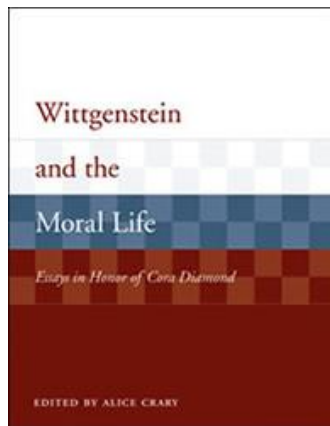




## Alice Crary, *Wittgenstein and the Moral Life*



review by Francesco Pesci

«The essays in this volume celebrate the philosophical writings of Cora Diamond» (p. 1). These are the words with which Alice Crary opens this interesting, varied and rich book. Under this common description we find eleven different contributions by some of the most important contemporary Angloamerican philosophers. Each of them has shared, more or less directly, part of his or her own intellectual biography with Cora Diamond and here takes up a particular theme in Diamond's writings. As the title suggests and as Crary reminds us in the Introduction, two main issues must be taken into account in order to have an overview of Diamond's impact: her exegetical work on early and late Wittgenstein in cooperation with James Conant – which goes under the label of 'resolute reading' – and her original and unconventional reflections on moral philosophy. The book is divided into two sections along these lines. The first, entitled *Wittgenstein* (pp. 27-278), contains essays by Conant,

Kremer, Floyd, Putnam and Finkelstein. The second, entitled *The Moral Life* (pp. 279-404), contains essays by Cavell, McDowell, Lovibond, Nussbaum, Mulhall and Crary.

Although the thematic division of the book tries to give it some organization, the reader cannot avoid a certain sense of fragmentation among the chapters which, far from being inevitable in a collective volume, makes it difficult to give a synthetic and comprehensive outline of the book. This is certainly an excellent book and a valid instrument to start assessing the outcome of Diamond's work as a whole and to evaluate Diamond's influence on contemporary philosophy. Nonetheless, the reader must expect neither an introductory volume nor a detailed critical analysis of Diamond's major philosophical achievements. The spirit in which these essays are written is that of considering Diamond's writings as a source of inspiration and as a spur to elaborate reflections which, being evidently indebted to her thought, are ready to take different directions and, sometimes, to reach different conclusions. Here we will concentrate mostly on those contributions which are more directly related to, and in dialogue with, Diamond's texts.

A first line of interest lies in the first three essays, which together form a rough updating of the state of health of the 'resolute reading'. Not many years ago, Diamond and Conant published together an important paper (J. Conant & C. Diamond, *On reading the Tractatus resolutely: reply to Meredith Williams and Peter Sullivan*, in M. Kölbel and B. Weiss (ed. by), *The Lasting Significance of Wittgenstein's Philosophy*, Routledge, 2004) in which they clarified and refined some important issues regarding their influential work on early and late Wittgenstein in the light of the many criticisms they had received. In that writing they held – among other things – two points that are here taken up. Even if there are fundamental theses that must be shared, there is not only 'one way' to be resolute, and degrees of disagreement are possible, if not welcome. Secondly, to be resolute does not mean to negate a development in Wittgenstein's thought. In his complex and insightful *Mild Mono-Wittgensteinianism* (pp. 31-142) – which subtly exploits the technique of Kierkegaard's pseudonyms to present the author's point of view – Conant argues at some length about what exactly it means to hold a thesis of continuity in Wittgenstein's thought. He analyzes what has been erroneously attached to resolute readers in considerable detail. To put it in the broadest (and vaguest) way, what is in any way central to a resolute reading is the attribution to Wittgenstein of a constant conception of the aim of philosophy. This is essentially «the aspiration to practice philosophy in such a way that it does not issue in a doctrine or a theory, but rather in the practice of an activity» (p. 68). The *Tractatus* must not be read as putting forward any general theory of meaning, capable of giving us a criterion to distinguish sense from nonsense, but as an exercise of that clarification of thoughts that Wittgenstein thought to be possible through the clarification of propositions, *das Klarwende von Sätzen*. Holding firmly to this point (here roughly represented), Conant illustrates a fairly great degree of variation in Wittgenstein's conception of philosophical method and – as a partial novelty (but not for the readers of *On reading the Tractatus resolutely*) – presents a list of what he calls the metaphysical «unwitting commitments» (p. 78) of the *Tractatus*. This is a series of possible propositions that Wittgenstein came to see, in his later writings, as open to challenge in a way his earlier self did not. He came, that is, to recognize them 'as' philosophical commitments. For the author of the *Tractatus* they were not «in view [...] as commitments» (p. 79). These must be sharply distinguished from those apparent metaphysical commitments which he consciously aimed to free philosophy of through the *Tractatus* itself, and must not be seen by a resolute reader as in any way inconsistent with the aspiration to eliminate metaphysics. The detailed account of the lists of conscious (but apparent) commitments on the one hand, and unwitting commitments on the other – which for Conant are always open to a certain degree of disagreement among resolute readers – is the most remarkable

feature of his essay which, touching nevertheless many more issues (such as the question of the 'piecemeal' method), presents a comprehensive and convincing way «to be simultaneously maximally resolute and mildly mono-Wittgensteinian» (p. 111).

