

COPYRIGHT NOTICE:

Stephen Mulhall: The Wounded Animal

is published by Princeton University Press and copyrighted, © 2008, by Princeton University Press. All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form by any electronic or mechanical means (including photocopying, recording, or information storage and retrieval) without permission in writing from the publisher, except for reading and browsing via the World Wide Web. Users are not permitted to mount this file on any network servers.

Follow links for Class Use and other Permissions. For more information send email to: permissions@press.princeton.edu

Chapter One

INTRODUCTION: THE ANCIENT QUARREL

IN 1997, THE EMINENT novelist and critic J. M. Coetzee (later to be awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature) gave two Tanner Lectures on Human Values at Princeton University, under the general title “The Lives of Animals.” They took the form of two fictions—two linked short stories about the visit of the eminent novelist Elizabeth Costello to Appleton College to deliver the annual Gates Lecture (together with a seminar in the literature department), in which she chooses to speak about animals, and in particular the ways in which animals have been and are treated not only by human beings in general, but by philosophers and poets in particular. Since the Tanner Lectures generally take the form of philosophical essays or addresses, and an invitation to give them is seen as a mark of real distinction in the philosophical world, it is hard to see Coetzee’s way of responding to that invitation as anything other than a deliberate attempt to reopen an issue that has marked—indeed, defined—philosophy from its inception among the ancient Greeks: the quarrel between philosophy and poetry, described by Plato as ancient even though his invocation of it (epitomised in his notorious claim that the poets must be banished from the just city, the philosophical republic) is in fact the means by which philosophy distinguishes itself for the first time as an autonomous form of intellectual inquiry.

Plato offers a bewildering number of interrelated justifications for his expulsion order, outlined both within the precincts of the *Republic* and elsewhere. Some appear to depend heavily upon specific epistemological and metaphysical doctrines that hold little appeal for many contemporary philosophers; but all can be formulated in ways that are likely to resonate with anyone capable of identifying with philosophy’s highest aspirations for itself, and so for us. Plato fears what he sees as literature’s capacity to engage and incite our emotions while bypassing our rational faculties. He distrusts its ability to construct simulacra of real persons and events, in whose purely imaginary vicissitudes we can effortlessly lose ourselves, thereby distracting ourselves from the genuinely real and the slow, hard struggle to comprehend what lies behind its often-misleading presentations of itself. He takes very seriously the poet’s interpretation of himself as subject to divine inspiration, a mere channel for the muses—a self-image that reveals poetry to be an essentially nonrational activity, lacking

any secure, transmissible, and impersonal body of knowledge or expertise that might ground a claim to any depth of understanding; and he despises the poet's ability to construct convincing representations of those possessed of genuine knowledge and understanding (generals, kings, even philosophers) without himself being in possession of the comprehension he counterfeits. He sees the poet's imaginative capacities as essentially amoral—entirely unconstrained not only by truthfulness (even when the nature of the divine is at stake), but also by the demands made on all comprehending creatures by the nature and reality of good and evil; indeed, the poet is often more attracted to the representation of interesting, vivid evil than banal and boring good. Taken together, Plato sees a fundamental threat of corruption that literature poses to the soul of the poet as well as that of his readers and listeners, the obstacles it creates for their distinctively human attempts to achieve self-knowledge and live a good life through a lucid grasp of reality—the task to which philosophy distinctively devotes itself.

Against this background, merely banishing the poet might seem like an excessively charitable response. And yet: quite apart from certain hesitations or qualifications to the universality of the anathema Plato pronounces (as when he excepts certain kinds of music from his ban, or allows certain kinds of artistic tools and techniques to be deployed in the education of the republic's young), and setting aside the broader question this raises of whether he might usefully distinguish between vices that are inseparable from the literary enterprise as such and those that happen to infest its contemporary manifestations (as in Homeric misrepresentations of the nature of the gods), the form of his pronouncements seems in deep contradiction with their content. For the Socrates of the *Republic* and elsewhere is not only willing to, but adept in, employing striking quasi-poetic imagery in conveying his message of the superiority of philosophy to literature: such figures as the divided line and the cave, not to mention the utopian allegory of the just republic (with its political structures further functioning as a figure for the internal articulation proper to the just soul), have become part of the philosophical canon. Moreover, Plato's favoured medium for presenting Socrates's message and method is that of the dialogue: he stages his condemnation of theatre in the form of dramatized conversations between idealized characters whose shape and orientation make manifest what Plato's Socrates sees as the essential core of philosophical investigation as such—the dialectical examination of one soul by another.

Is this best understood as an essentially dispensable or ornamental feature of his enterprise? Or as an adroit attempt to turn the resources of poetry against itself, addressing philosophy's audience in the terms most likely to motivate them in their presently benighted, cave-dwelling state,

but in such a way as to bring about their emergence from it, to effect a species of self-overcoming that leaves the literary definitively behind us? Or as a revealing indication that poetry is always already internal to the precincts of philosophy's republic, incapable of being excised without depriving philosophy of resources without which it cannot achieve its goals? And whichever answer one gives to this question, taken as one about Plato's version of the philosophical enterprise, how far can or should it be generalized to philosophy as such? How far is Plato's deeply determining way of understanding the relations between philosophy and literature itself determined by certain ideas—of the nature of reason and the emotions and how they relate to one another, of the nature of knowledge and understanding, of the nature of fictional representations and their relation to reality, of what good and evil and language might be, and of what poets know about any and all of these things—that any genuine philosopher must recognize as themselves open to philosophical question?

