

Diamond's Wittgenstein and the Mute Philosopher

Anat Matar

1

One possible way of situating Wittgenstein is by conceiving the history of philosophy as a movement in the realm of language, and by analysing and implementing Wittgenstein's ideas concerning the language of past, present and future philosophy. This is Cora Diamond's way, as I read it. Diamond believes that traditional philosophy was mesmerised by an illusion of sense regarding its own statements, and that the same illusion still bewitches contemporary philosophers. She attributes to both stages of Wittgenstein's thought the insights needed for a final liberation from this illusion. I shall not dispute Diamond's interpretation of Wittgenstein here; rather, I wish to examine the future of disillusioned philosophy according to Diamond's allegedly Wittgensteinian views.

The picture emerging from Diamond's writings is that there are three stations on the (not neatly chronological) route to disillusionment from the mythology couched in the traditional language of philosophy. We can call them 'traditional metaphysics', 'transitional metaphysics' and, keeping to Diamond's own term, 'the realistic spirit', which is basically a metaphysic-less station. This tristational reading of the convoluted history of philosophy is a movement going from a naively dogmatic language of a priori requirements, via a consciously self-defeating philosophical language, to a language free from chimerical constraints.

Philosophy has always aimed at a liberation through self-understanding. *Traditional* metaphysics distinguished between false appearances and genuine principles, which transcend the partial, contingent phenomenon of self-understanding, and are anchored in a more "real", eternal, unchanging realm. In the *transitional* metaphysics of Kant, Frege and the Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus* such external realms were exposed as myths. All three philosophers realised that in order to express genuine self-understanding, metaphysical language must reflect its *own* principle, and not any other, allegedly prior ones. However, they also understood that only something that is *partial* can reflect, can stand opposite to something *else*, what it aims at reflecting - whereas in the case of logic, or language, which is essentially

all-inclusive, there is nothing outside it for it to reflect! Philosophical language seeks to represent the world from a logical point of view, but this search itself lays logic outside the world, prior to it, and is hence self-contradictory. This intrinsically nonsensical character of philosophical language, its inability to reflect, is exposed by transitional metaphysics.

However, looked at from the *later* Wittgenstein's perspective, Kant, Frege and the early Wittgenstein were still misled by a powerful component of the traditional myth, by "the dogmatism into which we fall so easily in doing philosophy" (PI: § 131). This dogmatism is the "preconceived idea to which reality must correspond" (ibid.); it is the a priori decision that something *must* be so, in language, in reality, in mathematics, in the moral realm, even in a work of art, in a novel. Behind all these there allegedly lies a system, a rigorous form of argument, a definite set of rational principles. This attitude betrays "a reluctance to see all that is involved in using [language] well, responding well to it, meeting it well, reluctance to see what kind of failure it may be to use it badly" (380). And it is such *mistrust of language* that has initiated philosophers, past and present, in their endeavours to pose requirements and to seek solid foundations, which should serve as "preparatory studies for a future regularisation of language" (PI: §130).

The final stage, that of the realistic spirit, is, according to Diamond, the one that sets us free from all dogmatic requirements - requirements that are in fact antecedent to any actual, "realistic", encounter with reality. Instead of the previous mistrust, a realistic spirit is confident with its language, a language which resists dogmatic constraints and a priori requirements. But how does such a liberated language look? It would be plausible to expect Diamond to show future philosophers wherein lies their new linguistic voice, freeing them from the linguistic diet forced on them by the myth of traditional philosophical discourse. However, I believe that the result is exactly the opposite: since Diamond reads the later Wittgenstein with a very strong *Tractarian* accent, her realistic spirit leaves the philosopher eventually mute.

2

According to Diamond, the language of philosophy, as such, yields to the idea that "words can both hide and reveal", i.e. that "what is in one sense plainly before us may be hidden from us" (25). She hence accepts the stubborn distinction between appearance and reality, which is the cornerstone of philosophy, of metaphysics. Diamond gives this classical division linguistic shape, by distinguishing between ordinary uses of language, where principles and arguments are explicitly formulated, and what she calls 'riddle-thinking', which is marked by a more suggestive, implicit and creative linguistic moves (25). She makes a rapprochement between great riddles and the

deepest metaphysical and ethical problems. Solutions of philosophical problems, like those of riddles, can never be explained in the manner usually designated to *ordinary* questions: step-by-step argument, systematic analysis. These are solutions of a *totally different* kind, expressing an *attitude* to life, and hence the understanding they convey is not at all conceptual.

Looking now for a *language* suitable for riddle-solutions, we find that these solutions yield only 'description' "in a different sense" (269), and that their language is not language but 'language'. The quotation marks signal a dramatic difference: this 'descriptive' 'language' essentially describes *nothing*. As linguistic constructions its sentences are plain nonsense. Their illusory power urges us to go *beyond their appearance as ordinary, meaningful* sentences, but there is no 'beyond' towards which we aim, no hidden realm of truth. What is hidden, we now realise, is the fact that *nothing* is hidden: there is nothing to which logic, ethics, or metaphysics *refer*. There is nothing we can reach here by means of signs.