In *The Cardinal Problem of Philosophy* (pp. 143-176) Michael Kremer aims at a classical target of the 'resolute reading'. As he reminds us, prior to Diamond's *Throwing Away the Ladder* (in *The Realistic Spirit*, MIT Press, 1995), the dominant interpretation of the *Tractatus* was some variant of the 'ineffability' reading. In his essay he deals with the specific account that this reading has traditionally offered of the saying/showing distinction. The importance of the issue is justified by claiming attention for a letter Wittgenstein wrote to Russell in August 1919. In that letter, in order to make Russell understand the main point of the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein describes the question of what can be expressed by propositions and what can only be shown as 'the cardinal problem of philosophy'. Kremer begins with some philological work on the letter and connects it with the *Tractatus*'s Preface, where Wittgenstein states that, in its essentials, he has solved those problems that rest on the misunderstanding of the logic of our language. In defining the saying/showing distinction as a philosophical problem, Wittgenstein may have assumed it to be something to be (dis)solved. This philological apparatus is one of the arms Kremer uses to combat the ineffabilist explanation of the saying/showing distinction. Generally – for example by Peter Geach – this distinction has been seen as an instrument at the service of the sense/nonsense dichotomy. In an ineffabilist fashion, the 'showing' side has been conceived to somehow point to those insights which, being beyond the limits of language, cannot be put into words. The 'showing' would thus be an instrument of access to the realm of nonsense. This approach has been strongly criticized by Diamond and the other resolute readers because it ascribes to Wittgenstein the paradoxical intention to declare something nonsense, while at the same time wanting to say that there is “something” which, even if nonsense, is somehow graspable. This attitude towards the *Tractatus* has been labeled by Diamond as 'chickening out'. Kremer attempts here to give an explanation of the distinction that is coherent with a resolute reading. As a first step he suggests that the uses of 'showing' in the *Tractatus* may be two-sided. «On the one hand, talk of showing can tempt us into the nonsensical illusion that we grasp a realm of super-facts beyond the reach of language. On the other hand, talk of showing can, innocently enough, direct us to the practical abilities and masteries that are part of our ongoing talking, thinking and living» (p. 158). As a second step, he warns us not to take this two-sidedness at face value. It must not reach the status of a supposedly theoretical commitment with a propensity to give us a sure standpoint from which to again distinguish sense from nonsense. The innocent meaning of 'showing' amounts simply to an awareness of our ability to make sense of our propositions. «The solution to the “cardinal problem of philosophy” is *not* to be found in a “theory” of that which can be said and that which can only be shown, or a *criterion* of sense and nonsense. The desire for such a theory is itself part of the problem» (p. 163) and involves a philosophical fantasy that must be overcome.

In her *Wittgenstein and the Inexpressible* (pp. 177-234) Juliet Floyd touches different topics such as the presence *in nuce* of the theme of an open-ended variety in our language in the *Tractatus*, the mixture of two different analytic traditions in Wittgenstein's and Diamond's thought, the variety of meanings of the notion of 'showing' in the *Tractatus*, the conception of his philosophy as a transition «from not really understanding what one wants to say to understanding how to say it better» (p. 191). Her essay demonstrates that plurality of visions internal to the 'resolute reading', desired and “legitimized” by Conant and Diamond. In fact, even though Floyd shares most of the central assumptions of the resolute readers, she draws attention to very different issues. Besides feeling uncomfortable with the therapy lexicon (p. 187), more notably, she takes up the question of 'Logical

Atomism' in the *Tractatus*. Her general point of criticism against Diamond, Conant and Kremer is their too quick dismissal of part of the logical apparatus of the *Tractatus*. In the first decade of responses to Diamond's writings, she argues, «what we are to say about the *Tractatus*'s logical atomism and Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* conception, both of the outcome of logical analysis and the formalization of language in a logically perspicuous notation such as Frege's or Russell's» (p. 194) has been left too undetermined. Moreover, Floyd attributes a certain importance to the notions of 'validity' and 'formality', which have been partially neglected by these resolute readers. Her overall achievement in these pages is thus an account of the *Tractatus*'s logical apparatus which, while still being 'resolute', links it historically as well as conceptually «to certain important strands in the philosophy of logic that pushed, *via* Carnap, to the center of more recent philosophical attention in the work of Quine» (pp. 202-3), thus rejecting the «epistemic and meaning-theoretic strands of thinking about analysis [...] that we see at work in Russell» (p. 203).

