



# Williams' Relativism and the Moral Point of View: A Challenge by Cora Diamond

Sofia Miguens<sup>1</sup>

Accepted: 13 November 2023  
© The Author(s) 2024

## Abstract

There are similarities between Bernard Williams and Cora Diamond as moral philosophers: both their moral philosophies are marked by an engagement with the question of what it is like to be a human being, and both are engaged with experience more than theory. Still, such similarities rest on very different philosophical grounds. In this article, I consider whether a Nietzschean (Williams) and a Wittgensteinian (Diamond) could ever converge on a characterization of the 'moral point of view' as this involves views on life, thought, and language. I argue that divergences between Williams and Diamond persist, a very important one concerning relativism: whereas Diamond adumbrates a Wittgensteinian way out of relativism, it remains a last word for Williams.

**Keywords** The moral point of view · Bernard Williams · Cora Diamond · Nietzscheanism versus Wittgensteinianism · Relativism

Life is not argument.  
Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 121.

## 1 Introduction

In her article "How to Be Somebody Else" Sophie Grace Chappell identifies similarities between Bernard Williams and Cora Diamond as moral philosophers by saying that both their moral philosophies are marked by an engagement with the question of what it is like to be a human being and that both are engaged with experience and life more than with theory (Chappell 2022a, b: p. 95). Chappell is certainly right that such similarities exist and that they are relevant. In the current landscape of moral philosophy, both Williams and Diamond stand out for their rich and subtle criticisms of major orientations such as Kantianism and Utilitarianism (see Diamond 1988, 2000, 2005, 2006, 2008 and Williams 1985, 1993, 1995a, 2002). Still, Williams' and Diamond's positions in moral philosophy rest on rather different grounds. Here I want to discuss whether a Nietzschean

(Williams) and a Wittgensteinian (Diamond) could in fact ever converge on a conception of the moral point of view, an issue which, as such, involves specific views on life, thought, and language and on how these relate. I argue that although Chappell is right to point out the similarities, divergences regarding the nature of the moral point of view persist between Diamond and Williams. I also want to show that Diamond adumbrates a way out of relativism, following Wittgenstein and Anscombe, whereas, given the views on thought and language that underlie his Nietzscheanism, relativism is bound to be Williams' last word.

## 2 Williams on Ethics: A Clear and Disturbing View

What is 'morality', or 'ethics', according to Williams? Williams' answer is clear and disturbing. There simply is no ground for a moral theory such as 'administrative ideas of rationality' (Williams 1985: p. 197) made us expect. The sole purpose of moral reflection is to assist our self-understanding (Moore 2018); philosophy cannot tell us how to live. How could it? For that to be possible, there would have to be a single stance on human life as such, or on what the best life for humans qua humans is. Yet such Aristotelian appeasement, as it were, misses the Nietzschean

---

✉ Sofia Miguens  
smoraismiguens@gmail.com

<sup>1</sup> Department of Philosophy, Faculty of Arts, University of Porto, Via Panorâmica S/N, 4150-564 Porto, Portugal

self-creation that Williams sees in us,<sup>1</sup> the many open ways to live a human life, as well as the tragic dimension involved. In fact, moral theories, with their focus on voluntary action and moral obligation simply miss, according to Williams, the point of ethics. Once we take in the idea that a purely voluntary act is an illusion and that thinking that the ‘amoral’ will be moved by rational argument is also an illusion, the point of ethics is to help us make sense of our humanity (Williams 2002) and reflect on the human condition. By then, the ground for thinking that we could ever argue against the ‘immoralist’ from an Archimedean point, a moral universal viewpoint as it were, has disappeared from under our feet. Naturally, Williams admits that we do speak, and will go on speaking, of responsibility, guilt, or shame in human lives. But there simply will be no accounting for such phenomena by appealing to a moral ‘theory’ of any kind. Moral theories (e.g. Kantian or Utilitarian) are too far removed from any concrete sense of a particular life, or forms of life. Also, moral theories are often governed by unrealistic dreams of a community of reason (Williams 1985: p. 197). In fact, according to Williams, we think and deliberate *from what we are* (Williams 1985: p. 200). We may reflect on the concreteness of our life as we live it, reflect on why so often we do not live up to self-understanding, reflect on the roles of truth and truthfulness in endeavors towards meaning in our individual lives (Williams 1995a, b). All that is done, though, once the dispelling of ‘moral theory’, and of the ‘universal rational viewpoint’ of rationalistic conceptions of rationality, has taken place (for a recent discussion see Chappel and Van Ackeren 2019). This is part of what Chappell means by ‘life, not theory’ in Williams. It is in such conditions that Williams engages with the question ‘what it is to be a human being’, namely in his reflections on the moral outlooks of Ancient Greeks (Williams 1993), which he deems more needed, and more fruitful, to face modernity than ‘administrative views of rationality’. What about Diamond? What does ‘life, not theory’ mean in her case? I will try to get to that through a somewhat indirect route: in what follows I will compare Diamond and Williams on applying our concepts, focusing on concepts deployed in ethical thinking.

<sup>1</sup> Such Nietzschean self-creation, which rests on the idea of ‘Becoming who you are’ (Nietzsche 2001, *The Gay Science*, 270), lies at the heart of Williams’ perceptive approach to moral philosophy and moral psychology. In the moral philosophy literature, this is often referred to as *perfectionism*. In contrast with approaches to morality such as Kantianism or Utilitarianism, perfectionism gives centre stage to what one is, and what one engages with, and not on what the rational thing to do is.

