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# Philosophy and Poetry

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## Abstract

Philosophy certainly has connections with science but it is not itself a science. Nor is it literature. But it is related to literature in a way that excessive emphasis on science can obscure. In this paper I defend the rather old-fashioned view that philosophy is essentially linguistic. I also argue, less conventionally, that there is an unavoidable personal aspect to at least some philosophical problems, and in answering them we must speak for ourselves without being able to count on every other speaker of our language agreeing with us or even understanding what we say. Where the rules of our language are not set we must, so to speak, make them up for ourselves as we go. In this way philosophy requires the kind of linguistic creativity more often associated with poetical kinds of literature. Drawing on the work of Cora Diamond and Alice Crary, I argue that philosophy should be regarded as, not identical with, but continuous with poetry.

In his 1957 remarks on “The Elimination of Metaphysics,” Rudolf Carnap distinguishes between cognitive meaning (which asserts, designates, or refers, and is associated with science) and expressive meaning (which is non-cognitive, and associated with music and poetry).<sup>1</sup> Carnap and others wanted to limit philosophy to the cognitive sphere and rejected metaphysics, along with most ethics (with the exception of meta-ethics), on this basis. Without embracing the suggestion that there are precisely two kinds of meaning, I want to argue that Carnap was right to think that some philosophy belongs in the same camp as poetry. He would consider this to be a rather bad kind of philosophy, but I will argue that in fact all philosophy that is not misleadingly named belongs in the same camp as metaphysics and ethics. It is because philosophy is not the same kind of thing as science that, as Wittgenstein noted, “People say again and again

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that philosophy doesn't really progress."<sup>2</sup> It was Wittgenstein too who wrote that, "philosophy ought really to be written only as a *poetic composition*."<sup>3</sup> I will not go that far, but I will argue that philosophy would do well to move in that direction. To some extent philosophy is already done in the way that I recommend here, but my goal is not simply to describe current practices. I want also to make a case for philosophy's having a more literary or humanistic, and therefore less scientific, understanding of itself than at present. (And by this I mean only that some philosophers have scientific tendencies, not that all philosophy is utterly scientific.) It is not that all philosophy ought really to be poetry, but, rather, that some might be, and that all should be recognized as having an inescapable connection with literary writing.

In order to make my case I will begin, in part I, with a consideration of what (analytic) philosophy has generally been taken to be and to be for. I pay little attention to continental philosophy in this paper, mostly because it already embraces the kind of broadly literary conception of philosophy for which I argue here. At least the relevance of literature to the work of the philosophical novelist and playwright Sartre is obvious, the importance of literary style to the work of the poet and philosopher Nietzsche is obvious, the centrality of poetry in the thinking of the later Heidegger is clear, and the creative and playful nature of much of Derrida's work is evident. I will not attempt a catalogue of the ways in which such work has influenced others, but will take it as given that it has. So I will focus from here onwards on so-called analytic philosophy, or philosophy in the analytic tradition. In part II I discuss the main reasons for thinking that the literary conception of philosophy that I am arguing for is well suited to ethics, and in Part III I explain how this has implications for the rest of philosophy too.

## Part I: What is (Analytic) Philosophy?

There is a sense in which, as Hans-Johann Glock points out, philosophy is basically *a priori*, whether we like it or not:

By tradition philosophy, like logic and mathematics, has been regarded as *a priori*, independent of sensory experience. Its problems cannot be solved, its propositions cannot be supported or refuted, by observation or experiment, irrespective of whether these concern the natural world or human culture. Though often derided at present in the name of naturalism, this rationalist picture squares well with the actual practice of philosophers, naturalists included. Philosophy as a distinctive intellectual pursuit is constituted at least in part by *problems* of a particular kind. These problems include questions such as 'Can human beings acquire genuine knowledge?', 'What is the relationship between mind and body?' and 'Are there objective moral principles?' They are not just supremely abstract and fundamental, but also *a priori*, at least in the

sense that the characteristically philosophical disputes about them concern not the scientific findings themselves, but at most the relevance these findings have for such problems.<sup>4</sup>

Let me note several ideas that Glock brings together in this passage. He says, for one thing, that philosophy is partly defined by the kind of problems that it addresses. He says, secondly, that these problems are *a priori* “at least in the sense that ... characteristically philosophical disputes about them” are not primarily concerned with scientific findings. Thirdly, he says that these problems cannot be solved by observation or experiment. I agree with the first two of these claims, but the third is somewhat problematic. If observation can neither support nor refute philosophical propositions then one wonders how philosophers can proceed at all. Indeed Wittgenstein, who denied that there were any such things as philosophical propositions (see *Tractatus* 4.112 and *Philosophical Investigations* § 128), suggested that philosophers had not made any progress whatsoever in more than two thousand years.<sup>5</sup> Yet he must have considered his own work to be somewhat worthwhile, and it consists of what might well be called observations. They are not mainly *scientific* observations, true, but Wittgenstein places no limits on what kind of reminders we might want to assemble in doing philosophy. Glock takes himself to be agreeing with Wittgenstein, so we should not read too much into his insistence that philosophy is *a priori* and that observation has no place in it. At any rate, I do not want to deny that there is a place for observation and experience, broadly conceived, in philosophy. I will argue below, for instance, that we can learn from poets, and that they in turn learn from experience. There is no reason why we might not learn directly from experience itself (it surely shapes the intuitions on which we draw in ethics, for instance), nor why only poets (however broadly we conceive of this category) should be able to teach us.