The wager motivating this study is that Coetzee's Elizabeth Costello gives us good reason, as philosophers, to open just these ideas and assumptions to question; but that she does so in ways that can properly be understood only if we understand that our primary relation to her is as a literary creation. *The Lives of Animals* is an attempt by a master of literature to put philosophy in question; and whatever philosophers ultimately come to think is the right way to answer the questions this text poses, they will have failed altogether to meet that challenge if they fail to take seriously the fact that the questions themselves are at once possessed of a recognizable philosophical warrant, and yet irreducibly posed by and through literature. If we wish to maintain the Platonic image of the republic of philosophy, we would have to say that these questions are at once internal and external to its domain; but we might be better served by thinking more in terms of a dialogue, in which philosophy and literature participate as each other's other—as autonomous but internally related. One might say: their distinctness is constituted by the very distance that not only allows but requires that they address one another. I am not suggesting that philosophy can or should become literature, or literature philosophy; but I am suggesting that for each properly to acknowledge the other would require both to confront the challenge of reconceiving their self-images, and so their defining aspirations.

Looking in more detail at a recent exchange between two philosophers over exactly these issues might help to give the reader a clearer sense of what is at stake here from a contemporary philosophical perspective, before we turn to Coetzee's perception of literature's present stake in this quarrel. As it happens, this exchange also takes off from a question about the ethical status of nonhuman animals; and as with Plato's disorienting

inclination to present philosophy's conflict with the poets as always already ancient even at the moment of philosophy's inception, it is hard to find its true point of origin. In one sense, it begins when Cora Diamond takes issue with a set of claims made by Onora O'Neill; but those claims were made in a critical review of a book by Stephen Clark entitled *The Moral Status of Animals*,¹ which presents itself as a critical engagement with a long and complex tradition of thinking about animals, about rationality, and so about philosophy that occludes the possibility of modes of thinking that are genuinely responsive to "the heart's affections and the plain evidence of sense" (MSA, 93)—a tradition that he traces back through Aquinas, the neo-Platonists, and Aristotle to Plato himself. Here, at least, then, the Platonic figure of ancientness has its concrete realisation, quite as if his creative invocation of those mists of time was also a prophecy.

Diamond abstracts from this historical context quite as much as O'Neill, preferring instead to organize her critique of O'Neill's critique around a single sentence from her review: "[I]f the appeal on behalf of animals is to convince those whose hearts do not already so incline them, it must, like appeals on behalf of dependent human beings, reach beyond assertion to argument" (CR, 445). Diamond, in effect, isolates this sentence in order to ask: can O'Neill really mean what she is saying? More specifically, she claims that the view it expresses of how philosophical discussions of ethical matters can and should be carried on is essentially confused; it assumes a conception of moral thought that is not merely false, but renders the moral force of many kinds of literature incomprehensible.

Since many of us, and perhaps all of us in a certain frame of mind, might be inclined on the contrary to take O'Neill's remark as a statement of the blindingly obvious, we plainly need to probe further. Before doing so, however, it might be worth noting one of the costs of Diamond's decision to concentrate on O'Neill's underlying, general conception of moral thought, just as O'Neill explicitly chose to abstract from much of the factual, polemical, and imaginative detail of Clark's book in order to focus on (what she sees as the lack of) argumentative underpinnings for his radically zoophile vision of the relation of the human to the natural world. For that decision entails that, in the context of this paper at least,² the nonhuman animals that are the primary focus of Clark's concern slip

¹ (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), hereafter MSA. O'Neill's review of it, hereafter CR, appeared in the *Journal of Philosophy* 77 (1980), pp. 440–46; Diamond's critique of that review, entitled "Anything but Argument?" (hereafter AA), is included in her *The Realistic Spirit* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991), hereafter RS.

² As we shall see, Diamond makes the moral status of animals her explicit concern in a number of other important papers.

from our field of vision; they (as opposed to the dependent human beings to which O'Neill refers in passing in our focal sentence) barely maintain a role even as illustrative examples of the possible topics of human moral reflection. It is not hard to imagine Clark himself feeling that such a defence of his book—however sympathetic and successful it may be—nevertheless risks exemplifying the very problem it aims to identify. Is philosophy's aversion to the concrete reality of the putative objects of its attention so constitutive of its nature that it will even inflect the work of those who aim to philosophize in support of attempts to refuse that aversion; or is it simply unreasonable to expect any philosopher to attend equally to every aspect of her topic at any given time?