### 3 ‘Life, Not Theory’: Williams and Diamond on Applying Our Concepts

Differences between Williams and Diamond qua moral philosophers may in fact be highlighted if we consider their respective views of applying our concepts. Such views are key for contrasting their stances on relativism, which is my main interest here.<sup>2</sup> Williams’ brand of relativism goes along with the view of the nature of moral reflection that I have just sketched (Williams 1985). In Chapter 9 (Relativism and Reflection) of *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* Williams puts forward the idea of a ‘relativism of distance’ (Williams 1985: p. 162): «I shall call relativism seen in this way the relativism of distance. There is room for it in a reflective ethical outlook [*one of Williams’ main contentions in the book is that there is no way back from such reflective ethical outlook*]. The distance that makes confrontation notional, and makes this relativism possible, can lie in various directions. Sometimes it is a matter of what is elsewhere, and the relativism is applied to the exotic. It is naturally applied to the more distant past. It can also be applied to the future.» (Williams 1985: p. 162) Immediately before Williams says «It is not merely that to try to live the life of a convinced phlogiston theorist in contemporary academia is as incoherent an enterprise as trying to live the life of a Teutonic

<sup>2</sup> There are many ways to approach relativism in current philosophy, from faultless disagreement to the many shapes of contextualism, to Continental Philosophy studies of authors such as Hegel or Nietzsche. Maria Baghramian and J. Adam Carter (Baghramian and Carter 2022) conclude their *Stanford Encyclopedia* article on relativism by saying: «Relativism comes in a plethora of forms that are themselves grounded in disparate philosophical motivations. There is no such thing as Relativism simpliciter, and no single argument that would establish or refute every relativistic position that has been proposed. Despite this diversity, however, there are commonalities and family resemblances that justify the use of the label “relativism” for the various views we have discussed.» In this article I will try to keep things clear by focusing on Williams and Diamond. Anyway, this is how Baghramian and Carter define relativism at the beginning of the same article: «Relativism, roughly put, is the view that truth and falsity, right and wrong, standards of reasoning, and procedures of justification are products of differing conventions and frameworks of assessment and that their authority is confined to the context giving rise to them. More precisely, “relativism” covers views which maintain that—at a high level of abstraction—at least some class of things have the properties they have (e.g., beautiful, morally good, epistemically justified) not *simpliciter*, but only relative to a given framework of assessment (e.g., local cultural norms, individual standards), and correspondingly, that the truth of claims attributing these properties holds only once the relevant framework of assessment is specified or supplied. Relativists characteristically insist, furthermore, that if something is only *relatively* so, then there can be no framework-independent vantage point from which the matter of whether the thing in question is so can be established. Relativism has been, in its various guises, both one of the most popular and most reviled philosophical doctrines of our time.»

Knight in 1930's Nuremberg. Phlogiston theory is not a real option because it cannot be squared with a lot that we know to be true.», and before that: «A relativist view of a given type of outlook can be understood as saying that for such outlooks it is only in real confrontations that the language of appraisal—good, bad, right, wrong, and so on can be applied to them; in notional confrontations, this kind of appraisal is seen as inappropriate, and no judgments are made.»

My point is that in formulating his relativism, Williams carefully weighs what he calls *real* and *notional* confrontations between outlooks, ethical and others, after he initially characterizes relativism as taking disagreements, and thus positions which apparently conflict, as such that they do not conflict. Of course, taking positions which apparently conflict as such that they do not conflict is done at the cost of commensurability. One might say, as Williams does, that the aim of relativism is precisely to explain away a conflict. But then, incommensurability between theories or forms of life, or cultures, is the inevitable consequence of relativism. In the case of cultures or forms of life Williams also asks whether relativism in fact supposes accepting that two cultures, or forms of life, exclude one another, which would mean that cultures are self-contained. His answer is negative. Still, he acknowledges that each outlook makes claims that seem to extend to the whole world. Williams's discussion of relativism is, without any doubt, nuanced; his relativism of distance is in no way simplistic.<sup>3</sup> I will not discuss it directly. What I want to look closely at is one central element in Williams' work associated with his brand of relativism: his celebrated distinction between thick and thin concepts (Williams 1985, Väyrynen 2019). When Diamond speaks of our concepts, she often speaks, in a Wittgensteinian spirit, of 'going on applying our concepts', namely in 'saying ethical things about how things are'. We say of a certain person that she is brave and of another that she is despicable, of one action that it is right and of another that it is wrong. Now, according to Williams, there is no such thing as a homogeneous class of ethical assertions, and thus no homogenous account of what we are doing in putting forward such claims (Williams 1995a, b: p. 233). In some assertions, thin ethical concepts, such as *good*, *right* or *wrong*, are used, whereas in others, thick ethical concepts, such as *brave*, *despicable*, *treacherous*, *cruel*, *brutal*, *dishonest*, *blasphemous*, *chaste*, *tactful*, and so on, are used. Thick ethical concepts have a higher empirical content than thin ethical concepts do (Williams 1995a, b: p. 233). They claim more about the world, and they are more descriptive and less abstract, than concepts such as *good*, *right* or *wrong*. Their application is determined by the

nature of the world. Also, in thick ethical concepts description and evaluation are inextricable. Applying them (e.g., using the concept *chaste* or the concept *obscene*) is viewing the world a certain way and simultaneously approving or disapproving of it. The whole landscape of contemporary moral philosophy takes on a particular shape when seen through the lens of this distinction. It becomes clear that what many philosophers—certainly Kantians, for one—are attracted by, when accounting for the nature of morality, are *thin* ethical concepts (Williams 1995a, b: p. 234). On the other hand, some other philosophers in fact center ethical discussions on thick ethical concepts—namely, Neo-Aristotelians of all kinds (Williams 1995a, b: p. 234). Now, a crucial claim of Williams is that the vocabulary of thick concepts is not homogeneous in a pluralistic society, or in the same society over time, or between different societies (Williams 1995a, b: p. 236). There are no universally shared thick concepts; plurality is irreducible. This is where Williams' relativism enters. Williams's view of relativism is, as I said, nuanced and sophisticated. It is, in fact, such nuancing (namely when it comes to considering and weighing moral and scientific outlooks of the past and of the future) that the term 'relativism of distance' intends to capture and specify (Williams 1985: p. 162). The nuancing also concerns relations between disagreement, conflict, confrontation and the reflectiveness of ethical outlook, since, as I said before, according to Williams 'there is no route back from reflectiveness' (Williams 1985: p. 163). I will not go into all that now; what I want to assess is whether Williams' relativism in fact well-grounded in the work done by the notion of thick and thin ethical concepts.