The linguistic mechanism that enables this flickering of sense and nonsense is 'secondary sense'. The term is taken from the *Philosophical Investigations*. Diamond, following Wittgenstein (PI, p. 216), explains to us the idea of secondary sense by contrasting it with metaphorical sense. The latter is a linguistic construction that may be paraphrased. While we may make clear what we mean by, say, 'man is the cancer of the planet', we cannot do so with 'Wednesday is fat and Tuesday is lean'. The latter is a use of a secondary sense. It aims at evoking an experience, a feeling, and only in that formulation can its meaning be captured. Sometimes, says Wittgenstein, "a sentence can strike me like a painting in words, and the very individual word in the sentence as like a picture" (PI: 215). These circumstances, where meaning is got by an *insight*, are similar to the experiences of seeing an aspect (PI: 214), and they are parasitic upon the *regular* procedure by which words acquire meaning, on *primary* uses (PI: 216). Diamond's point is that the linguistic constructions aiming at expressing - or better, *evoking* - metaphysical and ethical ideas - or better, *attitudes* - are uses of words in a secondary sense. It now becomes evident that ordinary language plays only an indirect role in philosophy. Reflective linguistic structures are not statements - in the usual ("primary") sense. They speak only to those who have - to use Wittgenstein's phrases again - "a sensitive ear", "a musical ear" (PI: 214, 215), they force themselves as *pictures*.

We should bear in mind that among the linguistic moves that are precluded from systematic language, or indeed, from language (in the ordinary sense) in general, are philosophical reflections on language, including that of philosophical reflection:

[W]e have something which cannot be referred to by an ordinary description... This is a grammatical characterisation of a special sort... It is the 'grammar' of a 'language' in which we could talk about what makes language possible. Looked at another way, it is the grammar which shows us what kind of question it is we are trying to answer... and to be a great riddle is to 'allude' to a language whose full transparency to us is ruled out. (281f.)

Philosophical reflections expressed as statements are a myth. But that doesn't mean that no philosophical reflections are possible. A good reflection aims not at passive conceptualisation, but at *stimulation to further thought*. The language of reflection is a language that simply *acts* as what it wishes to reflect, thus *showing, not saying*, its relevant features. For this purpose, it must ceaselessly break new ways. It is at this point that Diamond leads us to see that philosophical insights are at home mainly with the language of *literature*, that it is in literature, where reality and fiction, similarities and dissimilarities, can be creatively interwoven, to yield a powerful reflection, an illuminating object of comparison:

The language-games are rather set up as *objects of comparison* which are meant to throw light on the facts of our language by way not only of similarities, but also of dissimilarities. For we can avoid ineptness or emptiness in our assertions only by presenting the model as what it is, as an object of comparison - as, so to speak, a measuring-rod... (PI: §§130-131, original emphasis)

But Diamond does not "reduce" philosophy to literature. There is a division of labour: the novelist writes; the philosopher reads. Philosophy, as we learn from the *Tractatus*, is a *method*. For Diamond, this comes to saying that it is a way of contemplating life, art, morals, language; it is a practice, a gesture, an attitude, a constant intertwining of perspectives. Literature is then the appropriate *vessel* for philosophical ideas. Being pictorial, yielding insights, resisting paraphrase, dependent upon style, all these features of secondary sense are much more at home with novelists than with professional philosophers. Philosophical "solutions", phrased as straightforward talk in ordinary language, are prone to lead to the gravest mistakes. In order to get a hold of them as they should be understood, what is needed is that which could create the desired effect, the right attitude. No direct, "rational" formulation, brought in the form of orderly arguments, leads to the desired understanding as a proof leads us from premises to conclusion. Allusions play the main role. To sum up this point: whereas traditional philosophers are *deaf* - not hearing the hollow sound of their own statements, the realistically spirited ones are *mute*: they have a sensitive ear, but no tongue to express themselves.

3

Now traditional philosophers fail also in their *reading* tasks, for "it is no plain business finding how to write illuminatingly about human experience - and no plain business reading about it either" (379). Traditional philosophers remain dogmatic when reading literature philosophically. They read a novel as if the thoughts expressed in it have already existed before the text, neatly organised in a system, and as if their task as professional readers is to discover them and to tell us the right way for us to read the text in their light. Diamond contrasts their "limiting assumptions" with the attitude of a realistic spirit. The latter's reading is no less philosophical, but it is a *liberated* philosophy - a philosophy whose main point is to show the "inadequacies of any such systematic account of human nature..." (369). In order to reflect (upon) human nature, we should surpass the limiting language of traditional philosophy, or systematic discourse, *read* such pieces as Fielding's *Tom Jones* - and read them in a *philosophic state of mind*:

Through a reading of the novel, we can come to recognise the gulf between all such systems and the 'fluidity' of human experience... What we learn of human nature is not the truth or falsity of any particular view in the repertoire; rather, reading the novel teaches us how to think about human nature by making us think about it, in response to its 'constant intertwining' of perspectives (369).