Back to the focal sentence. Suppose one takes O'Neill to be saying that any moral appeal will convince only if it reaches beyond assertion to argument: is that not obviously true, given that conviction here is being implicitly contrasted with mere persuasion, in order to suggest an appeal to reason? How could anyone possibly wish to deny that genuine rational conviction neither can nor should accrue to anyone's unargued vision of things? But to whom, then, might it be worth asserting this? For whom might it constitute a genuinely informative statement? Can we take seriously the possibility that Clark is entirely ignorant of this point—that his book utterly fails to reflect any awareness of it?

What bothers Diamond is not O'Neill's devaluation of mere assertion, but her implicit assumption that there is only one way of proceeding beyond mere assertion, and that is to argument. Of course, if "argument" here is simply a placeholder for "any consideration that could, in principle, produce genuine conviction as opposed to mere persuasion," then O'Neill's position reduces once again to a triviality—something hardly worth saying. But in fact, O'Neill has a rather stronger, certainly a highly specific, conception of what an argument can and should be; hence, in presenting argumentation as the only alternative to mere assertion, she is in effect excluding the possibility that there might be ways to convince others of a vision of animals, or children, or disabled adults that are non-argumentative and yet capable of engaging with, and embodying, genuine thoughtfulness.

How, then, does O'Neill envisage argumentation? In two stages: she begins by invoking an apparently general idea of rational grounding; but whenever she offers illustrations of such grounds, they turn out to be distinctively philosophical—or more precisely metaphysical—in nature. Here is a representative instance of this process.

[Clark] fails to explicate his own conception of animal-human kinship and the way in which this grounds animals' moral status. The Thomist, Cartesian, and even utilitarian traditions have tried to state the metaphysical grounds that de-

termine who or what may have moral standing. Clark's appeal to the claim that animals are kin is not articulated to anything like the same degree. It is because he seeks to do morality without metaphysics that his appeals can reach only the audience who share his commitments to animals. (CR, 445–46)

As O'Neill elsewhere makes clear, the kinds of rational grounding for attributing moral status to animals provided by the philosophical traditions she invokes are such things as sentience and rationality. In effect, then, O'Neill's picture of rational grounding amounts to the specification of a property or feature of the being whose moral status is in question, one that it shares with those whose moral status in the relevant respect is beyond question, and on the basis of which its claim to that status is rendered rationally convincing. Hence, she treats Clark's talk of human–animal kinship as if it were (because it could only be) another attempt in the same vein; and so regarded, she takes it to be at best insufficiently articulated, at worst entirely empty.

By contrast, Clark himself identifies those visions of nonhuman animals with which he contends as deficient (more specifically as “paranoid fantasies”) primarily because and insofar as they detach themselves entirely from “the heart's affections and the plain evidence of sense”; and (as O'Neill notes in her review) he describes himself as seeking to appeal past such visions to “the hidden, guilty, nebulous convictions of the heart” (MSA, 4). He thus envisages complete detachment from the heart as one way in which thinking can exhibit deficiency qua thinking (not: one way in which thinking can be caused to be deficient, but rather: one form that rational deficiency may take); hence, he identifies the form of his rational appeal to the reader as one in which that detachment is overcome. For Clark, then, it makes perfect sense to talk of “convictions of the heart,” and so it makes sense for him to see overcoming their repression, establishing their purity, and giving them more concrete structure and substance as ways of making rational progress.

For O'Neill, by contrast, “convictions of the heart” is a contradiction in terms, which is why Clark's intended appeals to his readers appear to her to be inarticulate to the point of muteness (quite as if he had reduced himself to the status of one of the “dumb” animals he wishes to defend). For her focal sentence implicitly aligns the domain of the heart and its inclinations with that of (mere) assertion, and the domain of (rational) conviction with that of (metaphysical) argument. The heart may incline one way, or another: that is simply a matter of fact about our affections, as is any alteration effected in them. Rationality lies essentially beyond such matters; and since genuine reason and argument can begin only when the heart is left behind, any mode of address to the heart cannot

possibly be a way of establishing rational conviction. It could only be mere persuasion—an essentially causal matter.

O'Neill never exactly asserts (let alone argues) that rationality, so conceived, is the peculiar province of the human animal; but she has never hidden her allegiance to a broadly Kantian conception of human moral worth as residing in the rationality that distinguishes our mode of animality, and there is evidently an internal relation between her resistance to Clark's vision of kinship between human and nonhuman animals and her sense of the essential unrelatedness of mind and heart in the human being. By the same token, Clark's conception of a peaceable animal kingdom patently concerns not only the relation between human and nonhuman animals, but also the relation within human animals between heart and mind, body and intellect. And from Clark's point of view, O'Neill's Kantian conception of reason and her Kantian resistance to the moral claims of animals both give expression to the same phenomenon—the fateful vulnerability of humans to paranoid fantasies about their own animality, and hence their relation to other animals.

But my primary concern at present is not to follow out these very real hints that this specific topic in moral philosophy and more general conceptions of moral thinking and of thinking as such are nonaccidentally related. The key point for our purposes is rather that the conception of moral thinking, and of thinking as such, that O'Neill invokes in her critique of Clark's book is not itself philosophically uncontentious; hence it cannot provide an Archimedean point from which to achieve objective leverage on Clark's specific moral claims. There simply is no account of rationality, and so of moral reasoning, available to us here that is not itself essentially open to question, and more specifically open to moral evaluation. For what is to count as a legitimate instance of moral reasoning is itself partly determined by one's conception of morality, as well as by one's more general philosophical commitments and preconceptions. Philosophers can no more call upon a universally accepted conception of rationality than they can call upon an essentially uncontroversial conception of morality in their deliberations about moral thinking, and so in their deliberations about philosophy and literature.