One philosopher who takes issue with Williams's relativism, as such relativism is articulated in terms of thick ethical concepts, in a way that will prove important to understand Diamond, is David Wiggins (for the general shape of Wiggins' own approach to ethics see Wiggins 1991, 2006). So, I want to bring in an element from a discussion between the two, Williams and Wiggins.<sup>4</sup> The point of bringing in the Wiggins-Williams discussion (which is a discussion of truth and objectivity in ethics) is that Wiggins does not go along with Williams' 'symmetry view'—i.e. with the idea that for each moral judgment there is always the opposing judgment to be made by someone. Wiggins thinks that such symmetry is a crucial feature of Williams' depiction of our use of moral concepts and sets out to oppose it. He himself introduces an idea of *asymmetry*—the idea that in certain cases there is nothing else to think but that p, and brings forth an example of a situation where, he thinks, one cannot but think that p. The example he introduces in the debate (Wiggins 1995) is the judgment 'Slavery is unjust and insupportable'. There are

<sup>3</sup> In fact, one can even see seeds in Williams of the ideas that I will attribute to Diamond in this article. But they are not developed, and could not be, given the framework Williams works with.

<sup>4</sup> I have analysed this debate before in Miguens 2023.

such situations where one cannot but think that *p*, Wiggins claims, and this is one such situation. We cannot but think, now, that ‘Slavery is unjust and insupportable’. Diamond pays a great deal of attention to this particular example in her 2019 book *Wittgenstein and Anscombe Going On to Ethics* (Diamond 2019). In what follows I will go back to this at length. The main point I want to bring forth is that Williams rejects Wiggins’ claim that there are situations where one cannot but think that *p*. He believes different people can always think different things about the ‘same situation’. For each moral judgment done by some, there is always the opposing judgment to be made by others. To show this, he introduces a thick ethical concept, the concept *cruel*, as well as a case in which for most of us the concept plainly applies to a situation. Some boys do a terrible thing to a cat; they set a cat on fire. Wiggins’ view here, says Williams, would have to be that there is nothing else to think but that this is a cruel thing to do to a cat. Yet, Williams points out, the boys clearly think otherwise: they think that what they are doing to the cat is fun. By doing this Williams is pointing out that there are indeed other ways to think than that this is a cruel thing to do to the cat: the boys simply see what they do as fun. So, it is not the case that there is nothing else to think but that *p*. For Williams, the example highlights the symmetry in the use of the concept *cruel*. Examples such as this one, which is an example of a thick concept in use, are important because they illustrate Williams’s view of the nature of our ethical thinking in a way that brings out both issues of objectivity and relativism. In Williams’ words, «I’ve suggested that thick concepts provide the most promising area in ethics for delivering more than minimal truth, more than simply the surface facts. They provide examples of ethical statements that can not only be true but also be pointfully known by people. But of course, these facts don’t remove all disagreement. This is not simply because some or all of the parties are ignorant, but because of a lack of conceptual homogeneity.» (Williams 1995a, b: p. 239).

So, to sum up, at the core of the business of ethics lies, for Williams, the use of thick concepts such as the concept *cruel* in the example above. It is thick concepts, and thick concepts only, that provide examples of ethical truths being ‘pointfully known’ by people (e.g. we know pointfully that setting the cat on fire is cruel). Yet, there are no thick concepts whose use is universal. The best prospect for truth in ethics would be that there would be some universal set of thick concepts, which of course there is not. Such is the entranceway for relativism.

Not only are the themes of Williams’ ‘brilliant, deep, imaginative and humane’ work (More 2019: p. 9) brought together in his distinction between thick and thin concepts, but also the distinction shows a lot about the conceptual life of humans, as Williams’ sees it. It is worth exploring the connections between the thick-thin distinction and many of

the themes of Williams’s work, from his Nietzschean critique of utilitarianism, to his approach to tragedy, to his idea of how little moral philosophy can achieve, even to his Nietzschean account of the virtues of accuracy and sincerity. Behind all such themes lie the gulfs between humans which are revealed in conceptual lives, namely in ethical outlooks. In other words, behind all of them lies the issue of relativism,

Again, since so much in Williams’ thought rests on the thick-thin distinction and on the irreducible plurality in the use of concepts it supposedly reveals, one question to ask is: is Williams right about thick and thin concepts and how they work? Is his view of thick and thin concepts a good view of ‘how we go on applying our concepts’? Diamond, for one, thinks Williams is not right, and sets out to say why. Speaking from her own Wittgensteinian perspective on ‘human life with language’ she characterizes our use of concepts in terms which at many points very much resemble Williams’ terms. Yet she does not share Williams’ position concerning relativism and disagreement. Why, then, would a Wittgensteinian like Diamond have a different take on relativism than a Nietzschean like Williams does?<sup>5</sup> Diamond’s answer is foreshadowed in Wiggins’s proposal to Williams in the above-mentioned debate. She intends to take Wiggins’ proposal one step further.

#### 4 Diamond on Asymmetry: Bringing in Anscombe to Help Wiggins

In her 2019 book *Reading Wittgenstein with Anscombe Going On to Ethics*, Diamond calls our attention to the fact that, despite his central claim about thick and thin concepts, Williams allows for a nuance in the thick-thin distinction. In her own words, «As Williams understands it, there are concepts which lie between the thick and the thin—his own example in the 1995 article in the debate was that of justice—neither thick nor thin but in between.» (Diamond 2019: p. 271). The idea that the concept *justice* lies between the thick and the thin plays a very important role in Diamond’s hands as she discusses Williams’ thick-thin distinction. But Diamond also stresses the fact that, along with the distinction between thin and thick ethical concepts, Williams

<sup>5</sup> I have addressed this question in Miguens 2020: pp. 410–411. I was interested there in how Diamond’s Wittgensteinian approach to thought and language stands to Frege’s idea that ‘there is a stack of thought available to us all as thinking beings’. In Diamond’s own work, this is a place for Wittgenstein’s take on the Fregean idea of ‘a common intellectual life of humanity’ to go one step beyond Frege. She also addresses the issue in the shape of a dialogue with Hilary Putnam on realism, commensurability and incommensurability.



works, in his view of ethical thinking, with the presumption of symmetry and that it is precisely such presumption that Wiggins rejects. Diamond wants to explore Wiggins's counterproposal regarding asymmetry by bringing it together with an idea of Elizabeth Anscombe, which I will introduce next. But first I want to consider the issue of asymmetry itself. The issue of asymmetry is the link between the different parts of Diamond's 2019 book, as well as the source of her interest in the formulation 'There is nothing else to think but that p'. This is an expression introduced by Wiggins in his discussion with Williams on truth and objectivity in ethics. As Diamond sees it, what Wiggins is doing in the debate by introducing the expression should be brought together with Anscombe's idea of 'what can only be true'. This, on the other hand, is an idea Anscombe uses in her Introduction to Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* (1957). Both Wiggins and Anscombe are trying to grasp asymmetry in thought. For Diamond, asymmetry in thought does crucial work not only in thinking about ethics but also in the interpretation of the *Tractatus* and in thinking about the nature of philosophical method in general.

