BOOK REVIEW

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

Megan Fritts[1]

1 Introduction

Cora Diamond's latest volume, *Reading Wittgenstein with Anscombe: Going on to Ethics* (hereafter: *RWA*), stands out in many ways. Most immediately apparent, it possesses an unusual title—a title that makes sense (and then, makes much sense) only after one has begun to read the book. This title also gives readers their first clue into what I believe is the most distinctive aspect of the volume which is its refusal to fixate on, and argue for, a singular concluding end point. Diamond is not here interested in using this collection of essays in one large, sweeping argument for a new interpretation of the *Tractatus* (*Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus.* Trans. *D.F. Pears & B.F. Mcguinness.* Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963). Rather, her aim appears to be an active one: what is it like to read the *Tractatus* along with Anscombe? How should we understand Anscombe's critiques of Wittgenstein, or her (at times) idiosyncratic interpretations of his claims? Is her interpretation of his picture-theory, or her understanding of its importance, accurate? Can there be truths that lack a sensible negation, as Anscombe insisted there must be, or was she mistaken? How can we arrive at a philosophical method of doing ethics after the *Tractatus*? I mention a few of the questions discussed throughout these essays to illustrate the *character* of the volume: a scholar's personal, and ongoing, exploration of two intellectual giants, and how their ideas have influenced how she carries on the activity of philosophy.

The book contains seven essays, six previously published (in some form) and revised for this volume, and one (the final essay) entirely new contribution. In addition to these essays, Diamond has penned three helpful introductions preceding the three parts into which the book is divided, as well as a general introduction at the beginning of the book. The introductions are all new material, containing helpful historical information, interpretive clarifications, and some notes about how and why various chapters were revised before their inclusion in the volume.

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2 Reading the *Tractatus* with Anscombe

Part I, the longest of the three parts, is titled "Wittgenstein, Anscombe, and the Activity of Philosophy." In addition to Diamond's incredibly thorough 42-page introduction, the section contains three essays, all broadly seeking to understand how Anscombe understood and interacted with the *Tractatus*. The first of these essays is titled "Finding One's Way into the Tractatus", with the implicit focus on how Anscombe found her way, as detailed in her *An Introduction to Wittgenstein's Tractatus* (hereafter: *IWT*; London: Hutchinson University Library, 1963a). Diamond spends most of this chapter providing her readers with an interpretive framework for Anscombe's *IWT*: specifically, she outlines what she takes to be Anscombe's three primary aims for the book. First, Anscombe aimed to elucidate and motivate the problems that the *Tractatus* is interested in investigating and solving. The second aim was to interpret the *Tractatus* as primarily putting forth the "picture-theory" of meaning—the theory that "propositions (spoken, written, or merely thought) are pictures[.]" (*RWA* p.45) The third aim was to radically alter the standard reading of the *Tractatus* by questioning the background assumptions of British empiricism and logical positivism, which Anscombe believed had pernicious effects on one's ability to read Wittgenstein's ideas in an illuminating way. Diamond goes on to mention two non-aims of *IWT*: how the *Tractatus* relates to Wittgenstein's later work, and how the *Tractatus* relates to Wittgenstein's general ideas on philosophical method. While both of these topics receive a bit of attention in *IWT*, Diamond takes neither to be a proper aim of the text.

The second essay of Part I, "Saying and Showing: An Example from Anscombe", elucidates Anscombe's critique of some parts of the *Tractatus*, taking a critical stance toward the critiques contained therein. The topic of investigation is Anscombe's discussion of the proposition "'Someone' is not the name of someone"—a proposition she takes to be clearly true, to the point of triviality, yet unable to be shown to be true on Wittgenstein's account of meaning in virtue of the fact that (as she understands it) such a proposition cannot be false. To negate such a proposition, Anscombe argues, would not produce a negation of the claim, but would only produce a senseless string of words. In this essay, Diamond turns a sharp eye toward the nature of Anscombe's criticism of Wittgenstein's account of meaning (namely, that it cannot assign a truth-value to a proposition so *obviously* true as "'Somebody' is not the name of somebody"), and argues that it is unclear exactly what Anscombe herself means to be arguing. Diamond's skepticism of Anscombe's argument is focused on Anscombe's claim that such a proposition is so obviously true; Diamond struggles to conceive of the proposition as being able to be true at all, let along trivially or necessarily or obviously true. By carefully examining the content of Anscombe's argument, Diamond reveals apparent ambiguities which seem to allow for no charitable interpretation.