This last matter is relevant here precisely because Diamond clearly expresses her temptation to regard the moral force of literature as a decisive piece of evidence against O'Neill's stance, since that stance makes the self-evident relevance of literature to moral thinking essentially incomprehensible. A central example in her paper of this relevance comes from Charles Dickens, and his attempts (in such novels as *Great Expectations* and *David Copperfield*) to convince those whose hearts are inclined against it that prevailing Victorian attitudes towards children and those classified as mad are morally objectionable. These novels are, in Diamond's view,

attempts to enlarge the moral imagination of his readers; they do not assume that his readers' hearts are already inclined in the way Dickens would like, but rather work to change their prevailing inclinations and assumptions, to lead them to a more sympathetic way of looking at children. By presenting his readers with the world as viewed from a child's perspective, even (even particularly) when this does not involve the child being treated badly or generously, he aims to get them and us to attend to a child *as* a centre of a distinctive view of the world, and so to attend to children in their own right. By this kind of imaginative exercise, itself internally related to the engendering of pleasure of a distinctive kind, Dickens can succeed not only in altering our affections, but in enhancing our understanding—or rather, he enhances our understanding by engaging with and altering our affections and sensibility.

O'Neill might naturally respond as follows. If what Dickens aims to do is to redirect our attention, then the relevance of his enterprise to our moral thinking will turn on what we can find out, not on how we did so; and the moral relevance of whatever facts were thereby brought to our attention would then be demonstrable purely in the terms of the model of reasoning that we have apparently left behind (that of providing a rational ground for the assignment of a particular kind of moral significance). Diamond finds this response to be not so much mistaken as ludicrous. For what are "the facts" about children such that the kind of interest in them that Dickens takes and advocates is fitting? "Are we to describe children, their perceptions, emotions and thoughts, and then find some principle for directing emotional attitudes towards things of any sort whatever (small sentient Martians included) having such-and-such properties? This is sheer comedy" (AA, 301). And what the comedy reveals is that, for Dickens, it is not that the point of the kind of attention we give lies in what we find out; it is rather that what we can find out is conditioned by the kind of attention we give.

There are, after all, many ways of attending to things. There is Gradgrind's way, which is cold and even insolent; what we could possibly find out through such a chillingly presumptuous approach to the world can feed no adequate moral thought, or show us what we need to respond well to the world. And there is Dickens's way, the characteristic emotional colouring of which derives from its combination of great warmth, concentration of energy, and humour. It gives expression to a particular style of affectionate interest in and imaginative engagement with human affairs of exactly the kind that it aims to create in us, precisely by virtue of the capacity of that mode of attention to engage and reorient our own present interests and engagements.

There are many other such modes of attention; and, because they give expression to a certain conception of what is worth attending to and why,

they are all necessarily subject to critical evaluation. But the one way in which that cannot be done is by asking which is most appropriate to the way things really are. For which way is that? Can it be seen except through the adoption of a particular mode of attention, or specified except through the adoption of a particular style of expression? There is no evaluatively neutral way of justifying any such adoption or rejection—no way of using the facts to determine which response to them is morally appropriate or fitting. To think otherwise is to commit oneself to a rather crude version of the all-too-familiar philosophical fantasy of an abyssal distinction between the domain of value-neutral facts and the evaluative systems we superimpose upon it.

Of course, to say this is not to deny that there are other ways of critically evaluating modes of attention, and so what they reveal. Dickens's mode of attention is, for example, inherently vulnerable to the threat of sentimentality and sometimes succumbs to that threat. By this I do not mean that it fails to reveal what is there to be seen as a consequence of Dickens's being in the grip of an excessively sentimental mood; I mean rather that sentimentality is the distinctive form or mode of its failure—that it constitutes one particular respect in which his moral thinking can show itself to be deficient. Such a form of criticism is not a hypothesis about the author's emotional state, but a judgement about the intellectual and moral texture of his writing and his thought. Failures of moral thinking are not exclusively matters of invalid inference or distorting external conditions. Our moral thinking (and our thinking more generally) can also be sentimental, shallow, cheap, or brutal in itself, as such; and we cannot identify such failures of thinking except by utilizing our own affective responses to them—responses that might at first be unreflective, but which we can, and must, reflect upon and submit to critical evaluation in exactly the kinds of terms that they make it possible for us to apply to the thoughts and emotions of others.

The point here is not to deny that more familiar forms of critical reflection, of the kind associated with philosophy in general and analytical philosophy in particular, and which tend to focus on questions of inferential validity in the context of assertion and argument, are real and important elements in the human rational armoury. It is simply to point out that there are other forms of critical reflection as well—ones with which we are perhaps more familiar in extraphilosophical contexts, but which are no less concerned to deepen our understanding and enrich our thought by embodying certain kinds of affective response to things, and inviting us to share those responses, as well as to critically evaluate them (perhaps by placing them next to very different modes of response, as Dickens's work invites us to reflect upon the differing moral sensibilities of Gradgrind and Betsy Trotwood).

