosophy cannot talk about, whereof we (employees of philosophy departments) must be silent.

But one can see what it is in Diamond's paper that Wolfe feeds on: Diamond may appear to be willing to identify 'philosophical argumentation' with 'contemporary academic discussions' of a certain form, as if any form of reasoning that differs severely from this falls outside the domain of 'philosophy.' This is a point where I mean that Diamond invites her readers to think 'un-Diamondian' thoughts. Diamond claims that 'Costello's responses to arguments can be read as replies in the philosophical sense only by ignoring important features of the story.' I understand why Diamond wants to say this, and I agree with her to a high degree – especially in the sense that it is possible to include Elisabeth Costello in the contemporary Anglo-American academic debates about animal rights only if we read it in a special way that downplays the fact that it is a work of literature that we read. But how are we to understand her formulation 'in the philosophical sense'? Are we to assume that there is a proper form of argumentation for philosophy? Are we to assume that there is no way for us to see Coetzee's novel to be 'arguing' in a philosophically relevant sense? The answers to these questions are clearly 'No!' (and I believe that Diamond is in agreement with me here).

It is as if Diamond gives too much to her opponents, reducing the thrust of what I take to be one of her own most important points: that the picture of how unaffected Costello is by philosophical arguments at her disposal and by those directed against her, is philosophically significant on its own. For it shows that that kind of reasoning doesn't reach to the heart of someone like Costello. If we read Coetzee's novel and come to think that this is an adequate picture of a particular form of life, then we should also be able to say that 'the fact that contemporary academic philosophy (of a certain but dominant strand) has no patience for this form of life, that it rejects Costello's indirect responses and sticks to its own deflected and reduced forms of understanding, discredits it.' Given that Diamond has, consistently and with precision, challenged the narrow conceptions of what it is to argue that dominate contemporary Anglo-American philosophy, I do not think this is the direction we should walk if we are to continue to think with Diamond. What I think we should add to Diamond's paper is the thought that the distinction between her two difficulties must be seen as a methodological tool, a way to start working with and come to terms with what troubles us as philosophers, and not as a representation of reality, as a theory about the nature

---

72 Most notably in her 'Anything but Arguments?"
What is it Like to Be a Corpse?

of our world which may or may not be true. To use a familiar metaphor: it’s a ladder that must be thrown away.

Diamond employs Cavell’s notion of ‘deflection’ to describe ‘what happens when we are moved from the appreciation, or attempt at appreciation, of a difficulty of reality to a philosophical or moral problem apparently in the vicinity.’ To say that philosophy is ‘in the vicinity’ is to say that it is near but not (really) here. I want to suggest that philosophy is not in the vicinity of a difficulty of reality, it is already there. Diamond claims that a poet like Ted Hughes manages to put a difficulty of reality into words. He does this by coming out as someone ‘who can no longer speak within the game.’ I have tried to show that this description functions well for much, if not most, philosophy – and this means that where there is a difficulty of reality, there is one of philosophy. Diamond describes the difficulty of reality as a situation in which we are ‘pushed beyond what we can think.’ This sense of ‘beyond’ is, in turn, explicated as a sense of loss of our linguistic community: ‘Our concepts, our ordinary life with our concepts, pass by this difficulty as if it were not there; the difficulty, if we try to see it, shoulders us out of life.’ Notice that deflection involves something of a repudiation of the ordinary. The problem is that if it is true that ‘our ordinary life with our concepts, pass by this difficulty as if it were not there,’ then we might think that our ordinary lives with our concepts are faulty or insufficient and that the turn to philosophy (as a turn away from the ordinary) is a turn in the right direction. And why should we not think that? (Most philosophers seem to do so.)

I want to say that philosophy often – but probably not always – begins in a turn away from the ordinary. I also want to say that a return to the ordinary often is the way out of a philosophical problem (which is not to say that the philosophical activity consisted in nothing more than a U-turn, or that the philosophical problem was not an authentic problem at all). But this does not mean that the repudiation of the ordinary is something that only happens to trained philosophers, scholars. What does it mean to say that ‘our ordinary life with our concepts, pass by this difficulty as if it were not there’? If we think of the philosophical movement of ordinary language philosophy as a mere return to the ordinary, where we started, then the successful philosophy would be one that takes us back to a position where we can pass these difficulties by as if they were not there. The problem is, of course, that they are. The fact that a difficulty of reality can be both ‘deadly chilling’ and seen as a recognition of me being shouldered out from community – that I can no longer rest comfortably in my ordinary life with words – shows that the turn to philosophy was not a stupid mistake and that philosophy is already present, to some extent, in the ordinary. It had, at least, its beginning there.

Furthermore, it is important to see that if philosophy can only ‘appreciate’ a difficulty of reality by reducing such experiences to ‘positions,’ then deflected philosophy

74 Ibid., 45.
75 Ibid., 58.
76 Ibid.
is also treating the difficulty as if it were not there, since its defining movement is a move away from the reality of the difficulty. But the force of a philosophical movement away from and back to the ordinary must not be to take us ‘back’ to where the problem appeared not to exist, but to take us back to a comprehension of the root of the problem, work it through and only thereafter go on. At that point, there can no longer be any ‘as if the problem did not exist’ – it has to be a place where the problem ‘no longer’ exists. This means that it has to be the task of philosophy to try to achieve an understanding of the non-deflected uses of our words in which the original problem took form. There is philosophy (already) in a difficulty of reality.

