Review Of "Wittgenstein And The Moral Life: Essays In Honor Of Cora Diamond" Edited By A. Crary

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Alice Crary, ed., *Wittgenstein and the Moral Life: Essays in Honor of Cora Diamond*

*Wittgenstein and the Moral Life: Essays in Honor of Cora Diamond* by Alice Crary,

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The advantage of the value theory, then, is not that it frees us from the practical task of choosing the right balance. Civil libertarians will still object to legislative intrusions into constitutionally protected areas, and legislatures will still chafe under constitutional restrictions. What would change is that a judicial decision to respect democracy will not, by itself, tell judges what to do when substance and procedure clash. The values on both sides would be democratic values. But, again, that does not tell us which values take priority.

Of course, if we assume that democracy is an overriding value, Brettschneider’s conclusion is important—and so it would also be important whether, as I have suggested, his argument for his particular definition of democracy is less than conclusive. However, there are other ways to look at this issue. We might, for example, identify democracy with a (perhaps sophisticated) procedure but then claim that its value, along with the value of constitutional restrictions, is derivative from some more fundamental moral perspective, like a sophisticated consequentialism or contractualism. In that case, as in Brettschneider’s account, the clash between procedure and substance would involve balancing two values against one another within a single normative perspective; however, that perspective would not itself be the perspective of democracy. Only if we assume that democracy is the ultimate value will Brettschneider’s account seem preferable to this alternative.

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Here are three ways of thinking about how to understand both the thought of the later Wittgenstein and its importance, if any, for ethics:

1. Consensualism.—Correct applications of general terms are responsive and responsible to nothing but “our” (or some community’s) decisions about how to apply them. There can be innovative decisions, and so consensus can shift, but no discoveries of Platonic forms or languages of thought can lie behind and justify such decisions. Saul Kripke and Richard Rorty have urged such a reading of Wittgenstein’s later writings. Extended to moral theory, it points toward some form of social constructivism: what counts as right or wrong, permissible or obligatory, is settled, if at all, by an emergent social consensus.

2. Antidecisionism.—Nothing “exterior” to practice determines criteria for the correct application of a general term. Hence consensus and decision, understood as exterior to what we do, are no more able to explain and justify general term applications than are Platonic forms or languages of thought. Nothing is hidden. The relations between general terms and their application conditions are internal: to grasp the general term just is to know how to apply it. Questions about the justifications of practices in general drop away. P. M. S. Hacker has eloquently developed this reading. Extended to moral theory, it points, if anywhere, toward quietism in the face of practices of applying moral terms, at least where no muddles arise. Ongoing vigilance in surveying the
practices of applying such terms as “right,” “wrong,” “permissible,” and “obligatory” is enough to keep us on course.

3. Literary-critical anthropologism.—Our applications of general terms both necessarily arise out of going practice and are marked by a standing, unappeasable desire for a perfect authority rooted in something beyond practice as it stands: perhaps it is the mind’s encounter with its own innate ideas; perhaps it is a Platonic heaven; perhaps it is biological hardwiring. Efforts to satisfy this desire can lead to conceptual change but only insofar as these efforts innovatively yet intelligibly engage with what is already done. Stanley Cavell has developed this reading. Extended to moral theory, it points in the direction of philosophical anthropology. Literature, along with certain forms of narrative history and psychology, can track the shifting shapes of this unappeasable desire. Acknowledgment and responsiveness to the complexities of the human, not theory generated in a position of detachment, are our best modes of human relationship but are also always under pressure from avoidances and from desires for mastery.

Building on and responding to Cora Diamond’s work both on Wittgenstein and on certain topics in the moral life, the essays in this volume explore whether there might be a space between antidecisionism and full-blown literary-critical anthropologism. Each of them rejects both epistemic consensualism and social constructivist ethics, both as a reading of Wittgenstein and as sound philosophy. The idea that agreement fixes the meaning of general terms itself depends on the idea that there is transcendent perspective available, from which we might establish how the meanings of general terms are fixed. But it is just this idea of an available transcendent perspective, so Diamond has argued and so these essays agree, that Wittgenstein rightly rejects, both early and late. As a result, there is no reason to think that the objectivity of term applications founders, no reason to see the term applications as rooted merely in consensus. Rather, they are rooted in practice, which is surveyable only piecemeal and not from any transcendent perspective.