If these really are forms of critical reflection, and hence amount to legitimate ways in which we can respond to the claims of reason upon us, it cannot be right to conceive of the domain of moral thought in such a way as to exclude them. And the further question arises: why couldn't a philosophical text—a text that aims not so much correctly to characterize the legitimate forms of moral thought evinced elsewhere but rather itself to contribute to distinctively philosophical debates about some range of moral issues—draw upon such modes of critical reflection, and so reasonably expect its readers to be willing and able to respond in similar ways? On Diamond's view, this is precisely what Stephen Clark is aiming to do in his book.

If Clark's aim is that his readers acknowledge something in themselves which habits of thought and response overlay and keep hidden, it is essential that he invite us to set our imagination and sensibility and intelligence to work; only that exercise can put us in a position properly to judge the view of animals he invites us to take up. Like any judgements worth bothering with, it will draw on more than just the capacities of the head. (AA, 303–4)

That last sentence may go a little too far: questions about valid inference in the domain of assertion and argument are surely worth bothering with. But in the end, Diamond is not primarily interested in claiming that philosophers such as O'Neill should be compelled to recognize either the validity of Clark's vision of animals or the deep human value of the modes of attention and response through which he gives it expression, and in terms of which he invites us to respond. Both embody views about the natural world, about moral understanding, and about reason, that are eminently disputable. But what is not legitimate is for philosophers to bring their own, equally disputable, opposing views about these matters to bear in such a way as to imply that their view is the only conceivable one.

O'Neill's assumptions about the heart and the mind, and about assertion and argument, operate unquestioningly in her thinking in such a way as to exclude the very possibility that Clark might be attempting to address her, and our, capacities for rational reflection at all. And in so doing, she reproduces Plato's exclusionary gesture: in O'Neill's philosophical republic of letters, it is not only literature, but any form of critical reflection that employs those modes of attention and thought best exemplified in much literature, that suffers banishment. But of course, precisely because her assumptions exclude those modes of attention and reflection from the domain of genuine moral thinking even as a possibility, they can hardly be overturned by the citation of cases that exemplify those modes; every such apparent counterexample will simply fail to meet O'Neill's criteria for relevance, counting for her as persuasion, not argument. Hence, Diamond concludes by acknowledging that the exemplary

instance of literature, together with all the other detailed literary and nonliterary cases she discusses in her paper, “are in a sense quite useless” (AA, 306).

In a later paper, “The Power of Example,”³ O’Neill responds obliquely to the issues raised in Diamond’s critique of her review, and in a way that seems to prove the validity of Diamond’s pessimism. Even more irritatingly, from Diamond’s point of view, the portion of the paper that is relevant to her critique takes the form of a highly general account of a tendency O’Neill detects in moral philosophers of a Wittgensteinian bent to employ examples from literature to initiate and further their reflections. So the precise points and the specific character of Diamond’s particular understanding of Wittgenstein, of literature, and of moral philosophy are immediately subsumed into an abstract category of “Wittgensteinian moral philosophers,” in which Rush Rhees rubs shoulders with Howard Mounce and Richard Beardsmore, D. Z. Phillips and Roy Holland. It is hard to think of a more thoroughgoing refusal to attend to particulars, or to show sensitivity to difference; and it is especially galling for Diamond, since her critique of O’Neill is in fact entirely silent on the matter of Wittgenstein—its concerns and claims do not rely in any way upon arguments from that particular authority (even though it is undeniable that her work is significantly inflected by what she takes herself to have learnt from Wittgenstein). Little wonder, then, that Diamond finds it “extremely difficult to respond . . . with anything short of an oath” (RS, 27). Let’s see if we can do a little better than that.

Membership of the general category here turns for O’Neill in the first instance upon a tendency to regard examples not as mere illustrations of theory and principles, or as models for action, or as vehicles of moral education, but as the pivot of moral thought in themselves: attention to them is not a means of getting elsewhere, but an end in itself. The only goal is to understand the examples themselves, and we should (can only?) do this by eliciting, developing, and reflecting upon whatever it is that we find ourselves wanting to say about them. Consequently, these examples must not be schematic or sketchy, but rather detailed, elaborate, and fully worked out; and it is natural therefore to derive them from the domain of literature, and in particular from classics in the genres of the novel and the short story. The nuanced detail of their working out leaves little room for disagreement about their specific substance, O’Neill tells us; hence, there is no need to draw on moral theory to fill them out, and indeed no room for reasonable disagreement about their construal (beyond that for which there is warrant in the text itself). And they further allow the moral philosopher to draw upon a background of immediate, shared compre-

³ In *Philosophy* 61 (1986), hereafter PE.

hension; they are counterfactual, but neither counternomic nor remote in any way from everyday human experience.