Bad philosophical reading of literature is further connected to the presumption to know in advance what philosophy itself is. Traditionally, in philosophy "we are concerned to develop certain ideas, to work out their consequences and systematic relations, to see their rational justification..." (369). The realistic spirit lets philosophy be determined internally, freely and creatively. What *evokes* philosophical thinking is philosophical; what *dictates* the rules for a philosophical inquiry, or *states* its results, is not.

4

Diamond is fully aware that she herself is engaged in philosophical writing, in *expressing philosophical insights by means of sentences in the English language*. It is here, I think, that the deep problems of her vision of a "realistic spirit" surface. And it is not a mere coincidence that these problems should be detected most clearly in her conception of her own writing, her own philosophical language.

Diamond tries to implement the realistic spirit's moral and avoid explicitly formulated philosophical arguments. This is why in most of her essays all she wishes is to *gesture* towards the meaninglessness, the immorality or simply the uselessness of the presumably philosophical moves of *others*. Here is the philosopher as reader; in this

case, a *critical* reader, demonstrating another's faulty moves. Diamond explains that in order to demonstrate to the nonsense-speaking philosopher that this is what he does, it is necessary to treat, first, his nonsense as sense - to go as far as possible with this assumption, until it is clear that "he had given no meaning to certain signs in his propositions." The same method is needed in order to understand her own move as well, she admits, since she is bound to talk only nonsense, during this procedure. Hers, though, is *self-conscious* nonsense, transitory, like that of the *Tractatus*: "The reading it *requires requires* that it take us in at first, *requires* that it should allow itself to be read as sense, read as about logic, and so on, despite *not being so*" (EIT: 164, my emphases). Note how salient is the fact that the language here is a language of *requirements*. Indeed, we may remember that this transitional stage was criticised by Diamond precisely for its dogmatic nature, for knowing in advance what logic, language, philosophy, sense and nonsense are, what they should be.

However, if, as Diamond avows, most of her essays assume this critical, transitory, nonsensical stance, how is it that they themselves avoid dogmatism, requirements? I believe that they do not. For while formally eschewing any a priori requirement of language, of philosophy, and of the language of philosophy, Diamond's exclusion of her own *talk* as talk, her preference to see it rather as transitional 'talk', is only possible on the basis of a set of very powerful, dogmatic requirements from all three - language, philosophy, and the language of philosophy. It hence reveals a constant *double talk*.

Now if we read Diamond as transitional readers, if we allow ourselves - temporarily - to take her nonsense as sense, to take out her quotation marks, to treat philosophical 'language' as if it were language, we end up with a very conservative picture of language: with sharp dualisms, not dissimilar to those prevailing in traditional philosophical writings. As we then wake up from this illusory trip, adding back the quotation marks, this feeling persists. At the basis of Diamond's notion of a metaphysics-less, non-dogmatic, free and creative spirit stand the most rigid of distinctions, as a priori requirements. For the idea that philosophers are eventually mute, that philosophical reflection can be rendered merely as an image, never in 'conceptual language', is bound up with an inflexible dichotomy between sense and nonsense, between ordinary, 'normal', descriptive discourse and creative discourse, between question and riddle, primary and secondary sense. The statement that "to be a great riddle is to 'allude' to a language whose full transparency to us is ruled out" implies that *ordinary* questions and descriptions are written in a fully transparent language, that there is indeed such a possibility in language. These implicit presuppositions of Diamond, which serve as the hidden, ineffable basis of the realistic spirit, are the crux of full-fledged traditional metaphysics.

The later Wittgenstein, read "Tractatically", is, *au fond*, a traditional philosopher, far from the revolutionary figure we'd expect. Luckily, I believe that it is possible to read Wittgenstein differently - in a way that shows him to offer future philosophers *genuinely* radical views of language and of philosophy, and a rich and confident philosophical language in which to express these views. But *Diamond's* Wittgenstein leaves philosophers speechless.

References

- Diamond, Cora, 1991, *The Realistic Spirit*, Cambridge, Mass: MIT press. [Page numbers in parentheses refer to this volume, unless otherwise cited]
- 2000, "Ethics, Imagination and the method of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*", in A. Crary and R. Read (eds), *The New Wittgenstein*, London: Routledge. [EIT]
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig, 1958, *Philosophical Investigations*, Trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, Oxford: Blackwell. [PI]