All these issues are brought together in Diamond's discussion of how we go about applying our concepts. Earlier in her 2019 book, while considering philosophy as an activity of clarification, Diamond examines other cases of asymmetry. In particular, she considers the example used by Anscombe in her Introduction to Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* (1959): the proposition "'Someone' is not the name of someone" (Diamond 2019: p. 71). Anscombe herself uses this example to criticize Wittgenstein's Tractarian view of sense and nonsense. She claims that according to Wittgenstein's classification of *sinnvolle* and *unsinnig* propositions in the *Tractatus*, propositions such as this one, which may be illuminating and even true, come out as nonsense. Yet "'Someone' is not the name of someone" does not seem to Anscombe to be nonsense. Granted, 'there is no opposing thought which is intelligible'. In other words, the True-False poles of *sinnvolle* propositions seem to be absent in "'Someone' is not the name of someone". Nevertheless, the proposition expresses an insight. It should thus not be proclaimed to be straight nonsense, as Wittgenstein would have us do.

Now, what interests Diamond is the relation between asymmetries such as the ones above and the fact that all thinking, not only ethical thinking, is an activity in which *guidance* occurs. Some uses of language and thought are involved in such thought guidance. That is what both Anscombe and Wiggins are trying to get at. In Diamond's own terms, such guidance takes place by means of blocking certain paths of conception and argument and directing thinking towards open and useful paths. This is what she wants to explore while thinking about ethical thinking. This is the reason why she praises Wiggins for introducing the idea that, in some cases, in ethics, there is 'nothing to think but

that p', which he exemplifies with 'Slavery is unjust and insupportable'. What Wiggins is doing is calling attention to the asymmetry present here. Nevertheless, she believes that Wiggins misses something important, which comes up when one considers the actual (contextual, historical) uses of 'Slavery is unjust and insupportable'. She herself does not want to miss it. She thus brings the discussion of the example 'Slavery is unjust and insupportable' into the context of the nineteenth-century debate between abolitionists and proslavery thinkers in the United States, a context in which clearly some people were thinking that 'Slavery is unjust and insupportable' whereas some other people were simply not<sup>6</sup>. She believes Wiggins did not pay enough attention to the fact that path-blocking and path-indicating conceptions and arguments were circulating then, in such circumstances, and that what she, Diamond, after Anscombe, calls 'guidance of thought', was at stake.

## 5 Applying Our Concepts: Why the Example of Slavery is Important 'Exactly as it is'

As I mentioned before, Williams introduces the example of the boys who set a cat on fire and do not see what they do as cruel. Williams challenges Wiggins: his view here, says Williams, should be that there is nothing else to think but that this is a cruel thing to do to a cat. Yet, he points out, the boys clearly think otherwise: they think that what they are doing to the cat is fun. With the example Williams wants to illustrate that there are other ways to think than simply that this is a cruel thing to do to the cat. Thus, it is not the case that there is nothing else to think but that p.

Diamond believes that it is very significant that Williams changes the example. He replaces the original example, which concerns the use of the concept *justice* (and, as we will see, *slavery*) with an example of the use of the concept *cruel*. He thus introduces what he calls a thick ethical concept, as well as a situation in which for most of us the concept plainly applies. He does it to call attention to the fact that the boys do not apply the concept *cruel* to the situation. Diamond thinks that the change of example is not at all indifferent.

As for the boys not thinking of setting the cat on fire as cruel, she believes that one cannot infer from that fact that they are not users of the concept *cruel* (Diamond 2019, p. 275). In fact, she doubts that the boys are not users of the concept *cruel*. They may very well talk of a cruel teacher or cruel villains in films. They can recognize cruelty; they

<sup>6</sup> One very interesting aspect of Diamond's 2019 book is such historical background, which can be further explored by looking into the political positions of e.g. John C. Calhoun (1782–1850).

apply the concept *cruel*; they simply do not view their own actions toward the cat as cruel. Diamond comments that this is a common phenomenon. Very often when it comes to themselves, people simply switch off the use of concepts they master. However, most importantly, Diamond believes that Wiggins' example (of use of the concept *justice*, applied to slavery) and Williams' example (of use of the concept *cruel*) are not on the same level. Williams' example involves a thick concept, the concept *cruel*, whereas Wiggins' example does not.<sup>7</sup> Diamond also calls attention to what takes place with concepts one may understand, and thus in a sense have, but not use. One such example, which comes up in the Williams-Wiggins discussion, is the concept *obscene*, as spoken about by Oscar Wilde, in court.<sup>8</sup> Asked whether he did not think that his own writing was obscene, Wilde answered 'Obscene is not a word of mine'. In other words, he (Oscar Wilde) claims not to have any use for the concept *obscene*. Thus, for him, there is no such thing as obscene writing. Naturally, for all that, he does, in some sense, understand the concept *obscene*, as others around him go about using it.