In other words, the use of canonical literary examples doubly minimizes the room for disagreement between philosopher and audience about the substance and significance of the example. This is vital for Wittgensteinian purposes, on O'Neill's reading, since the Wittgensteinian method can work only by establishing what we want to say about the example, so that extensive disagreement at that point in the enterprise would vitiate it entirely. As O'Neill puts it: "This method must presuppose sufficient community of moral views—an ethical tradition, perhaps, or a shared ideology—for there to *be* something which 'we' (whoever 'we' may be: and this is a large question) do want to say about a given example" (PE, 12). Where such agreement is lacking, we can only have a breakdown in moral communication, an impasse of incommensurable frameworks; where it exists, we merely elaborate views that we always already held, even if implicitly or less articulately. It is, therefore, not hard to see why O'Neill regards the Wittgensteinian position as leading readily and simultaneously to moral conservatism and moral relativism.

What disappears from view as a result, in her judgement, is the ubiquity of moral disagreement. For the Wittgensteinian approach occludes an important range of cases in which the focus of moral reflection is in fact the question of how properly to characterize the specific case under discussion; and it further leaves inarticulate a perfectly intelligible range of questions about the moral worth of the locally shared frameworks whose legitimacy is presupposed by exclusive reliance on judgements that presuppose them—questions that might be motivated by perceived discrepancies between one local practice or tradition and another, or between one cultural framework and another.

But the Wittgensteinian use of literary examples has a further limitation. In O'Neill's view it imposes a spectator perspective on our moral thinking. Such examples confront us with the requirement to judge the characters in their imaginary situation; but they leave us with no responsibility to carry such judgements over into real situations in which they have concrete consequences for real people, and no substantial guidance for how to do so when we do get out of our armchairs and take up those responsibilities. As O'Neill puts it:

The move from an example and the judgement reached by reflecting on the example in the light of our shared practices to a decision about an actual case, which is unlikely to match the example in all respects, is far from obvious. . . . It is difficult to see how [it] . . . is to be made without the mediation of principles or theories which indicate or suggest which *sorts* of correspondence between example and actual case are important and which trivial. (PE, 18)

A moral philosophy that restricts itself to such examples risks reducing itself to mere aestheticism, to a form of moral connoisseurship that fails even to address the real problems we actually face.

It is evident that O'Neill's countercritique of Diamond rests on a number of presuppositions: some concern what she calls "the Wittgensteinian method in philosophy," others concern literature. To take the former first: even if some moral philosophers who would describe their work as Wittgensteinian might fit the description O'Neill constructs, is there any reason to think that Diamond does? It is true that Diamond's defence of Clark is in part a defence of his claim to be inviting his readers to acknowledge something in themselves that is overlain or hidden by unthinking habits of thought and response; so she plainly recognizes that one way of convincing another to alter their moral views is to remind them of something that they already know or acknowledge, something that is already common to author and reader. But it is also true that Diamond repeatedly emphasizes the capacity of literature, and so of literary examples, to enlarge our moral imagination, to educate the heart towards enlarged and deepened moral sympathies. Does this not show that she cannot accept the putative "definitively Wittgensteinian" idea that the only alternative to speaking to the converted is not to be able to speak to them at all?

O'Neill does note this apparently recalcitrant aspect of Wittgensteinian work such as Diamond's, and she responds as follows:

This [idea of enlarging sympathies] seems empirically dubious—plenty of people have been converted (or corrupted) to mean or violent or racist moral practice and outlook—and in any case assumes a standpoint from which distinct moral traditions can be compared, which is not obviously available within the Wittgensteinian approach. We have to remember that within a position which sees all justification as relative to locally accepted practice any reason for converting those beyond the pale of one's own current practices would be matched by others' reasons for undertaking a counter-conversion. (PE, 15)

The inadequacy of this response is striking. First, why should the fact that sympathies can sometimes be contracted by modes of address to the convictions of the heart show that they cannot also be enlarged thereby? One might as well argue that the fact that such corruption can equally well be engendered by logically valid arguments shows that argument is a morally dubious mode of addressing one's reflective capacities. Beyond this patently invalid inference, we have only the assertion that enlargement of sympathies is not obviously consistent with a central assumption of the Wittgensteinian approach. But if Diamond's paper explicitly emphasizes the possibility of critical reflection of a kind that enlarges sympathies, surely that gives us reason to reconsider the assumption that she believes that all justification is relative to locally accepted practice. The

fact that she underlines Dickens's capacity to lead his readers beyond the pale of their current practices suggests on the contrary that she does not in fact belong in O'Neill's artificially constructed category of "Wittgensteinian moral philosophers." Indeed, it raises the possibility that O'Neill's idea of a single, Wittgensteinian approach to moral philosophy united around such views of justification might itself be a fantasy. And here we reach a more fundamental philosophical disagreement between Diamond and O'Neill.

O'Neill simply takes it for granted that Wittgensteinian moral philosophers can and must be distinguished from other kinds of moral philosopher by virtue of the specific account they offer of such things as the nature of moral justification; the only question for her is what that distinctively Wittgensteinian account might be—what particular requirements it lays down for something to count as a moral justification, for example. We might disagree about what those Wittgensteinian requirements are, but there must be some; otherwise, there would be no distinctively Wittgensteinian position to analyse. In effect, then, O'Neill imposes particular requirements for what is to count as a Wittgensteinian account of ethics, and does so in terms of the particular requirements such accounts imposes on their subject matter.