Philosophical disagreements are typically about how certain questions are to be understood, and are thus linguistic (since understanding questions requires that we make sense of them and this sense is made in language), and the questions themselves tend to be about concepts, which again can only be understood in linguistic terms.<sup>6</sup> Thus, for instance, Glock’s examples of typical philosophical problems concern the concepts of knowledge (or what counts as genuine knowledge), mind, objectivity, and morality. A concept is not the same thing as a word, but the concept *snow* cannot be understood without reference to the word ‘snow’ and its cognates. We cannot hope to understand a concept such as knowledge without reference to uses of words such as ‘knowledge.’ This might be disputed, but if a concept has meaning then on a broad conception of language, there is really no difference between a linguistic investigation and a conceptual one: both are concerned with semantics (in a literal, not a pejorative, sense). In practice, conceptual investigations will be conducted in language, and not simply because this is the medium of all investigation. We identify the very concepts in question by linguistic means, in terms of the words used to express them. Unless we are

born with an innate set of concepts then we surely acquire concepts through exposure to language, so that there is at least this connection between words and concepts. For these reasons, in what follows I will treat concepts and words as being more or less interchangeable.

Even experimental philosophy, which might seem the most obvious exception to the idea that philosophy consists in linguistic analysis, aims to help answer philosophical questions as traditionally conceived, and is surely continuous with more traditional philosophy even while being genuinely innovative. Hence philosophy is largely linguistic. To the question “What isn’t?,” I might accept that the answer is, Not much. But there is a fairly clear difference between an investigation that focuses on language (or concepts) and the kind of empirical enquiry that historians and scientists engage in.

The original idea of analytic philosophy was that the business of philosophy is the analysis of concepts. Thus, for instance, Bertrand Russell writes in *The Problems of Philosophy* that: “philosophy is merely the attempt to answer such ultimate questions [as whether there is any knowledge in the world that cannot reasonably be doubted] ... critically, after exploring all that makes such questions puzzling, and after realizing all the vagueness and confusion that underlie our ordinary ideas.”<sup>7</sup> Russell’s concern, that is, is with *ideas*, at least in part, not primarily the language in which these ideas are expressed. Similarly, G. E. Moore explained that:

I never intended to use the word [“analysis”] in such a way that the *analysandum* would be a *verbal expression*. When I have talked of analyzing anything, *what* I have talked of analyzing has always been an idea or concept or proposition, and *not* a verbal expression; that is to say, if I talked of analyzing a “proposition,” I was always using “proposition” in such a sense that no verbal expression (no sentence, for instance), can be a “proposition,” in that sense.<sup>8</sup>

For understandable reasons (see above), conceptual analysis turned out to mean linguistic analysis, so that it came to seem that there was a neat division of labor between (conceptual or linguistic) philosophy and (empirical) science. Once we know what ‘time’ or ‘mind,’ for instance, mean then the scientists can get on with investigating those things. Quine upset this idea by arguing rather persuasively that the analytic truths that philosophers were supposed to seek cannot be absolutely distinguished from the synthetic truths that were meant to be the province of scientists.<sup>9</sup> Hence the idea that philosophy is not *distinct from* but rather *continuous with* the natural sciences.

This does not mean, though, that philosophy is one (or many) of the sciences. We might not be able to distinguish chemistry from biology or biology from psychology in an

absolute sense, but it hardly follows that psychology is chemistry, or that chemistry is biology. The existence of a grey area between them does not mean that black is white or that night is day. The sciences might always have conceptual aspects, and philosophy (conceived as conceptual analysis or elucidation) might always have to pay attention to science, but it does not follow that philosophers should be conducting experiments (although it does not follow that they ought never to do this either).

Assuming that philosophy is concerned with the kind of questions described by Glock and such ‘Socratic’ questions as, “What is justice?,” “What is mind?,” “What is truth?,” and so on, and assuming that philosophy’s interest in such questions is *primarily* conceptual, then philosophers should pay attention to the language in which such concepts exist. This might make philosophy sound like a branch of sociology, a branch focusing especially on language, but it is significantly different from that kind of science. One reason why it is different is that language is productive, not only in the sense that new sentences can always be constructed but also in the sense that new words can be, and are, introduced too. So it would be *impossible* to write down an exhaustive catalogue of a living language (unless one treated it as no longer living).

It would also be *unnecessary* to do so, since we are authorities on our language already. We do not need a catalogue to know what makes sense and what does not. We are authorities also in the sense that what we say goes, at least to some extent. We are among the people who can introduce new words and new uses of existing words. This is another important respect in which linguistic or analytic philosophy is different from a science such as sociology. Sociologists can study societies other than their own, and can also study their own as if it were another. Philosophers, though, do not study other people’s concepts. We study our own, and typically not as if we were outsiders. And as masters of our language, we can extend or restrict, create, and perhaps even destroy, concepts. The history of concepts is the history of the creative, imaginative, rule-bending/creating/breaking use of language. In this sense, it is the history of literature, poetry, or whatever else we might want to call linguistic art. I want to argue that philosophy, rightly understood, is a kind of literature or, at least, continuous with literature.