The final essay in section one, titled "Reading the *Tractatus* with G.E.M. Anscombe", follows Anscombe's investigation into the extent to which British empiricism has muddled the more popular or common readings of the *Tractatus*. Here, Diamond details why Anscombe was so insistent that the groundwork for Wittgenstein's

first work is not Russell, but Frege. The thrust of her gripe is that over-attention to Russell, and lack of attention to Frege, contributed greatly to popular misreadings of the *Tractatus*. This idea comes from Anscombe's understanding of Russell as having been primarily concerned with private mental states, while Frege was interested in questions that were "in no way psychological." (*IWT*, p.14)

3 Truth and Propositions

Comprised of essays 4 and 5, Part II of Diamond's book is about "propositions that can only be true, and more generally about propositions that do not have an intelligible negation." (p.231) They are "thinkables to which there are no alternatives." Essay 4, titled, "Wittgenstein and What Can Only Be True", focuses on one particular response to such proposition—namely, understanding them as "preparatory" for how we go on to use language (p.175). They are preparatory, Diamond argues, in the sense that they function as "path indicators" (in what ways can we speak/think?) or "path blockers" (in what ways can we *not* speak/think?). They are not, strictly-speaking, *senseful*, but neither are they nonsensical (p.185).

Essay 5, "Disagreements: Anscombe, Geach, Wittgenstein", tackles a different approach to dealing with propositions that lack sensible negations, focusing on what Diamond refers to as Anscombe's "Big Objection"—the "exclusion of necessary truths in a robust sense." That is to say, Anscombe's objection to the Tractarian account of truth is that there is no robust sense in which necessary facts are "true." And while some necessities like mathematical equations or tautologies may, by the lights of the *Tractatus*, be allowed a thin sense of "true" (they still do not tell us that anything *is the case*, but they do correspond to reality in a way that guides our thinking about other sayings), the sayings of, for instance, natural theology may not help themselves even to this meager offering. Diamond reads Anscombe's objection to this feature of the *Tractatus* as suggesting a wider, more diverse, but still univocal understanding of "truth" whereby "necessary truths" needn't be labelled a misnomer.

4 Wittgenstein's Influence on Moral Theorizing

Part III, "Going On to Think about Ethics", contains two essays, the first titled "Asymmetries in Thinking about Thought: Anscombe and Wiggins." Here, Diamond makes her first move "on to ethics" by discussing David Wiggins's own views on "thinkables to which there are no alternatives" ("Moral Cognitivism, Moral Relativism and Motivating Moral Beliefs," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 91 (1):pp.61-85, 1991a). This chapter is devoted to eking out and clarifying this idea shared by both Wiggins and Anscombe that propositions such as "Slavery is wrong" can be meaningfully expressed, can be illuminating and helpful, can be *true*, despite the fact that (Wiggins argues) such a proposition cannot be false. Wiggins' argument for the trivial truth of "Slavery is wrong" is that the two concepts invoked by

the statement—'slavery' and 'wrongness'—once accurately understood, entail the necessity of "slavery is wrong."

Connected to this claim of Wiggins, and a topic Diamond explores both here and in Part II, is Anscombe's claim that Wittgenstein's picture theory of language, as she conceived of it, would be "death to natural theology." (*IWT*, p.78) Anscombe's claim relates to the importance, on this theory of meaning, of the possibility of negation. Classical natural theology, as Anscombe conceived of it, derived proofs for God based on what must be true (think, for example, of Anselm's ontological argument). Such propositions of natural theology would be, on the Tractarian account of propositions, nonsense, because they do not have a sensible negation (and Diamond here quotes Wittgenstein's insistence that "the negation of nonsense is nonsense" (letter to Ramsey, *Wittgenstein in Cambridge: Letters and Documents, 1911-1951*, Blackwell). In essay six Diamond discusses this view, contrasting it with what she calls Anscombe's "solo propositions" position—the idea that there may be true propositions that cannot be sensibly negated. Diamond takes this view to be opposed to the near universal consensus that truth-aptness of propositions must come in pairs (a view endorsed, as it happens, by Anscombe's own husband (Geach, "A Philosophical Autobiography," In H. G. Lewis (ed.), *Peter Geach: Philosophical Encounters*, Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1991). Diamond describes how Wittgenstein's theory of such solo propositions (which Wittgenstein himself called "pseudo-propositions") was similar to his theory of mathematical equations (that they are, as Roger White (2006) describes them, not true or false, but rather "rules for the manipulation of signs"). She then discusses how some philosophers have attempted to distinguish the two for the purposes of maintaining the sensibility of "solo propositions", and why this distinction is more difficult to establish than we might imagine.

The purpose of her discussion of negation in this essay is to show her readers how she primarily understands Wittgenstein's methodology:

> What I have been trying to lead up to here is the importance for Wittgenstein, in many contexts, of thinking in terms of a contrast between *kinds of setting out of paths we can take in language*, and *engaged uses of language where we are taking these or those paths*. (p.264)

Diamond sees this contrast as important for understanding the role that "solo propositions" play in Wittgenstein's philosophical method—namely, they are useful in preparing language for philosophical use, though not "engaged uses." They function, she argues, as path-blockers and path-indicators, acting as "signs" indicating what paths our thinking may wander down, and which it may not.