Diamond also points out that, in some cases, although 'There is nothing else to think but that p' (in some situation, about a certain topic), this does not eliminate the possibility of thinking different things about such topic. We just have to think of a time and of a society in which slavery existed and where people discussed how profitable slavery was, independently of whether it was cruel. Modern-day historians may personally be horrified by slavery and consider it cruel and insupportable and yet discuss how profitable slavery was for the Portuguese, the English, or the French in the sixteenth, seventeenth, or eighteenth centuries. They thus think of slavery in other ways than that it was cruel. They may write articles on the subject. In fact, a person in the eighteenth century thinking then that slavery was profitable, would not necessarily disagree that instances of it might be very cruel. They might have thought it was cruel and unjust in the same way that we may, for example, think that financial capitalism is disruptive and unjust and still invest our money in the stock exchange. Since Aristotle, advocates of various forms of slavery have in fact insisted that certain forms of enslavement are fair (Diamond 2019: p. 291). In these people's thinking there is nothing conceptually wrong or unthinkable in the idea that some human beings are property of other humans. Not only can they live with that,

but they can even simultaneously engage in philosophical discussions about justice. This was certainly the case with Aristotle himself. In fact, if we examine history, we see that people we might admire for other reasons, such as Aristotle, Henry the Navigator, or the US Founding Fathers George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Benjamin Franklin, were all slave owners.

Anyway, Diamond's first point is that it is possible to think other things about slavery besides thinking that it is unjust and insupportable. So, the fact that, in some cases, there is nothing else to think but that p (e.g., think of slavery that it is unjust and insupportable) does not mean that one cannot think of it under another aspect (e.g., think of slavery that it is profitable). Yet Wiggins seems to accept Williams' point about the use of concepts too easily. Diamond believes he should not have done so. She wants to explore the fact that when someone 'has no use for concept X' (for example, the concepts *chaste* or *blasphemous*) this does not mean that such people do not understand such concepts. Wilde did understand the concept *obscene*, all the while that he claimed to have no use for it. That all this is possible—that one may understand concepts for which one has no use—should be kept in mind while considering ethical thinking.

So, I go back to Williams' words once again. He says «I've suggested that thick concepts provide the most promising area in ethics for delivering more than minimal truth, more than simply the surface facts. They provide examples of ethical statements that can not only be true but also be pointfully known by people. But of course, these facts don't remove all disagreement. This is not simply because some or all of the parties are ignorant, but because of a lack of conceptual homogeneity». (Williams 1995a, b, p. 239). All this amounts to the following picture of ethical thinking. At the core of the business of ethics lies the use of thick concepts, such as the concept *cruel*, for the boys, or the concept *obscene* for those putting Wilde on trial. It is the use of such concepts that provides examples of what can be known by people ('ethical knowledge,' in Williams's terms). Yet, since there are no thick concepts whose use is universal, and since the best prospect for truth in ethics would be that there would be some universal set of thick concepts, we remain bereft of such 'best prospect'—there is no 'best prospect' for ethics. Ethics simply cannot be what it is purported or expected by many to be. This, of course, is precisely Williams' point (Williams 1985).

Yet Diamond thinks that we do not have to go along with Williams' views on what the best prospect for truth in ethics is. There are other prospects for ethics and objectivity in ethics. In fact, we should be aware that it is precisely because Williams thinks along the lines sketched above, and only because of that, that he is moved to change Wiggins' specific example of slavery being unjust and insupportable. In doing so, he brings himself further from understanding Wiggins.

<sup>7</sup> Interestingly, Sophie Grace Chappell goes a different way here than Diamond does. In discussing Williams on thick concepts, Chappell decides to take the concept *justice* to be a thick concept, while acknowledging that Williams himself does not do the same, and so being perfectly aware of the passage by Williams that Diamond takes as pretext to build her case (see Chappell 2022a, b: p. 149, note 33).

<sup>8</sup> Williams speaks of *obscene*, Wilde actually spoke of *blasphemous*.

## 6 What the Question Really is: Forms of Disagreement and the Nature of the Moral Point of View

According to Diamond, Wiggins' example of slavery is important exactly the way it is (Diamond 2019: p. 277). In fact, it illustrates the fact that Wiggins is not doing what Williams thinks he is doing. According to Diamond, Wiggins' point is that in denying that slavery is unjust and insupportable, one puts oneself at risk of having no workable system of moral concepts to go on. Once one has justice and respect for humanity on board qua considerations (and What kind of moral thinking can you have without that? asks Wiggins), one will conceive of slavery as insupportable. What the example of slavery highlights, then, is not the ongoing application of concepts by someone who already has such concepts, such as the concept *cruel*, and goes on applying them. What Wiggins is reaching to is more ambitious, according to Diamond. He is getting at important aspects concerning the nature of 'the moral point of view' (Diamond 2019: p. 285), as this issue intersects with the ongoing use of concepts. This is precisely what Diamond wants to take into her Wittgensteinian outlook. There is further work to be done though, on aspects left unclear by Wiggins.

The problem with Wiggins's suggestion about asymmetry is, naturally, that the pro-slavery writers of the nineteenth century did not do without notions and considerations of justice and of what being human is. Still, they insisted that certain forms of enslavement were fair (Diamond 2019: p. 291). Wiggins should have accounted for that fact. Diamond thus asks directly: How were the defenders of slavery in the nineteenth century thinking? What were they thinking, the people who were actually thinking something that, according to Wiggins, in some sense 'isn't there to think'? The fact is that, and Wiggins did not pay any attention to this, they too made sense, they too used the concepts *cruel* and *justice*, and *slavery*. They too responded to reasons and presented arguments formulated from what they took to be the moral point of view. In fact, they had a conception of human nature. For example, some of them believed that some people were natural slaves. They believed that some people were themselves defective in reason, at most able to appreciate someone else's rationality.<sup>9</sup> Based on such considerations, those

<sup>9</sup> Through the idea, defended by some of the participants in the debate, that the natural character of Africans justifies their subjugation or enslavement, the notion of 'natural slaves' emerges as one of the main themes of Chapter 7. Diamond does not fail to notice that such thinking of natural inferiority may have persisted not only among the abolishers of slavery but also in later views of, e.g., women (again, in our own Western culture, long after slavery was abolished). This means that many people believed, presumably in good faith, that the claim that 'All men are equal' excluded women as it excluded slaves. In fact, as Diamond points out, it is very well known to all of us but not very easily acknowledged (we politely avert

opposing abolitionism had no problem with conceiving of slaves as a kind of property (even if, for some, only in labor and not in person) all the while that they did not 'suspend' applying the concept *justice* to many other situations around them. They did see many things as unjust. They simply put the concept *justice* to a different use.