Philosophical disputes concern not the *actual* use of concepts or words but the *correct* use of words or concepts. Do we *really* have free will? Are thermostats *really* capable of consciousness? Some people say such things, but *should* they do so? These questions are normative. Disagreements about how language should be used, about how our language should be used, call for persuasion. We want this persuasion to be rational, of course, and not to ignore the facts. But we also want some consistency in our language. For instance, if we want to know what emotions are then we will only be happy to accept a completely new definition of the word ‘emotion’ (based, perhaps, on recent scientific discoveries) if we are persuaded that in the past the word was used in a

meaningless way. Otherwise we will want to maintain a kind of harmony with the past use, even if we think that future use should move in a somewhat different direction, guided by new findings, perhaps, and accordingly revised rules. These quests for harmony are like aesthetic disagreements, such as disagreements about how a particular piece of music should be played. Competent people, even masters, can reasonably disagree, but it does not follow that there is no best answer. I might play a musical passage slowly while you prefer something faster, and it might become clear that your way is indeed better. Perhaps the slow version is satisfying, but the faster version is profoundly moving.<sup>10</sup> In that case, you win. This is subjective, of course, but it is not irrational. It is perfectly rational to consider the views of expert musicians only (say), and to decide who is right empirically, by playing the piece in each different proposed way and then seeing (or hearing) which is better. J. M. Coetzee has talked about the composition techniques of Beethoven and Bach.<sup>11</sup> Beethoven, as Coetzee imagines him, is an inspired genius, music flowing into and out of him. Bach, Coetzee imagines, tries first one way then another, like a teacher leading a child, but “leaves you behind” at a mysterious point, leading where you cannot follow his improvisation.

The use of language is, or can be, like this. We follow others, but do not merely parrot what they say. We make the language our own if we ever really learn it, and can then improvise. This possibility of improvisation, of innovation, which is a possibility that language must have, means that we can never say with confidence that we have specified precisely what is, and what is not, *the* way that any part of language is used. Descriptions of language-use that are immune to this kind of mistake cannot be sociological or third-person. Nor, of course, can *a priori* reflections on the correct use of language be sociological. Philosophy is not sociology. We draw on our own mastery of language in “describing” how it is used. In effect, we advocate, not only for this or that thesis or hypothesis, as scientists and other scholars do, but for a particular vision of how our language ought to be used.

## Part II: Literature and Ethics

The distinction between the descriptive and the prescriptive has been challenged perhaps most forcefully in ethics.<sup>12</sup> Philippa Foot, for instance, has argued that it is untenable, because of ‘thick concepts’, such as rudeness, that have both descriptive and prescriptive elements.<sup>13</sup> This is not to say that there are no distinctions we can make for particular purposes. What it *is* to say is that, while the evaluative is not the same thing as the descriptive, there is a space of continuity, a grey area between the two. The same goes for ethics and meta-ethics, as well as for ethics and metaphysics. Is the correct analysis of personhood a metaphysical or an ethical question? What about free will and determinism? The existence of God? Rationality? It has been argued that self-interested thinking that leads to evil decisions such as joining the SS does not deserve to be called

rational.<sup>14</sup> This is debatable, of course, but is this debate evaluative or purely conceptual? Or is that a false dichotomy? My claim is not that all philosophy is ethics, but that it is all continuous with ethics. I will try to both explain what this means and make it more plausible in the rest of this section.

In ethics one often has to speak for oneself, to aver sincerely what one holds to be true or right, without being able to prove this to others. Vice versa, speaking for oneself might always have an ethical aspect. Alice Crary has written that:

...learning to speak is inseparable from the adoption of a practical orientation toward the world—specifically, one that bears the imprint of the speaker's individuality. And since such a practical orientation to the world cannot help but encode a view of what matters most in life or of how best to live, it follows that here there is a significant respect in which learning to speak is inseparable from the development of an—individual—moral outlook.<sup>15</sup>

Crary makes several points here. Learning to speak is a practical matter, involving doing things and learning how to do things. In learning how to speak, listen, read, and write, one learns what to pay attention to and what to ignore. One also learns what kind of thing is normal and what kind of thing is unusual, and how, in general, to deal with unusual things. One also learns, develops, or internalizes certain goals. Talking and reading for pleasure, talking and reading for information, chatting, debate, empathizing, and gossiping are different activities with their own purposes and norms. Learning to engage in them requires the ability to follow others who do so, but without merely parroting them or using a script like a person inside a Chinese room, who speaks without understanding.<sup>16</sup> One must behave within the realm of the normal without being robotically predictable. One must follow the rules but also be an individual in order to count as *following* the rules rather than being somehow mechanically determined by them. And this relates to ethics. As Crary writes:

...the concerns of ethics ... encompass [a person's] entire personality—her interests, fears and ambitions, her characteristic gestures and attitudes and her sense of what is humorous, what is offensive and what is profound.<sup>17</sup>