This stance leaves open, however, both antidecisionism in the style of Hacker and literary-critical anthropologism in the style of Cavell. The essays that are collected here—written by James Conant, Michael Kremer, Juliet Floyd, Hilary Putnam, David Finkelstein, Stanley Cavell, John McDowell, Sabina Lovibond, Martha Nussbaum, Stephen Mulhall, and Alice Crary—are, like Diamond’s writing, generally somewhat hotter in tone than Hacker’s commentaries, as Wittgenstein is taken to have displayed a certain fervor in dealing with both conceptual and moral matters, against the more quietist drift of antidecisionism. Yet the essays (including Cavell’s) are somewhat cooler in tone, less concerned with topics such as psychoanalysis, the difficulties of achieving freedom, the joint strangeness and intimacy of the ordinary, and the standing possibility of alienation that Cavell has elsewhere taken up.

The essays are divided into two groups: “Part I: Wittgenstein” (the first five essays), and “Part II: The Moral Life” (the remaining six). Contrary to Alice Crary’s judicious and useful introduction, however, it is equally apt to see the first seven as concerned with philosophical anthropology and the place of epistemology within human life, with only the remaining four concerned with topics in ethics proper.

Cora Diamond is well known for having broached and defended (along
with James Conant) the so-called resolute reading of the *Tractatus* against more
typical “ineffability” readings. According to ineffability readings, Wittgenstein
undertook in the *Tractatus* to hint at, intimate, or “whistle” a metaphysical view
of reality as composed of simple, undecomposable, sempiternal, really existing
objects, which view cannot, however, be stated in a genuinely sensical sentence,
since sensical sentences are limited to picturing possible relations of objects.
According to this reading, the very stuff of the world must somehow be seen or
grasped, yet cannot be stated. According to Diamond, in contrast, there is “a
kind of critique of realism which runs through all of Wittgenstein’s philosophy”
(Cora Diamond, “Does Bismarck Have a Beetle in His Box?” in *The New Witt-
genstein*, ed. Alice Cray and Rupert Read [London: Routledge, 2000], 285),
early and late. We should, Diamond argues, not “chicken out” in our reading
of *Tractatus* 6.54: “Anyone who understands me eventually recognizes [my prop-
ositions] as nonsensical” (Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*,
89). Like the *Investigations*, the *Tractatus* is intended to purge us of our wish for
any metaphysical account of ultimate realities. It is this wish itself that leads to
alienation and failures of attention to life.

While this resolute reading of the *Tractatus* makes the book attractive, ur-
gent, and in line with contemporary antimetaphysical sensibilities, it is also open
to a number of immediate objections. It seems to require a theory of the nature
of the sense/nonsense distinction, a theory that the *Tractatus* is naturally taken
to attempt to state and defend. Hence it seems not to account for the existence
and force of most of the words of the book. It seems, further, to underrate the
criticisms that Wittgenstein later apparently made of the *Tractatus*, criticisms that
appear to involve taking it as purveying a metaphysical doctrine; hence it seems
to overrate the continuities between the *Tractatus* and the *Investigations*. Given,
however, that this reading is philosophically attractive, and given the gnomic
character of the text, Diamond’s work has sparked a swelling stream of com-
mentary, for and against.