But Diamond's Wittgenstein is precisely someone who sees the original sin of philosophy as that of attempting to lay down requirements on the reality it aims to contemplate, and who accordingly sees its possibility for redemption as lying in the attempt simply to attend to what is there to be seen, in all its variety and complexity. So one cannot properly appreciate the nature of the misunderstanding manifest in O'Neill's critique of Diamond if one restricts oneself to pointing out that Diamond's critique of O'Neill does not in fact presuppose that all moral justification must be relative to a practice; for one might then go on to ask: "Well, if that isn't what Diamond thinks about ethics, what *are* her distinctive commitments and theses?" But Diamond is not even attempting to argue that it is a requirement on all competent moral beings that they acknowledge the reality of convictions of the heart, or the relevance and importance of literature to philosophy; she is not trying to—she is in fact trying not to—lay down any requirements at all. Her aim is simply to remind us that it is perfectly intelligible to talk of convictions of the heart, and to regard literature as having moral force because of its ability to address them—that these ways of conceiving morality and rationality exist, and can be explained, and even rendered convincing (although not, of course, to everyone). But all that follows from such reminders is that philosophers can have no business laying down requirements on the nature of moral thought such that these possibilities entirely disappear from sight. To argue against their cogency or plausibility is one thing; to write as if their

very intelligibility is ruled out in advance, as if by the nature of the subject matter or the nature of human reason, is quite another.

What, however, of O'Neill's second set of presuppositions—those concerning literature? Here, too, we can detect a set of very strong presuppositions about the nature of literary texts at work, presuppositions that function so as to legitimate objections to those who see moral force in literature but that are never properly explained or defended—quite as if no reasonable person could possibly object to them. O'Neill characterizes examples drawn from literary texts in the following way:

[They are] examples of completed action in a context which invites moral consideration or assessment, rather than on less complete examples of a situation which raises moral problems or dilemmas, as though the primary exercise of moral judgement were to *reflect* or *pass judgement* on what has been done rather than to decide among possible actions. (PE, 11)

This notion of “completion” here is not perhaps entirely clear, but O'Neill goes on to clarify it by linking it to two distinctive features she attributes to literature—“the *authority* of the literary text in the presentation and construal of each example, and . . . the *type of example* to be found in works of literature” (PE, 12). Call these an issue of form and an issue of content, respectively.

The point about content captures O'Neill's view that works of literature (and especially novels) tend to be preoccupied with private rather than public crises, and so an exclusive emphasis upon examples drawn from such works tends to produce in Wittgensteinian ethical writing a focus on inwardness and personal relations rather than on the dilemmas of public and working life. Once again, one might feel that this articulates an obvious truth about the novel, with its distinctive generic resources for the exploration of individual consciousness, as exploited in the practice of Henry James or Jane Austen. But further reflection suggests that matters cannot be so simple. For could one plausibly claim that a literary genre whose canonical instances include *Middlemarch*, *War and Peace*, *North and South*, *The Possessed*, *The Red and the Black*, and *Dombey and Son* (to remain only within the nineteenth century) is one that lacks the resources or the ability to address dilemmas of public and working life—matters of economics, politics, war, religion, science, and their complex interactions on a national and international as well as a local stage? And why anyway assume that an interest in inwardness and personal relations must stand opposed to an interest in dilemmas of public and working life? Is it not precisely one of the distinctive powers of the novel, and one of the distinctive concerns of authors such as Eliot, Tolstoy, and Dickens, to show how these aspects of human life intersect and determine one another, revealing the personal within the political as much as the political

conditions for personal development or decline? Even if some of the moral philosophers O'Neill characterizes as "Wittgensteinian" have tended to prefer examples chosen from Henry James to ones derived from Stendhal, that hardly shows a limitation inherent either in literature or in any form of moral reflection that draws upon it.

What, then, of O'Neill's formal anxiety about the authority of the literary text?

The only acceptable disagreements about the construal of literary examples are those for which there is warrant within the text. Nobody can reasonably speculate whether the interpretation of such examples hinges entirely on factors of which the author has neither told nor hinted. (It is hardly open to a Wittgensteinian to adopt principles of interpretation—whether radically subjectivist or deconstructive—which call in question the possibility of a shared, open reading of the text.) Consider how impertinent it would be to construe *Macbeth* as a murder mystery by adducing extratextual hunches, or to wonder whether Raskolnikov wasn't perhaps mistaken in thinking that he had murdered Alyona Ivanovna. . . . Even in a poor whodunit extratextual importations are suspect; they are totally destructive of the literary examples on which Wittgensteinian ethical reflection builds. But in respecting the integrity of literary examples, the depth and ubiquity of moral disagreement are obscured. (PE, 14)