One cannot think ethically unless one has, and makes use of, a sense of what is relevant, what is fearful, what is offensive, what matters, what is ridiculous, and so on. And we disagree about these things. One person's *reductio ad absurdum* (in the common, non-technical sense of the term) is another's proof of an uncomfortable truth or, as is often said, "One man's *modus ponens* is another man's *modus tollens*." The vindication of the rights of women was mocked with a satirical vindication of the rights of animals.<sup>18</sup> We no longer laugh at either idea. More recently, G. E. M. Anscombe has tried to argue that if we allowed contraception then we would have to allow gay



marriage.<sup>19</sup> So, according to Anscombe, contraception must be wrong! This might still be accepted as a rational argument by some people, but surely not by many. Such discussions, though, do depend on one's outlook, on what one finds absurd or unthinkable. And pure logic will not tell us what this should be, or is. Nor will science. Not every question about what is absurd is ethical, of course, but rejecting Anscombe's argument about gay marriage as absurd would (most likely) reflect an ethical view.

Craty says that her book makes a "case for a view on which the concerns of ethics extend beyond moral judgments to individuals' entire sensibilities or modes of responsiveness to life."<sup>20</sup> If she is right, then everything linguistic is related to ethics. Certainly she is right that there is more to ethics than what one does to others and judgments about such actions. As she points out, an inability to love, for instance, is a moral failure. So is an inability to see what is callous, what is disrespectful, what is indecent, and so on.

This is a point made also by Cora Diamond. In her paper "Losing Your Concepts" Diamond refers to Iris Murdoch's view that we have an impoverished picture of human beings because of the way that philosophy of mind has come to make us think about "man as a brave naked will surrounded by an easily comprehended empirical world."<sup>21</sup> To rectify this harm done by a branch of metaphysics, according to Murdoch, what we need is not better philosophy but, in Diamond's words, "an enriched vocabulary; this is a task for literature."<sup>22</sup> In what follows I will explain how it is poetic work that enriches a vocabulary. I quote Diamond not to argue from authority but to give credit where it is due.

Diamond explains that she disagrees with Murdoch about the source of the problem: it is not philosophy of mind but Fregean philosophy of language that is the root cause, Diamond believes. Philosophers tend to tie "description to classification (to a narrow range of kinds of classification at that)."<sup>23</sup> This way of thinking obscures "the difference between the concepts *member of the species Homo sapiens* and *human being*." (Later she concedes that Murdoch is right that philosophy of mind is *one* source of difficulty.<sup>24</sup>)

This difference is not readily apparent (especially to philosophers if Diamond is right), but I will attempt to make it clear. It can be seen easily enough, I think, if we note that one is a biological concept and the other is something much more ethical and/or literary. A bad novelist might tell of the doings of various fictional members of the species *Homo sapiens*, but it takes a good novelist to create characters who are real *human beings*. The latter concept is much richer than the former, but not simply because this or that has been added to the scientific classification. There is no recipe for how to make characters three-dimensional. And there is a moral dimension to the concept *human being*: I cannot but function as a member of my biological species

(without large-scale surgery), but to act as a human being is an accomplishment, at least sometimes. And if all members of the species *Homo sapiens* are to be gassed (perhaps to stop the spread of some disease), then gassing them is treating them as members of that species. But it is not treating them as human beings. And, again, there is no formula for treating people in this way. Maximizing their utility is certainly not such a formula; its goal is utility or happiness, not humanity or humaneness. Nor is the categorical imperative, which is concerned with rational beings as such, not human beings specifically.

In her diagnosis of the problem that we have lost, or are losing, our concept of a human being (the moral concept, that is), Diamond points out that description is not one, simple thing.<sup>25</sup> My concern here is not with whether Diamond is right about the loss of this concept, but with the point she makes about description. Let me explain. Asked to describe a tree, for instance (the example is mine), a lumberjack might be expected to give a very different answer from that of a creative writer (who in turn will differ from other creative writers). Descriptions of a human body will vary from an artist (who might be expected to focus on color, size, and shape) to a doctor (who might look for signs of illness or past surgery), to a personal trainer (who might look for muscle and fat), and so on. They are likely to vary also depending on whether the body in question is that of a beloved family member, a hated rival, a total stranger, an attractive member of one's preferred sex, and so forth. There is no such thing as *the* description, which might be imagined to combine all of the above. Not only can one not describe a body simultaneously both as if one knew it well and as if it were unknown, both as if one found it attractive and as if it left one cold, but it is also impossible to describe every aspect of its character in a wholly objective way. Does the person look intelligent or geeky or boring?, rebellious or frightening or stupid?, sexy or tacky or ridiculous?, etc. What goes for trees and bodies goes too for other things. Description depends on various purposes, and some purposes require an element of personality or 'soul' in the description.