James Conant’s essay, comprising roughly 27 percent of the volume at 112
pages plus 25 pages of substantive notes, is an extraordinarily sophisticated and
interesting attempt to defend the resolute reading of the *Tractatus*. It urges what
Conant dubs a mild mono-Wittgensteinianism, according to which there are
significant antimetaphysical continuities, as well as continuities in aims, method,
and organization, between the *Tractatus* and the *Investigations* (there is only one
Wittgenstein). But Conant does not deny that the *Investigations* also enters sig-
nificant criticisms of the earlier work. Wittgenstein came to recognize that he
had held “unwitting [metaphysical] commitments” (78) in the *Tractatus* notably
that complete analysis of a proposition via logical decomposition is always pos-
sible, that all inference is truth-functional, and that there is a general form of
the proposition. Because these commitments were tacit and unwitting, Dia-
mond’s claim that the *Tractatus* aims at weaning us from metaphysics and is
essentially clarificatory, not doctrinal, in intent can be upheld; because these
commitments are, Wittgenstein later came to see, nonetheless present, we can
account for differences between the *Tractatus* and the *Investigations* and for the
later work’s criticisms of the earlier. Hence this is a mild, not radical, mono-
Wittgensteinianism.
More important yet, Conant undertakes to account for the details of the text of the *Tractatus*. His most interesting interpretive suggestion is that the reason that the *Tractatus* is so gnomic—it has notably received solipsist-idealist as well as realist readings—is that it contains initially apparently possible, but ultimately nonsensical abstract “philosophical thoughts,” where the reader is (to be) brought to see that these thoughts are ultimately nonsensical precisely by wavering incoherently between idealist and realist construals of them. (For example: are the simple objects extensionless psychological objects or infinitesimally extended points?) When no definite construal can be settled on, then the sentence is to be rejected as nonsense, in a way that presupposes no theory of the nature of the sensical.

This is an intriguing and very attractive suggestion, and the mild mono-Wittgensteinianism that is on offer does usefully note continuities in aims, methods, and organization between Wittgenstein’s two major books. I am not yet convinced that it is quite successful. A more orthodox reading of the *Tractatus* would hold that the transcendental or “logical” character of its argumentation (“3.23 The requirement that simple signs be possible is the requirement that sense be determinate” [13]; the necessity of the existence of some simple signs as names for simple objects is derived from a requirement for determinate meaningfulness) makes specification of the natures of simple names and simple objects irrelevant. Yet simple names and simple objects there must nonetheless be. Conant, in conceding that Wittgenstein held explicitly that complete analysis via logical decomposition is always possible (only later recognizing this as a metaphysical commitment rather than a platitude), would seem also to concede that there must be simple names and simple objects, in order that analysis of meaning be thus constrained. Ineffable doctrines about these names and objects must somewhere be in the air.

Michael Kremer likewise defends the resolute reading against the ineffability reading. According to Kremer, ineffabilists conflate practical knowledge, as in when someone may be shown how to do something, with theoretical knowledge, as in when someone may be shown that something is the case. If this conflation is dropped, then there are no ineffabilist doctrines left to be shown: “we are left with simply an awareness of that which does, in an entirely innocent sense, show itself—our ability to use language that we speak and understand” (163). For example, careful attention to symbolism can show that we use the sign “=” sometimes to express identity of reference but difference in sense and sometimes to express number, as in “(∃x)(∃y) ∼ (x = y).” A proper symbolism would then have only one sign for each symbol, thus making the use of the sign clear in the sign itself. This, too, is an attractive suggestion that makes sense of central ideas in the *Tractatus*. But it, too, fails to give an account of the metaphysical mythology of simple names and simple objects that seems to constrain how analyses of uses of signs must be carried out.

According to Juliet Floyd, Wittgenstein’s aim in the *Tractatus* was “to set forth the logical as such” (210) in the interests of clarification, without any commitment to ideal language philosophy, to any favored notation, or to logical atomism. Though this line of argument is intended more or less to favor the resolute reading, it cuts oddly against the emphases of both Conant and Kremer
on the importance the *Tractatus* attaches to clarification by means of transparent symbolism.