It is crucial for Diamond, in all this, that the kind of disagreement between advocates of slavery and abolitionists was not just a matter of thinking that the 'other side' was simply wrong at that point. She stresses that each side thought that the other side was, as it were, *more than wrong*: that the other side had 'gone off the rails'. But if one believes that those who disagree with us have gone off the rails, that there has been a 'miscarriage of thought' on their side, the issue of what is meant by this must be addressed. Yet Wiggins has nothing to say here. He does not allow into the picture, for example, the reasons why advocates of slavery believed that thinking about slavery in general terms, as the abolitionists did, was 'madness'. Yet, the pro-slavery thinkers did provide reasons. They provided reasons for, for example, repudiating the statement of the Declaration of Independence and the Virginia Declaration of Rights that *all men are by nature equally free*. They believed that real-life issues cannot be approached by such metaphysical abstractions as 'the natural rights of men'. Thinking in terms of metaphysical abstractions such as 'natural rights of men', in other words, the rights that all men *by nature* have, simply disregards the concrete reality of our nature and capacities. It is a bad way of thinking about our nature. It is presumptuous and abstract philosophy, they thought. In contrast, there is no disrespect toward human beings in taking slavery to be just. It is simply a matter of realistically acknowledging human nature as it is, they thought. Pro-slavery thinkers did acknowledge that there were evil uses of slavery. Yet, they claimed that to say that there is evil in any human institution is simply to say of that institution that it is human. There can also be a benevolent and enlightened practice of slavery, and that is what matters. What the defenders of slavery took to be the absolute wrong path in thinking about slavery was revolutionary thinking. They saw revolutionary thinking as abstract thinking, gone adrift from all realistic sense of the limits and fallibility of human nature. In other words: defenders of slavery rejected Enlightenment ideas that are probably

Footnote 9 (continued)

our gaze...) that the idea of naturally just subordination goes back to Aristotle's views on politics and indeed permeates it. Although she does not fail to point out the similarities between issues, the racism common to abolitionists and defenders of slavery is not specifically discussed by Diamond, nor is gender. However, by then many important instruments for entering such discussions are already in our hands.

dear to most, or all, readers of this article.<sup>10</sup> Anyway, they provided reasons for thinking as they did, and Diamond's point is that they were not irrational. They were simply putting forward (different) 'path blockers' and 'path indicators' than the abolitionists.

## 7 Relativism and the Moral Point of View: Some Conclusions

My main point in this article has been that in her reading of the Williams–Wiggins debate Diamond adumbrates a way out of Williams' relativism. Such way out is possible for a Wittgensteinian such as herself, with her view on life with language, and is not open for a Nietzschean such as Williams. Diamond approaches the Williams–Wiggins debate with an eye on 'how we go on applying our concepts'. It is under such light that the contrast between Williams's and herself appears in its most clear guise. Although the contrast has wider implications as well (in fact it has implications for a view of thought-world relations in general, not just for ethics), it reflects on their respective conceptions of the moral point of view. Diamond's critique of Williams starts from Williams' own observation that the concept justice is neither thick nor thin. Such starting point is important. Diamond believes it is significant that the discussion between Williams and Wiggins moves from examples of thick concepts (such as *cruel*) to concepts such as *justice* or *slavery*. Thinking about justice or slavery, i.e. going on using our concepts of *justice* and *slavery*, while thinking of slavery as being just or unjust, does not depend on (Williams') thick concepts only. Diamond does not deny that what Williams calls thick concepts may be applied in situations associated with slavery (we may think, for example, of a small boy watching a slave owner, his father, using the whip on a particular slave on a particular occasion and thinking that here and now his father is being *cruel*). She also does not reject the important insights which come with Williams' idea of thick concepts, namely that there is a description-valuation entanglement in the use of concepts, and that such entanglement makes a difference for 'poignantly knowing' something about the world as concepts are applied. In fact, she thinks it is quite relevant that both abolitionists and defenders of slavery were users of Williams' thick concept *cruel*. Concepts such as *cruel* and *brutal* were not doubt at stake in thinking about slavery, but they were not the only concepts involved. Concepts of justice and property and of what being human is, were also involved in thinking about slavery. What

Diamond wants to say about concepts here lies beyond the thick-thin dichotomy. She wants to have us pay attention to the fact that some people were able to think of human beings as being property of other human beings (believing a man or a woman simply could be owned, used, and disposed of as a piece of property, like a horse or a chair) and think of that as fair. Others simply could not think that way. They could not think that way and think as they thought about what being human is, what property is, and what fairness or justice is. Both parties were dealing practically and conceptually with other humans in a situation where from a legal perspective there were humans who were slaves. Both parties were users of concepts such as *cruel* or *brutal*, so thick concepts in Williams' sense. So approaching the slavery debate with Williams' vocabulary of thick concepts is insufficient to understand what is going on—the use of thick concepts is not what makes the difference between the ways of thinking of the two parties. Something more is needed: Diamond thinks that a contrast between two types of disagreement must be acknowledged. There are disagreements pertaining to the use of concepts one already masters, e.g., disagreements on whether particular 'thick' concepts, such as the concept *cruel*, apply in a particular case. These are exemplified by Williams' case of the boys and the cat; such is the setting in which William's dichotomy of thick and thin concepts works. However, there are also disagreements that do not pertain to applying concepts one already has, but rather to shaping what making sense is. They are a different kind of phenomenon. It is such phenomenon that accounts for Diamond's interest in the 19th-century debate on slavery. Both sides, the abolitionists and the pro-slavery thinkers, thought the other party was going 'down a path of disastrously tempting but utterly confused thought' (Diamond 2019: p. 289). Diamond believes the existence of such disagreement was marked, in that debate, by the mutual accusations of 'thinking gone astray', 'miscarriage of thought', and 'going off the rails' (Diamond 2019, Chapter 7). Such disagreement was not a matter of some mistake one might be talked out of, in a rational discussion between two rational parties. It concerned making sense in a new way. Each side thus believed the other side was simply not making sense. So Diamond's suggestion here is the following. In the 19th-century debate on slavery what was at stake in the disagreement was the moral point of view itself, what the moral point of view is. At stake was who took part in it. A conception of the moral point of view cannot be separated from a conception of rationality and of who possesses it (Williams could in fact agree with this). Views of life, thought, and language and on how these relate thus come together in a view of rationality and the moral point of view. Other views of morality such as Utilitarianism or Kantianism can also be seen as simply coming off of a view of rationality, which is attributed to humans. Views of rationality and of