As Diamond says:

Part of the difficulty here is that we think of learning to use a term as learning to follow the rules for that use; we think of language in terms of rules fixing what can and cannot be done. But the most essential thing about language is that it is *not* fixed in that way. Learning to use a term is coming into life with that term, whose possibilities are to a great extent to be made.<sup>26</sup>

Literature (some of it) explores the possibilities of language, but ordinary speech, too, constantly changes as words and uses of words come and go. There is innovation and creativity in this process, and the potential for such 'poetry' (as I will call it) lies within every user of the language. Of course, though, not every new use is poetry. Many

innovations are errors. What is poetry and what is just a mistake or nonsense is largely a matter of what catches on, but it is also possible for a piece of creativity to be successful among a small audience of connoisseurs without ever catching on with a wider community and, perhaps, without ever being imitated by those to whom it means something. Some uses of language speak to us, some do not. They need not be institutionalized to do so.

As Crary makes clear, ordinary communication depends on sharing a sense of what is relevant and what is not, what is out of the question and what is not, what kind of thing would be funny in the circumstances and what would not, what would be rude, what would be merely regrettable and what disastrous, and so on. Everyone is different, of course, and we all make mistakes, but some deviations from the norm are so great as to make one question what world the other is living in. We then face the phenomenon that Diamond calls conceptual contrast:

The vocabulary of conceptual contrasts includes, for example, such terms as ‘solemnly comic ineptitude,’ ‘righteous absurdity,’ ‘corrupt mind.’ These are not terms which can be applied to a piece of talk or writing on the basis of the falsity of premises or the invalidity of inferences. They come from one’s sense of how one lives, what life is like; and our practice of philosophy encourages the idea that such judgments have no part in philosophical thinking, that it does not call on a responsiveness involving the whole mind.<sup>27</sup>

Such conceptual contrast is relevant to philosophy not only because philosophy can encourage us to ignore it. It is also a phenomenon that one encounters in doing philosophy, in engaging with the work of philosophers. Some work, for example, might be philistine. This brings up one way in which literary works can be important as guidelines or correctives to faulty philosophical work. In her essay “Anything But Argument?” Diamond criticizes a certain conception of moral thought on the grounds not only that it is false but also that it “renders unaccountable and incomprehensible the moral force of many kinds of literature.”<sup>28</sup> This moral force is worth investigating. It is not a mere power but a kind of authority (or power exercised with authority) and the authority in question is not the authority of genius, as if we ought to do whatever great writers say we should because they write so beautifully. It is the authority of truth. This is not the kind of truth that can be tested scientifically though. It is the kind that is simply recognized as truth by sensitive and mature readers who see that it reflects the world, or life, as they have found it to be. Certain authors are accepted as great because careful readers recognize the truth in their work. And part of what it means to be a careful, sensitive, and mature reader is to see this truth. This might sound dangerously circular or even empty, but it is hard to know what to say in response to such a concern. There is such a thing as realism in literature, and this need not refer to any particular genre. A science fiction novel, for instance, might be realistic in its treatment of

emotions or psychology more broadly. This realism is recognized as such by people who have the relevant experience of human behavior and psychology (including their own psychological history, of course), and who read carefully. A kind of connoisseurship is required, so that the truth in the writing is there to be seen, but will not be seen by just any reader. A child, for instance, might well not see it. A description of a character's reaction to the death of a loved one might not be recognizable as either realistic or unrealistic by someone who has never known grief. Those who have, though, will often be able to tell the real from the fake quite easily. And it is generally the authors who present us with realistic characters behaving and feeling realistically that are recognized for their insight.

In other words there is a kind of argument available to philosophers of the form *If  $x$  then Wordsworth is a writer of no insight, Wordsworth is a writer of insight, therefore not  $x$* . Here  $x$  might stand for a proposition, but it is much more likely to refer to a way of expressing a feeling, or of framing an issue, of seeing it as having particular limits. These are the things that Diamond focuses on, at any rate, and I am trying to present an idea that she puts forward.

She argues that certain ideas about ethical thinking, that is, ideas about what it means to think at all well about ethics, are incompatible with an appreciation of some great works of literature. More specifically, she attacks the idea that all thinking about ethics must either be rational, proceeding from undisputed premises by way of strictly logical argument, or else arbitrary. She does so on the basis that writers such as Dickens, Dostoevsky and Wordsworth have attempted to enlarge our moral imaginations, to make us think differently about children, the value of human life, and the homeless, for instance, in ways that are neither scientific or logical nor on a par with changing someone's mind by hitting them on the head or giving them drugs. Diamond claims that there is a kind of middle way between logic and drugs that is not just propaganda, even though it does not consist in the observation of randomly chosen, or value-neutral, or all facts about the subject in question. Expanding the moral imagination involves offering new metaphors or pointing out facts that might otherwise go unnoticed, and doing so in a particular, sympathetic or sensitive kind of way. It is a matter of changing the way we think about certain things, not of merely providing additional information, but it is done by truthful means. In theory this might seem to be mere propaganda, effectively a sort of marketing, and surely almost anything can be marketed with more or less equal success. Dostoevsky and Dickens might be great anti-utilitarian propagandists, but the fact that they chose to use their rhetorical skills in that way says nothing about the merits of utilitarianism, one might think. Diamond disagrees. The moral imagination, she will say, has been not only changed but enlarged, improved, by such writers.