Hilary Putnam, David Finkelstein, Stanley Cavell, and John McDowell each forward a picture of epistemology as properly the clarification of conceptual commitments, as opposed to the establishment of absolutely certain representations in detachment from worldly practice. Putnam criticizes Wittgenstein’s rejection, in Part II of *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*, of the claim that Cantor’s diagonalization argument expresses a discovery that the real numbers are nondenumerable. Putnam rightly observes that it is an axiom of arithmetic that every number has a successor; hence, he argues, contra Wittgenstein, to have no qualms about the existence of infinite sets in general, where only such qualms could motivate Wittgenstein’s remarks about Cantor. It is an interesting question whether this last claim about Wittgenstein’s motivations is sound, though Putnam does not have space to go into this in detail.

David Finkelstein argues that “Wittgenstein’s holism doesn’t lead him to the jarring conclusions about animals that we find in Rorty’s and Davidson’s writings” (254), for example, that animals do not “really” think, do not “really” have beliefs, and so forth. Nor, contra Fodor and Lepore, ought we to try to explain the existence of shared beliefs (among people or among people and animals) as consisting in having tokens of the same type. (What could a representational token in the brain be?) Instead, we should stop looking for putative superfacts that metaphysically underwrite our conceptual commitments, and we should accept the plain fact that “people and animals have lives” (267).

Stanley Cavell rehearses his own reflections on vegetarianism and the lives of animals as a way of exploring whether there may be forms and instances of “inordinate knowledge” that is importunate—that is, that makes urgent claims on its possessor and on others—where these claims are somehow beyond daily life as it stands and beyond discussable and tolerable moral disagreement. “Animals are fellow creatures whom we categorically may not eat” is, Cavell suggests, drawing on both Cora Diamond and J. M. Coetzee, for some people apparently such a claim. He then undertakes to register the urgencies that attach to this claim, while also noting the manifold daily and ordinary differences between other animals’ eating, mating, parenting, building, and so forth, and our own. John McDowell, replying to Cavell’s essay, is more assertive about the genuine existence of the phenomenon of inordinate knowledge. He notes that vegetarians who experience a fully categorical moral claim resemble skeptics as Cavell has elsewhere described them, precisely in being unhinged from ordinary life. Claims to inordinate knowledge arise, compensatorily, when one is “unhinged by the sense that one’s words are failing one, that one is losing the capacity to instantiate one’s life as a speaking animal” (304). Such unhings can certainly happen. What is perhaps at issue between Cavell and McDowell is whether they are properly describable as one party having a piece of knowledge that others lack and, if so, just what kind of knowledge this is. Cavell, I think, would see such unhings as failures of relationship to oneself, to others, and to the ordinary or as what he calls failures of acknowledgment, itself a (special) kind of knowledge.

In the more properly moral philosophical part of the volume, Sabina Lovibond investigates the mixture of asceticism, contemplativism, aestheticism, and
transcendentalism, inspired by Schopenhauer, that is present in Wittgenstein’s *Notebooks*. This stance is an example of a “subject-centered answer” as opposed to a “morality centered answer” to the question, “what makes a human life a good one or confers value on it?” (305). Lovibond then argues that there is a certain depth and attractiveness to this aesthetic, subject-centered stance, a depth and attractiveness that involve sheer receptivity to the world, quite apart from consideration of anything one must do as an agent. She then further argues that both the subject-centered answer and the morality-centered answer (goodness may be brought into the world by agents) are in order; hence, at bottom, ethics and aesthetics are not one.

In a somewhat similar spirit, Martha Nussbaum examines Theodor Fontane’s late novel *Der Stechlin* in order to argue that “the pleasures of conversation” and of following conversations that are meanderingly self-guided can be set alongside the pleasures of “surprise, tension, and conflict” (329) both in reading and life. Clear attention to these former pleasures “for their own sake” can help to moderate submission to “dominant social scripts” of desire and marriage that can be tyrannical (334).