<sup>10</sup> Diamond uses herself as an example here and says 'Those, like me, for example, thinking, as I think, that slavery is unjust and insupportable full stop'.



the moral point of view cannot be held apart. Possession of rationality marks who has something to say and who is addressed in the discussion. Now, there were, in the debate Diamond analyzes, reasons circulating for the exclusion of some humans (the slaves) from the moral point of view since they were taken to be not fully rational. That there be reasons circulating for the exclusion of some beings, whom some people consider fully human, but others do not, is in fact not something we may think of as simply being behind us, in history, because moral progress has taken place. There are now in some parts of the globe, reasons accepted by some for the exclusion of women from the moral point of view (e.g., in Saudi Arabia or Afghanistan); women do not belong to those who have something to say and who are addressed in rational discussion. This amounts to conceiving of them, qua women, as not 'human' in the full sense, in fact, a particular sense which is not different from what was thought of slaves by pro-slavery thinkers. Certain humans are not capable of using their reason autonomously, so they must be 'supervised and guided,' hopefully with benevolence, by those who are fully rational.<sup>11</sup> There was then the question of allowing reasons to circulate to the effect of coming to see slaves as partaking in the moral point of view, and thus as fully human, or of blocking such reasons. This is not a question of free speech, nor a question of allowing or disallowing arguments to enter the public sphere and be disseminated. It is a question of coming to think a certain way about what being human is and what being rational is and as such it concerns the nature of the moral point of view itself.

So, I suggest that we regard Diamond in her analysis of the debate as making a proposal about what rationality is, and what being rational is, by highlighting the existence of different kinds of disagreements in our use of concepts. She seeks to articulate what the existence of different kinds of disagreements reveals. That is how her view of ethical thinking, inspired by both Wittgenstein and Anscombe, departs from Williams' relativism. For her, then, there are two different stages, as it were, in uses of language and concepts in 'human life in language'. There is being engaged in using concepts, the concepts available within forms of life. In our life with language, we go on applying such concepts: for example, we see actions as chaste or obscene, or think of other animals as meat, or think of certain humans as slaves, or of women as inferior in rationality. This is all Wittgensteinian philosophers usually focus on when considering different cultures as forms of life—particular language games within particular forms of life. This is what Williams, from

his Nietzschean point of view, focuses on as well and this is what he approaches with the idea of an ineradicable plurality of thick concepts. His relativism takes shape here—ultimately differences between uses of concepts within forms of life stand side by side as different outlooks, different world-views, as it were. Relativism amounts to taking disagreements and thus positions that apparently conflict so that they do not conflict and leave them be. Disagreements will not be settled rationally, they cannot be. Insofar as Williams' relativism of distance is supported by his thin-thick dichotomy, he must stay there.

But Diamond sees things differently. The difference starts with one claim: the claim that our ongoing use of 'ethical' concepts is not separated from our use of concepts in general. The use of concepts such as the concept *cruel* is not isolated, in our thinking of situations involving someone conceived as a slave, from uses of concepts *property*, or *human*, or *justice*. That is, in fact, the reason why Diamond always speaks of ethical thinking and not of 'ethics'. Ethical thinking is simply thinking. It is the deployment of our conceptual capacities, as logical thinking is, or religious thinking is. Ethical thinking is not an isolated compartment of our thinking, with its own set of concepts, the 'ethical concepts'. In ethical thinking, as in religious thinking, or scientific thinking, we go on using our concepts in general, and projecting them in new situations as we go on. In the case of ethical thinking the concepts projected are not just concepts such as *cruel* or *brutal* but also concepts such as *property* or *slavery*, or *human*. This is what Diamond wants to take in, and this is what ultimately clashes with Williams' characterization of the thick-thin dichotomy. Diamond also claims that, besides the ongoing application of concepts within forms of 'life with language', there is preparation for uses of language and preparation for further application of concepts. This is where the idea of path blockers and path indicators comes in. Such path blockers and path indicators are part of the ongoing thinking, of what living a human life with language is. Anscombe is brought into the picture here since she thinks that the guidance of thought is part of what thinking is (Diamond 2019, Chapters 6 and 7). Regardless of how good an example Anscombe's clarificatory utterance 'Someone' is not the name of someone' is (there is certainly much discussion about it among interpreters), it exemplifies the work done in the preparation for the application of concepts, and so in the guidance of thought. It is an illustration of Anscombe's idea that guiding the business of thinking is part of the business of thinking. Diamond's Anscombean point is thus that the Wiggins–Williams debate is not just about applying our concepts, in the sense of applying the concepts we already have and go on applying within particular forms of life. The debate brings out the question of guidance of thought, in situations some would depict as clearly leading us into accepting relativism, as is the case

<sup>11</sup> Notice that this is how we think of children. This reasoning is similar to that which leads us to not allowing a child to make certain decisions for themselves until they are legally an adult. This is in fact something we are quite comfortable doing.

of the nineteenth century abolitionism debate. This is the further instrument we need to make sense of the difference between Williams and Diamond where it concerns the nature of the moral point of view. For Diamond, as for Williams, we start from what we are, we think and deliberate from what we are (Williams 1985: p. 200). In other words, our ethical thinking arises out of the concreteness of our life as we live it. That the matter of moral philosophy is ‘Life, not theory’ means for both Williams and Diamond that at the center of it is conceiving of things in human lives, as human lives are lived. This is in the picture before, as it were, there is place for any argument about ‘what to do’. It is therein as well that there are questions about whether a question is an open question and what considerations are available. Such issue is of a different nature than the question which concepts we already have and apply. In Chapter 7 of her 2019 book Diamond is applying such ideas to ethics. Still, their importance goes well beyond ethics to the entirety of human thinking. In Wittgensteinian terms, Diamond is exploring the idea that language games are not rigid, that they are not unchangeable and that they are not isolated from other language games, and that there are these two kinds of disagreement within such games. The reason why language games are not rigid, not unchangeable, and not isolated from other language games is simply that language games are not just language (as it were, pure language or language unused). They are rather, as Wittgenstein puts in § 7 of the *Investigations*, ‘language and the activities into which it is woven’ (Wittgenstein 2009). Action taking place is thus the touchstone here. How to conceive of it in conceiving of the shape of thought as world-engaged and world-engaging is what is at stake between Williams and Diamond as they think about our ethical thinking, and about our thinking in general. Both see action and world-engagement as decisive. But they conceive them differently.