Whether one agrees is likely to depend at least in part on whether one has read the works in question, and whether one has done so sensitively, with proper understanding. There is little I can do here to prove that any literature has the kind of value and significance I am talking about, but I assume that many readers of literature (not to mention philosophers familiar with the work of Diamond and Martha Nussbaum) will accept that it can enlarge the imagination as Diamond argues.<sup>29</sup> My concern now is to focus not on novels as Nussbaum has done, but to look at the moral significance of poetry (broadly conceived) and what follows from this.

### Part III: Philosophy as Poetry

If we accept that at least part of what is important in moral philosophy is drawing attention to certain facts (including the fact that one thing really is like another, that a certain metaphor is apt) and doing so eloquently, i.e. sympathetically, convincingly, and honestly, what then? I am inclined to think that either no ‘oughts’ will ever follow from such ‘ises’ or else that they will often do so trivially, so that we need not worry about them. For instance, if Robert Burns shows us that, despite such things as poverty and low social status, “a man’s a man for a’ that,” either nothing follows about how we should treat the poor, and others, or else it follows that we should treat the poor with the same respect we show to the rich, but this conclusion is so obvious from the premise that it almost goes without saying. In other words, if we accept the idea that the careful articulation of truth is part of moral philosophy, then it starts to look as though this might well be *all* there really is to moral philosophy. Which is not to deny that there could well be a place for argument, even if (though not necessarily) only in pointing out the flaws in other people’s (attempts at) logic. The marshalling of intuitions and relevant scientific facts is already a large part of ethics as currently practiced. What is controversial in the view that I am trying to articulate and defend is the explicit downplaying of argument and the conception of what it means to be articulate that is implicit in this view. To be articulate is not to be precise in the way that a scientist or lawyer might be precise. It is not a matter of mathematical accuracy, or of qualifying a rule so that ambiguity is minimized. It is a matter of finding just the right words to express, and to recreate in a sensitive audience, a particular subjective response to the world, or particular features of it. A well-chosen metaphor, for instance, might capture the response precisely. And metaphors are sometimes used because no other available words seem to achieve exactly the desired result. This kind of use of language is what I mean by poetry.

It was in a sense an attempt to drive poetry out of philosophy that led to the focus on formal logic in analytic philosophy. For instance, Frege writes that:

The question of truth would cause us to abandon aesthetic delight for an attitude of scientific investigation. Hence it is a matter of no concern to us whether the name ‘Odysseus’, for instance, has a *Bedeutung*. It is the striving for truth that drives us always to advance from the sense to the *Bedeutung*.<sup>30</sup>

Truth, as Frege and Carnap conceive it, is the business of science, not of art. And it was the goal of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* to show how little in philosophy can be achieved with this kind of approach. Hence in the preface he writes both that in his book “the problems have in essentials been finally solved” and that “the value of this work secondly consists in the fact that it shows how little has been done when these problems have been solved.”<sup>31</sup> Philosophical problems might disappear in a formal language, but that is not the language that we think in, so an effective solution (or dissolution) must occur in natural language. And natural language is inescapably poetic or expressive, as I think Diamond and Crary, among others, have shown. This means that the poetic dimension is relevant not only to ethics but to all branches of philosophy.

What can poetry tell us about metaphysics, say? We shall have to see. If literature can tell us something about children and beggars (as Dickens and Wordsworth, arguably, do), there is no reason why it cannot tell us anything about other people, or animals, or the inanimate world. Indeed it often tries to, as we find in, say, Wordsworth’s *Prelude* or J. M. Coetzee’s *Elizabeth Costello*.<sup>32</sup> Part of my argument is that certain works of literature are considered great at least partly because their description of the world is found to be not only fresh but also true. This truth, though, is artistic or imaginative and cannot be translated into scientific language for the purpose of empirical verification. It is not, as I have said, a mere reporting of facts. Still, if a metaphysical theory conflicts with a great literary work then there is, *prima facie*, a problem. Of course the poem might not be so great after all, it might turn out not to ring true to those who have really paid attention to its subject, but I want to say that poets, or rather poetry, should be treated as somewhat authoritative. It gives us a view of things that we cannot simply ignore, that belongs with the phenomena that any good philosophy will seek to preserve. Which is not to deny, of course, that science might reveal other phenomena that we should also preserve. Nor is it to suggest that literature should *replace* philosophy. I am arguing only that it is an important supplement, and that its border with philosophy might not be clearly defined.

Having talked about philosophy in the past, let me say something about philosophy today and in the future. What should philosophy be? One thing it could be is elucidatory in a Wittgensteinian way. If concepts are linguistic, and meaning is use, then conceptual analysis will require, or perhaps just be, a description of the use of the words in question. What this means will depend on the goal of philosophy. If it is meant to be impersonal then philosophy will become a kind of linguistic sociology, a science in other words, to be conducted by those with a good ear (so that they will

know, for instance, which words are relevant to the concept in question). This, I think, would be the death of philosophy. Let me explain why.

For one thing, philosophy can be understood as all academic or intellectual inquiry that is not yet any other science. John Searle has given something like this definition of philosophy, writing that:

science is always right and philosophy is always wrong... As soon as we are confident that we really have knowledge and understanding in some domain, we stop calling it “philosophy” and start calling it “science,” and as soon as we make definite progress, we think ourselves entitled to call it “scientific progress.”<sup>33</sup>

If philosophy becomes a branch of sociology then there will be no philosophy as such left. Only science will remain.