Stephen Mulhall traces a development in Bernard Williams’s work on character from an initial use of schematic, preformed examples that are *not* “exploration-problems” (a term of Cora Diamond’s; 366), that is, *not* richly detailed and medium-specific, to a later “detailed contemplation of richly textured literary [examples]” (373). This development represents progress in Williams’s work, in that it registers, at last, the fact that “individual character, and thus selfhood, . . . [is] the result of a mutable social and political project, rather than a brute fact of experience” (377). Exemplary literature has always itself thought productively about the shapes and evolutions of such projects, so that it is a form of thinking that properly lies neighbor to moral philosophy, rather than simply a repository of counterexamples to standard theories.

Alice Crary criticizes and rejects both Peter Singer–style hedonic utilitarian and Tom Regan–style rights-oriented defenses of vegetarianism in favor of the thought, elsewhere urged by Diamond, that “simply being an animal is important for moral thought” (389). If we give up looking for metaphysical stories about what mattering “consists in” and instead pay attention to “what it means to be an animal,” then we can see that “animals impose direct moral claims in virtue of being the kinds of creatures they are” (389). The relevant facts about meanings are fully available, if we can but manage to give up “an image of the real world as lacking meaning” (391).

The theme of the availability of meanings to attentive perception in daily life, where such attentive perception is frequently blocked by (scientifically inspired, systematic) metaphysics is a Wittgensteinian one that runs throughout Cora Diamond’s work, as well as throughout the writings of Stanley Cavell and John McDowell (and Iris Murdoch). If it is apt, then there is indeed a way between antidecisionism and full-blown literary-critical anthropologism, and moral thinking should take less the shape of (moralistic) systematic theorizing, modeled on science, and more the shape of the cultivation of such attentive perception. It is a further question just how much attentive perception of human life will or should bring into view the “self-divided,” itinerant, and unappeased character of human subjects as subjects of desire or how much, instead or also,
it can yield something like settled commitments. Perhaps fully settled commitments, continuously stabilized by unambiguous perceptions, are not in the end quite possible.

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To say that this book is one of the most provocative and well-written studies of Hume’s political thought would, I fear, damn it with faint praise. There are, after all, very few provocative and well-written studies of Hume’s political thought. Yet this work fills the gap admirably. Hardin attempts to show the systematic coherence behind Hume’s scattered reflections on politics and to weave his political ideas into the more developed fabric of his theory of morals. Hardin’s interpretation of Hume and his predecessors will be highly controversial (and is quite dubious at points), yet no reader interested in Hume will fail to be stimulated by his sharp analysis and by his very bold reading of *A Treatise of Human Nature*. While some of the following remarks will be critical, they are intended mainly to indicate the range of questions that this book provokes.

Hardin’s approach to Hume is entirely by means of the famous is-ought distinction. Not only does Hardin take this distinction to be the axis of Hume’s moral and political theory, but he also gives a profoundly radical interpretation of Hume’s intention in proposing the distinction in the first place. Hardin begins from Hume’s stated goal of introducing the “experimental method” into the human sciences. Hume’s idea is that after collecting a number of “cautious observations of human life” we can bring them under increasingly general principles of human nature, just as Newton brought the astronomical principles of Kepler and the mechanical principles of Galileo under the single law of gravitation.

Hardin is most concerned with the part of this science that concerns morality, as opposed to those that concern reason, passion, and other parts of human nature. Hume famously argues that moral distinctions (particularly those of virtue and vice) are like the “secondary qualities” of color, taste, and smell. They are not inherently present in objects. Rather, human nature is arranged so that when people encounter a certain kind of object they are stimulated to interpret or to receive it in a certain way. Something may appear blue, for example, yet if people’s eyes were constructed differently, it might appear to be a different color. But this new color would be no more true or false than the former one. It would merely be a different way of interpreting the same object, which has no “true colors,” strictly speaking.

So it is with moral distinctions. When people encounter certain objects (usually other people), they sometimes experience a kind of “agreeable” feeling that leads them to call that thing or person “virtuous,” or, conversely, they can experience a kind of “uneasy” feeling that leads them to call that thing or person “vicious.” If human nature were constructed differently, people might receive these pleasures and pains from different kinds of objects, and so they would