All this talk of path-indicators and thinking gone astray is set-up for Diamond's discussion of ethics. That is, she is here giving readers her playbook, her method of doing ethics—and in this method she takes herself to be following in Anscombe's (and Philippa Foot's, and Sabina Lovibond's) footsteps. To illustrate the use of path-blocker language in ethics literature, Diamond quotes Anscombe from her famous article, "Mr. Truman's Degree": "[C]hoosing to kill the innocent as a means to your end is always murder" ("Mr Truman's Degree." In *Ethics, Religion, and Politics*. Blackwell: Oxford. 1981. p.66). This statement can be understood as functioning like Wiggins' above statement about slavery being wrong—that once

you understand the concepts of murder and of killing the innocent as a means to an end, the path your thinking may be tempted to take (say, thinking that killing the innocent as a means to your ends is sometimes permissible) is effectively blocked. The public, once this necessity was made stark, could not remain ignorant of the fact that Oxford was about grant an honorary degree to a mass murderer. The application of Wittgenstein's ideas of path-blockers and path-indicators, then, becomes the use of these signs to guide practical thinking, the use of logical barricades preventing our moral reasoning from wandering down dark paths of tempting nonsense.

The last essay of Part III, and of the book, is titled, "Truth in Ethics: Williams and Wiggins." This essay begins with an overview of a debate between Bernard Williams and David Wiggins, on the topic of truth in ethics (the two articles came out in *Ratio* in 1995). Williams argues, contra Wiggins, that there are no such things as "unthinkable" moral statements, such as "Slavery is not wrong." Wiggins argues that, were the negation of "slavery is wrong" to be a "thinkable" proposition, then you must have deprived yourself of "any workable scheme of moral ideas" ("Objective and Subjective in Ethics, with Two Postscripts about Truth". *Ratio* 8 (3):pp.243-258, p.280, 1995). One's reserve of moral language—"wrongness", "cruelty", "slavery", "justice"—must be so reduced, so emptied, that the concepts no longer fit together in a way that can be useful for the furthering of moral thought.

Williams' disagreement with Wiggins arose from the notion of "thick" ethical concepts; namely, Williams thought that ethical concepts such as "cruelty", "coercion", or "dignity" were needed for believing or disbelieving that the proposition "slavery is wrong" is true, and that such concepts were not univocal ("Truth in Ethics," *Ratio* 8 (3):pp.227-242, 1995).

For example, while two individuals may be familiar with the concept of cruelty, one person may describe the act of torturing an animal as "fun", and therefore see a (decisive) reason to engage in this activity, while another may describe the act as "cruel", and therefore see a (decisive) reason to not engage in the activity. The first individual may respond positively to the charge of doing something cruel but see this as not what chiefly characterized the activity, and therefore not find the claim "torturing animals is good" unthinkable.

Diamond admits that she finds Williams' objection to Wiggins' "unthinkables" to be confusingly weak—after all, shouldn't Wiggins' analysis of slavery also be able to allow for the assessment that slavery is *profitable* (a, perhaps, *pro tanto* reason to engage in the enterprise)? But the rest of this chapter functions primarily as a sketch for further research, with Diamond raising questions about what Wiggins' argument leads to or entails. In two sections respectively titled "Four Issues I Want to Think about, and Six That I Can Merely Mention", and "Wigginsian and Wittgensteinian Things to Think about in Response to the Questions in Section 6", she barrels though a litany of intriguing, probing questions raised by the intersection of this literature. For example: is slavery a "thick" ethical concept because of the differences between the European and American slave trades?; is Wiggins' "moral point of view" a weakness in the argument due to differing cultural narratives about slave trades?; can we preserve the thrust of Wiggins' arguments if we take a more Tractarian approach to such propositions as "slavery is wrong", understanding them as necessary path-indicators and not as "true" statements about the way the world

is? These questions, and many more, fill up the final pages of Diamond's book, and leave hopeful readers anticipating additional future scholarship.

5 Conclusion

Who will benefit from reading this book? Certainly, anyone looking for an in-depth history of some of the more important interpretations of the *Tractatus* will benefit, as will those looking for a more accessible introduction to Wittgenstein's first work than Anscombe's *IWT*. Just as importantly, this book will be a great resource for anyone interested—whether from camaraderie or morbid curiosity—in the methodological foundations of ethical theory in the style of Anscombe, Foot, and Diamond. What Diamond has done in this volume, in addition to "reading Wittgenstein with Anscombe," is to illuminate the rarely acknowledged Wittgensteinian roots of much work done in contemporary virtue ethics—a tradition too often thought to spring solely from Aristotle and Aquinas. She has also done much work to shed light on Anscombe's *IWT*, showing proper reverence even as she questions some of its interpretive and argumentative aspects.

This book is not, however, an exhaustive history, or even a survey, of the 20th century's grappling with the *Tractatus*; its format, seven stand-alone essays, prevents this kind of historical breadth. But the trade-off is a more personal intellectual walk alongside a serious scholar of both Wittgenstein and Anscombe, a scholar possessing a deep familiarity with analytic philosophy of language (as a student at Oxford she worked with Paul Grice) and its influence on Oxford moral philosophy. This book does important work illuminating the questions and concerns that motivated, and continue to motivate, scholars like Diamond today; concerns which differ so sharply from the concerns of much contemporary moral philosophy. And in all these capacities, I believe this book is a resounding success.