For another thing, this anthropological method would in effect be what Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus* calls the “only strictly correct method” for doing philosophy, and he points out how unsatisfying it would be.<sup>34</sup> If someone wondered about the “mystery of consciousness”, for instance, this method would advocate something not much more helpful than reading a good dictionary. That would tell you how we use the word ‘consciousness,’ after all. But then the real problem, one would feel, was being ignored. And the answers—the facts about how words such as ‘consciousness’ are used—would all be historical, popular products, not open to revision unless and until the speakers of the language start to use their words differently. The conservatism and the apparent irrelevance of philosophy so conceived would be very unsatisfactory. This is one reason why “ordinary language philosophy” fell out of favor (although not everything that goes by that name suffers from these problems).<sup>35</sup>

On the other hand, if philosophy is personal, if it is not so much that consciousness is mystifying ‘in itself’ as that some of us are mystified by it, then what matters is not so much what *people* say but what *we* (the persons in question) say, or would say. What we do or would say is an objective matter, but the focus on the first person (I or we) and the methodological or epistemological authority this gives us would make linguistic or analytic philosophy thus conceived non-scientific, but more like a kind of self-psycho-analysis. The problems are personal but the solution, while personal in a sense, is to look out beyond oneself at the public language one has inherited and how we relate to it. In a sense the solution is to re-connect with others, those who invented or developed the concept in question. To return to sharing their uses of it and stop trying to use it in one’s own, unproductive and confusing, way.<sup>36</sup> Or, finding new uses that others embrace and that articulate what it was that had caused discomfort or confusion.

This process of linguistic re-settling in established uses or pioneering new ones that are acceptable to others would involve mostly listening to and reading the words of others, as well as attending to one's own words. The main product would be clarity or satisfaction (the absence of puzzlement), and perhaps greater community, not anything written, although something written might well come about as a by-product. Philosophy would be the activity of gathering well-chosen words, words that bring satisfaction, from oneself or others. This satisfaction would be of a particular kind, of course, but the words that produce it would not have to be. They would simply have to be well chosen, articulate, genuinely and refreshingly saying what strikes us as right or true. This I think could be considered a definition of poetry, and philosophy might be defined as the reading, writing, and collecting of poetry thus defined. I am not claiming that poetry and philosophy are or should be the same thing. I am claiming that they are, or should be, more similar than most philosophers recognize. Philosophy deals with questions of a certain type, and these do not belong to poetry. But answering them could well involve the kind of creative use of language that is usually associated with literature and that cannot be sharply distinguished from it.

What will this achieve? Done badly (as no doubt some people think certain continental philosophers have shown), it will bring some of the faults of bad literature into philosophy. Done well, it will make our debates richer, more closely related to well-formulated examples, less blind to or ignorant of aspects of the reality we claim to be addressing. For example, philosophers (and others who philosophize) are often criticized for attacking (and sometimes defending) a straw man when it comes to religion. The God of the philosophers, it is said, is not the God that ordinary believers worship. Explorations of religious belief such as *The Brothers Karamazov* might help in this regard. More generally, a realistic sense of *what it is like* to be terminally ill and in pain, or in the first weeks of an unwanted pregnancy, or in combat might help us think well about the ethics of euthanasia, abortion, and what it means to fight justly. Imagination is needed in ethics and in understanding metaphysical questions about the self and teleportation, for instance, or Gettier cases in epistemology. But that is a familiar and surely uncontroversial idea.

What is less widely accepted is the idea that when we argue about freedom of the will or the nature of consciousness or whether paradoxes can be true, we are arguing (at least in part) about how certain words of our language should be defined and used. We are arguing about what we should do in the absence of clear reason to prefer one particular course to all others. We are arguing then, in a sense, about ethics, about what to do. My claim is not that all philosophy is ethics, however, but the weaker claim that questions of the proper use of words have an inescapable literary aspect, one that is continuous with ethics. Whose proposed use of words is better? How are we to speak and write?



So far as we end up speaking and writing differently as a result of such philosophy, we will end up thinking differently. And so philosophy, while perhaps not discovering any new facts, can change us. Heidegger makes the point: “even if *we* can’t do anything with it, may not philosophy in the end do something *with us*, provided that we engage ourselves with it?”<sup>37</sup> And in so changing us, if it does, philosophy will change not the world—words leave everything as it is, after all—but the world *as we know it*.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Rudolf Carnap, “The Elimination of Metaphysics through Logical Analysis of Language,” in *Logical Positivism*, ed. A. J. Ayer (Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press, 1959), 60–81. For the distinction between cognitive and non-cognitive meaning, see pp. 80–81.

<sup>2</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, ed. G. H. von Wright in collaboration with Heikki Nyman, trans. Peter Winch (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 15e.

<sup>3</sup> Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, 24e.

<sup>4</sup> Hans-Johann Glock, *What is Analytic Philosophy?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 96.

<sup>5</sup> See Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, 15e.

<sup>6</sup> See Robert Brandom, *Making It Explicit: Reasoning, Representing, and Discursive Commitment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), Donald Davidson, “Thought and Talk,” in his *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), Michael Dummett, *Seas of Language*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

<sup>7</sup> Bertrand Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 7.