Putnam's essay (*Wittgenstein and the Real Numbers*, pp. 235-250) – which makes a direct criticism of Wittgenstein, ascribing to the second part of the *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics* the assumption of some definite implausible 'philosophical theses' about mathematics; and David H. Finkelstein's (*Holism and Animal Minds*, pp. 251-278) – which, following Diamond's suggestions, argues in favor of a distinction between Wittgenstein's holism and the Rorty-Davidson model – are not concerned with the 'resolute reading' and do not face up directly to Diamond's work, so we will omit a summary of them.

The other main line of interest lies in the second half of the volume. The essays by Cavell, McDowell and Crary deal with animal ethics. In particular, Stanley Cavell's *Companionable Thinking* (pp. 281-298) and John McDowell's *Comment on Cavell's "Companionable Thinking"* (pp. 299-304) constitute, together with Diamond's *The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy* (in *Reading Cavell*, ed. A. Crary and S. Shieh, Routledge, London 2006, pp. 98-118) a triptych that should be read jointly. In her wonderful paper Diamond links the question of eating animals, as it is offered in Coetzee's novel *The Lives of Animals*, with central Cavellian themes centered on the notions of 'deflection' and 'exposure'. In his contribution, Cavell attempts to offer a response to Diamond, going further into the issue of the moral differences that arise between vegetarians and meat eaters. He asks whether we can really assess these differences by an appeal to the Wittgensteinian theme of 'seeing aspects'. And his answer is somehow negative. If we describe it as a difference in aspects we run the risk of belittling Diamond's point. What we would not catch is a deeper difference. In the conceptual world of the kind of vegetarians she refers to, animals are not simply seen 'as' company (as if it would be possible to see them differently in different moments), they 'are' company. In this light, to eat our 'fellow creatures' assumes the status of that unhinged perception that Diamond calls the 'difficulty of reality,' and Cavell glosses as the problem of «inordinate knowledge», (p. 283), of that knowledge whose importunity and oppression make us feel uncomfortable in trying to put it into words, as though they could never reach the reality we are aiming at. In further response to this account, McDowell criticizes Cavell with respect to the angle he chooses to take on Diamond's reflections. According to McDowell, Cavell overestimates the question of the moral distances (feeling provoked to reflect upon his meat eater life). The meat eating problem that Diamond puts in the foreground is a question that, leaving aside the problem of the moral differences, appeals to a 'difficulty of reality' that one can appreciate even if one does not share the vision of nonhuman animals as fellow creatures. «The role of Coetzee's Costello for Diamond is rather to provide an analogue for the unhinging perceptions of separation and finitude that according to Cavell himself constitute the real point of philosophical skepticism» (p. 304).

In the last essay (*Humans, Animals, Right and Wrong*, pp. 381-404), Alice Crary deals with a historical target of Diamond's writings, that is, a familiar mode of argument in favor of animal ethics that has mostly been worked out by, to mention only the best known, Tom Regan and Peter Singer. As she calls it, the «Argument from Common Capacities» (p. 382) used by these philosophers tries to free us from the prejudice of thinking that simply being a 'human being' – namely having a certain set of capacities – can do the philosophical work of justifying our moral consideration toward human beings in a way that does not grant the same moral consideration toward nonhuman animals. Typically, this argument calls attention to the fact that the possession of certain capacities is really far from being the center of our moral consideration toward disabled people, who lack significant parts of the “common” capacities. Thus – they say – the prejudice we are victims of in excluding animals from our moral consideration only on the base of their 'being animals' is revealed. In this perspective 'being human' and 'being animal' are not morally relevant concepts. Crary wants to challenge this view. Using different examples, also from Diamond, she attempts to show that «being human is by itself morally significant» and «that being an animal is as well» (p. 386), even if they claim different kinds of moral considerations. What she wants to stress is the 'direct claim view' that «animals impose direct moral claims in virtue of being the kinds of creatures they are» (p. 389), which, while evidently a point Diamond makes, can hardly be ascribed to her in the same direct terms.

Unfortunately, we cannot here sum up the remaining contributions, which are: Sabina Lovibond's *“In Spite of the Misery of the World”*: *Ethics, Contemplation, and the Source of Value* (pp. 305-325) – her reflections about contemplation in ethics are very fruitful if confronted with those of Diamond; Martha Nussbaum's *A Novel in Which Nothing Happens: Fontane's Der Stechlin and Literary Friendship* (pp. 327-354); and Stephen Mulhall's *The Mortality of the Soul: Bernard Williams's Character(s)* (pp. 355-380) – which, even if apparently concerned with different issues, can be labeled under the theme of the role of literature in helping us to see ourselves and our relations to others in a more ‘realistic spirit’.

Crary, Alice (a cura di), *Wittgenstein and the Moral Life: Essays in Honor of Cora Diamond*, M.I.T. Press, London 2007, pp. VIII-409, £ 23.95

Sito dell'editore

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