In Diamond’s elaboration on this issue, the question of a non-deflected practice of philosophy is nearly analogous to the question of literature’s place in philosophy. (Understanding is present in poetry, distorted in philosophy.) And so the question of the opposition that is marked between a difficulty of reality and a difficulty of philosophy becomes a version of the question with which Cavell ends *The Claim of Reason*: ‘can philosophy become literature and still know itself?’ Since Cavell’s book ends with a question mark, we should not be too hasty to assume that that which precedes the question mark – the book as a whole – already has presented the answer to that question as it were, in between the lines. That question is, as it should be, left open.

The question ‘Can there be such a thing as philosophy that is not deflected from such realities?’ has one crucial mark that separates it from Cavell’s question: ‘Can philosophy become literature and still know itself?’ If we understand deflection as a way into philosophical problems, then philosophy should acknowledge difficulties of reality as difficulties for philosophy. It is not as if the appreciation of a difficulty of a reality has to enter, or come into, philosophy. It is not a competition between two distinct forms of representation (though it is a criticism of philosophy’s obsession with a certain type of writing and reasoning). It is not a question whether or not philosophy can take a difficulty of reality seriously, can take it on board. It has to. It is already there.

The recognition that a difficulty of reality already is a difficulty of philosophy, should lead us to say, with Cavell, that: ‘[If you give up] something like formal argumentation as the route to conviction in philosophy, and you give up the idea that either scientific evidence or poetic persuasion is the way to philosophical conviction, then the question of what achieves philosophical conviction must at all times be on your mind.’ Good philosophy is self-reflective – reason is under reason’s investigation.

I have argued that it is problematic to claim that poetry (or literature) can make us transgress the limits of understanding. That view seems to build on the thought that the propositional and linear reasoning that we have come to call ‘philosophical’ actually does capture what argumentation is. If we want to say that literature can achieve something of philosophical importance that our own understanding of philosophy

77 Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 496.
obstructs, it must not be that it reaches beyond, or to the other side of, argumentation and understanding. Rather, it must be that it can remind us about what understanding is outside, or before, philosophy – thereby ‘widening’ the sense of ‘reasoning.’

That there is sense in saying that a literary work cannot be paraphrased (into, say, philosophy) without significant loss, does not mean that it can express the inexpressible. The kind of philosophical clarity that we can attain by confronting ourselves with Diamonds essay, Coetzee's novels and the philosophical commentaries thereof, is not that we can achieve a new form of knowledge or understanding, hitherto unknown to all but some poets and writers of fiction, but that certain real forms of knowing, of understanding, ways of changing one's mind, have been excluded from philosophy. Exclusions made, I believe, because we have been too certain about the sense of the term ‘philosophy’ – letting that sense determine where we look and how we look for guidance and clarity. The importance that the philosophy/literature distinction brings to philosophy is not to be overcome by any claim pertaining that philosophy is, or is not (like) literature. The importance lies rather in this debate's power to make us uncertain about both these notions. Good philosophy is often (if not always) uncertain about its own status as philosophy. When a philosopher, or a tradition of philosophical labourers, have reached consensus about what philosophy is, and how we must proceed (in an almost instrumental sense) in doing it, philosophy ends.

5.5 Concluding remarks

In one sense, this chapter has been a reflection on a sentence of Wolfe's: 'there is the suggestion in Diamond, I think, that imaginative and literary projection can somehow achieve this instance what propositional, syllogistic philosophy cannot achieve (the non-conceptual, nonlogical force of “I know what it's like to be a corpse”).' But we have also attained a richer picture of how the two-way movement of philosophy that Murdoch talks about may come about. The notion of deflection may be helpful in coming to see how words and world come apart and it makes it comprehensible that we may ‘choose’ (subconsciously or not) to be guided by faulty pictures. Diamond's reading of Elisabeth Costello may furthermore help us see that the return to the ordinary, foothold, community, may be a struggle, an achievement, and it is also an achievement that does not boil down to a mere acceptance of how we normally speak. The novel Elisabeth Costello, read in the way that Diamond suggests, is very far from (what Murdoch called) a pointing finger: there is no simple resolution or salvation offered to its reader. Coetzee's mirror is truly a representation of 'the battle between real people and images.' If we think that we have found such a pointing finger, Diamond has given us many reasons to doubt our conclusions. Elisabeth Costello may be said to have lost community and to be cut off from the world because of this loss. But her loss

80 Wolfe, 'Exposures,' 23.
81 Murdoch, 'Against Dryness,' 295.
is intentional. She thinks everyone but her are turning our concepts in bizarre ways. If there is a ‘way out’ here, it may come from a recognition of just how big the contrast is between intellectualistic theories and real human difficulties. But (just like with Either/Or) there’s no simple either/or to choose between here.

Not: Either Elisabeth Costello is right in urging us to ground our judgements in emotions and by reading poetry or ‘the philosophers’ are right in thinking about it as a difficulty that can only be solved by means of rational argumentation.

Rather, Coetzee invites us to think about how we (his readers) inflect our concepts and to think about how we are to measure the distance between a life lived and theories about a life lived.82

*The Black Prince* and *Elisabeth Costello* are two novels in which philosophical sentences and theories are given prominent positions. But if I am right about *The Black Prince* and if Diamond is right about *Elisabeth Costello* there are deeper philosophical insights to be found in these novels if we take these philosophical sentences to belong to the world of the novel; if we follow Murdoch’s advice and think about them as mirrors in which we may (or may not) see the reflections of our own deflections.

---

82 A similar line of reasoning has been developed by Jonathan Lear in relation to Coetzee’s *Diary of a Bad Year*, in ‘The Ethical Thought of J. M. Coetzee’, in *Raritan, a Quarterly Review*, 28(1).