<sup>8</sup> G. E. Moore, “A Reply to My Critics,” in pp. 535–677 of Schilpp, P. A., ed., *The Philosophy of G. E. Moore*, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1942), p. 661.

<sup>9</sup> See Willard van Orman Quine, “Two Dogmas of Empiricism,” [The Philosophical Review](http://www.jstor.org/stable/2301913) 60 (1951): 20–43.

<sup>10</sup> Consider, for example, this review from amazon.com (<http://amzn.com/B0007RO57A>, accessed 15<sup>th</sup> November 2010) of Heinrich Schiff’s playing of J. S. Bach’s Cello Suites: “Schiff plays almost every movement faster than others (including even Rostropovich, who sometimes races mechanically, each note with exactly the same weight as every other), with the result that long melodic lines are heard as wholes rather than isolated chunks. This leads to large-scale harmonic relationships being heard and felt. The movements consequently emerge as intellectual and emotional entities with individual character. No other player produced that experience so consistently or clearly for me.”

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<sup>11</sup> See <http://www.lannan.org/lf/rc/event/j-m-coetzee/>, interview from November 8 2001 with Peter Sacks, between 22:00 25:30.

<sup>12</sup> See Glock, 58-59.

<sup>13</sup> See Philippa Foot, “Moral Arguments” in her *Virtues and Vices and Other Essays in Moral Philosophy* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1978), 96-109.

<sup>14</sup> See Philippa Foot, “Rationality and Goodness,” in *Modern Moral Philosophy*, Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement: 54, ed. Anthony O’Hear (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 1-13.

<sup>15</sup> Alice Crary, *Beyond Moral Judgment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 43.

<sup>16</sup> See John Searle, “Minds, Brains and Programs”, *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 1980, Volume 3, Issue 3: 417–424. Searle’s famous thought-experiment invites you to imagine yourself in a room with an instruction book and some symbols in a language that you do not understand. Symbols come in to the room and, in accordance with the instructions in the book, you pass other symbols back out. The idea is that you might in this way behave just like someone who understood the language without actually doing so, and that a computer that passed the Turing test for artificial intelligence would be displaying no more understanding than this.

<sup>17</sup> Crary, 47.

<sup>18</sup> See Mary Wollstonecraft, [\*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman with Strictures on Moral and Political Subjects\*](#), (London: Joseph Johnson, 1792) and Thomas Taylor, *A Vindication of the Rights of Brutes* (London: first printed for Edward Jeffrey, Pall Mall, 1792).

<sup>19</sup> See “Contraception and Chastity,” in *Faith in a Hard Ground: Essays on Religion, Philosophy and Ethics by G. E. M. Anscombe*, eds. Mary Geach and Luke Gormally (Exeter, UK: Imprint Academic, 2008), 170-191.

<sup>20</sup> Crary, 232.

<sup>21</sup> Cora Diamond, “Losing Your Concepts,” *Ethics*, Vol. 98. No. 2 (Jan. 1988), 255-277, 261. Diamond refers here to Iris Murdoch, “Against Dryness: A Polemical Sketch,” in S. Hauerwas and A. MacIntyre, eds., *Revisions* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 46.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 261.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 266.

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<sup>24</sup> See *ibid.*., 271.

<sup>25</sup> See *ibid.*, 267.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 268.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 274-275.

<sup>28</sup> Cora Diamond, *The Realistic Spirit: Wittgenstein, Philosophy, and the Mind* (MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1991) “Anything but Argument?” 291-308, 291.

<sup>29</sup> See for instance Martha C. Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

<sup>30</sup> Gottlob Frege, “On *Sinn* and *Bedeutung*” in *The Frege Reader* ed. Michael Beaney (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1997), 151-171, 157.

<sup>31</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, translated by C. K. Ogden (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 2003), p. 5.

<sup>32</sup> Coetzee's work has been especially fruitful for philosophy, inspiring Stanley Cavell, Cora Diamond, John McDowell, Ian Hacking, and Cary Wolfe, *Philosophy and Animal Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), Stephen Mulhall, *The Wounded Animal: J. M. Coetzee and the Difficulty of Reality in Literature and Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), and essays by Amy Gutmann and Peter Singer in J. M. Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

<sup>33</sup> John R. Searle, *Mind, Language and Society: Philosophy in the Real World* (Basic Books, New York, 1998), 158.

<sup>34</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness (Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1961), 6.53.

<sup>35</sup> Three different varieties of ordinary language philosophy are distinguished in John W. Cook *Wittgenstein, Empiricism, and Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 107, and others, such as that of Stanley Cavell, might be added to the list.

<sup>36</sup> Rupert Read argues that good philosophical work with language can bring people together in politically desirable ways. See his “Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* as a War Book,” *New Literary History* 41 (2010): 593-612, especially p. 598. The argument of this paper is that the *Philosophical Investigations* can be read as a response to the threats of nationalism and anti-Semitism.

<sup>37</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics* trans. Gregory Fried and Richard Polt (New

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Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000), 13.

<sup>38</sup> I am grateful to Cora Diamond, Joshua Kortbein, Dale E. Miller, and two anonymous referees for helping me to improve this paper.