One final reference to Aristotle can still further illuminate the contrast between Williams and Diamond that interests me. For both Williams and Diamond, there is something right in Aristotle’s idea of ethical thinking as speaking to those who understand one. It means that we start from who we are; that is certainly important to characterize the moral point of view. Yet a different thing is Aristotle’s teleological stance about ‘human nature’ which accompanies this point. There, we might say that for neither Williams nor Diamond is there any such teleology: the lives of human animals simply can take many different ethical outlooks. A human life with slavery. A human life with democracy. A human life within a strict theocracy. An ascetic technological human life. In different times and different places. All such lives are possible for humans, in the sense of creatures physically and biologically like us now. For Williams, this is part of the Nietzschean contingency of becoming what one is. For Diamond it is a matter of forms of ‘human lives in language’ and ethical outlooks therein.

How to fare philosophically at this point is what is at stake between the philosophical anthropologies of Williams and Diamond. One thing I intended to show in this article is that such philosophical anthropologies build on different views of life with language. Underneath Diamond’s point that there is no way of isolating thick from thin concepts is the idea that there is no way of isolating (what Williams calls) thick and thin concepts from a metaphysics of thought and value. Her criticism of Williams ultimately bears on Williams’ particular metaphysics of thought and value, on his brand of naturalism, as a view of fact and value (Chappel 2022a, b). This is what Diamond ultimately disagrees with and departs from, but that would be the topic for another article.

**Funding** Open access funding provided by FCTIFCCN (b-on). The funding was supported by Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia, UIDP/00502/2020, Sofia Gabriela Miguens.

## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** There are no conflicts of interest involved in this article.

**Open Access** This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article’s Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the article’s Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

## References

- Anscombe E (1959) Introduction to Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*. Hutchinson, London
- Baghramian M, Carter JA (2022) “Relativism. In: Zalta EN (ed) The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Spring 2022 Edn). <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2022/entries/relativism/>.
- Chappel SG (2022a) Being somebody else: imaginative identification in ethics and literature. In: Andrew Gleeson, Craig Taylor (eds.), *Morality in a Realistic Spirit—Essays for Cora Diamond*. Routledge, London
- Chappel SG (2022b) Bernard Williams’ liberal naturalism. In: de Caro Mario, Macarthur David (eds) *The Routledge Handbook of Liberal Naturalism*. Routledge, London
- Chappel SG, van Ackeren M (2019) *Ethics Beyond the Limits—New Essays on Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*. Routledge, London
- Diamond C (1988) Losing our concepts. *Ethics* 98:255–277
- Diamond C (2000) Ethics, Imagination and the *Tractatus*. In: Cray A, Read R (eds) *The New Wittgenstein*. Routledge, London, pp 149–173
- Diamond C (2005) Wittgenstein on religious belief: the Gulfs between us. In: von der Ruhr M (ed) *Religion and the Wittgensteinian Legacy*. Routledge, London, pp 99–137

- Diamond C (2006) Différences et distances morales: quelques questions. In: Laugier S (ed) *Étique, littérature et vie humaine*. PUF, Paris, pp 53–94
- Diamond C (2008) The difficulty of reality and the difficulty of philosophy. In: Cavell S, Diamond C, McDowell J, Hacking I, Wolfe C (eds) *Philosophy and animal life*. Columbia University Press, New York, pp 43–89
- Diamond C (2019) Reading Wittgenstein with Anscombe, Going on to Ethics. Harvard University Press, Cambridge
- Miguens S (2020) The human face of realism—Putnam and diamond on the ethical ‘gulfs between us.’ *Monist* 2020(103):404–414
- Miguens S (2023) Truth in Ethics and Intercultural Understanding Cora Diamond on a Dispute Between Bernard Williams and David Wiggins. In: C Carmona, DPérez-Chico, C Tejedor (eds.), *Intercultural Understanding After Wittgenstein*. Anthem Press, London, pp.145-158
- More A (2019) Ethics and the limits of philosophy. In: Chappel, Sophie Grace and Marcel van Ackeren (eds.) *Ethics Beyond the Limits—New Essays on Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, Routledge, London, pp 9-26
- Nietzsche F (2001) *The Gay Science*. In: Williams B, transl. Nauckhoff J (ed) Cambridge University Press, Cambridge
- Väyrynen P (2019) Thick Ethical Concepts. In: Zalta EN (ed) *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2019 Edn). <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2019/entries/thick-ethical-concepts/>.
- Wiggins D (1991) Moral cognitivism, moral relativism and motivating moral beliefs. *Proc Aristot Soc* 91:61–85
- Wiggins D (1995) Objective and subjective in ethics. *Ratio* 8:243–258
- Wiggins D (2006) *Ethics—Twelve Lectures*. Penguin, London
- Williams B (1985) *Ethics and the limits of philosophy*. University of California Press, Berkeley
- Williams B (1993) *Shame and necessity*. University of California Press, Berkeley
- Williams B (1995a) *Making sense of humanity*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge
- Williams B (1995b) Truth in Ethics. *Ratio* 8:227–242
- Williams B (2002) *Truth and Truthfulness*. Princeton University Press, Princeton
- Wittgenstein L (2009) *Philosophische Untersuchungen/Philosophical Investigations*. In: Hacker PMS and Schulte J(eds) Revised 4th edn. Wiley-Blackwell, Oxford

**Publisher's Note** Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.