Let us set aside O'Neill's bracketed imposition of yet another unargued requirement on Wittgensteinian philosophy, with its embedded expression of ignorance about deconstruction. Once again, what remains oscillates between the articulation of a truism and the repression of significant literary and philosophical possibilities. The first sentence is very hard to disagree with; but is it obvious that any interpretation for which there is warrant in the text must be one that the author has either told us about or hinted at? Must we take a particular stance on the vexed and complex issue of the relevance and authority of the author's intentions to textual meaning in order to endorse the principle of textual warrant? The same oscillation between self-evidence and contentiousness is equally manifest in the specific examples invoked later in the passage. For many of the characters in *Macbeth*, there is in fact a murder mystery to be solved: who killed the king? But of course, that point can be established without invoking extratextual hunches, so perhaps O'Neill would not disagree. As for Raskolnikov, I do not see how one might exclude in principle the possibility that he mistakenly judged his victim to be dead when he left her flat, as long as that claim were to form part of an interpretation of the text as a whole that seems to have internal warrant.

Beyond such disputes about specific examples lurks a general point about textual interpretation. O'Neill plainly connects her arguably trivial claim about textual warrant with her earlier claim about the completeness

of literary examples: she sees the authority of literary texts as something that “imposes a largely shared interpretation of examples” and so helps to occlude the depth and ubiquity of disagreement in moral life. But to accept her point about textual warrant does not in any way establish the claim that interpretations of literary examples are largely shared or agreed upon; and this is evident even with respect to the work of authors who most plausibly fit her earlier content claim—those whose work focuses primarily upon inwardness and personal relations.

The novels and tales of Henry James are certainly “distinctive, nuanced and well-articulated . . . each is *sui generis* and in itself a complete example of moral thinking” (PE, 12). It is hard to think of literary texts that are more dense, substantial, and closely textured; but this has not ensured agreement upon how they are to be interpreted. On the contrary, the literary criticism of Henry James by now constitutes a literary critical tradition in its own right, with its epochs and revolutions, its conflicting paradigms and topics of unending debate. One might well define the canonicity of such texts as manifest in their capacity indefinitely to sustain productive critical attention; and what is thereby produced is not a monolith of self-reinforcing and inherently conservative agreement but rather an extended conversation between a variety of different voices and perspectives, none of which could be said entirely to lack textual warrant or to depend solely upon extratextual hunches (as if there is any way of rendering that distinction at once exhaustive and informative). The point here is not to contest the thought that interpretation requires textual warrant; it is to contest the assumption that the need for textual warrant makes determining the content and significance of a literary text any less complex, exploratory, and inherently open-ended a business than that of understanding the moral significance of a real-life situation.

O’Neill claims that the action of stories such as those of Henry James is essentially or inherently completed, something that she opposes to what she describes as less complete situations in real life that raise moral problems or dilemmas; but this is multiply misleading. For first, the relevant actions are not confronted by the characters as always already completed; rather, they find themselves in situations of necessarily partial knowledge in which their problem is precisely to decide what to do. Furthermore, it is characteristic of a James story that even when the action of the plot is complete, its moral significance remains a matter of debate and conflict among the characters, as well as among his readers; what that meaning is typically remains an unresolved problem, and so to the same extent does the question of what precisely was done (by Maggie Verver, or Isabel Archer). Accordingly, O’Neill’s initial, guiding opposition between passing judgement on what has been done and deciding between possible actions simply does not have any direct application to the situations of

James's characters, and it might even be argued that that is an important part of their moral significance for the author himself.⁴ In which case O'Neill's earlier point that guidance for real-life action cannot simply be read off from concrete literary examples would not count against the moral relevance of attention to literature. For those propounding that view could simply agree, suggesting instead that both the vicissitudes of literary characters in such texts and the vicissitudes of readers attempting to understand them might exemplify exactly the kind of attentiveness to particularity, the priority of right judgement to the application of general principle, that is needed to find one's moral way in real life, and indeed to find guidance in finding that way from literature. O'Neill's further idea that such guidance could result only from the application of principle or theory would then appear as yet another a priori requirement imposed on the reality of moral reflection.

The key point here, however, is not whether we accept or reject this way of understanding the moral force and relevance of James's writing in particular or of literature in general; it is whether we acknowledge that this is at least a possibility that the genre of the novel is capable of realising and hence acknowledge that O'Neill is once again laying down requirements on the nature of her subject matter that reveal themselves to be illegitimate as soon as we pay properly close attention to that subject matter in all its protean variety. If so, then her sense of the exiguous relevance of literature to philosophy rests as much on her highly restrictive conception of what literature may be as on her equally restrictive sense of the possible ways in which philosophy might acknowledge the claims of reason. And the shape of those restrictions—with their preference for theoretical principle over the exercise of right judgement from case to case, their relegation of the heart's concerns to the realm of mere persuasion, their conception of literary characters and situations not only as mere simulacra of the real but also as directing us away from moral reality rather than closer to its true nature—matches those originally imposed by Plato to such an extent that we can plausibly regard this conversation between O'Neill and Diamond as one more episode in what by now truly has become the ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry. Coetzee's intervention is thus not in any sense an attempt to revive a philosophically moribund debate; it is rather a contribution to an utterly contemporary controversy.

⁴ Cf. Robert Pippin, *Henry James and Modern Moral Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).