



Virtue Without Theory

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Can we use the language of virtue and vice in ethics without adopting some form of virtue theory? The answer is that we can. The question arises because even the defenders of virtue theory acknowledge that it suffers from some serious weaknesses. Nor do we want merely to translate the concerns of deontology or consequentialism into an Aristotelian vocabulary, because the point of using virtue language is to get at something supposedly missed by consequentialist and deontological theory. We will look at the origins, nature, and weaknesses of contemporary virtue theory, and go on to consider how other approaches to ethics might give us the benefits of the use of virtue language without the disadvantages of virtue theory. The approaches in question are those of Iris Murdoch, Cora Diamond, and Charles Taylor, and can loosely be described as anti-theory.

The resurgence of interest in Aristotelian virtue theory is widely attributed to the discussion of virtues offered by G.E.M. Anscombe in “Modern Moral Philosophy.”¹ This is slightly odd, given that in this paper Anscombe argues against what has come to be called virtue theory. We will look at the points Anscombe makes, with specific regard to virtue theory, and consider some criticisms of virtue theory as described by Rosalind Hursthouse, one of its ablest defenders. Afterwards, we will explore the views of Iris Murdoch, Cora Diamond, and Charles Taylor, and see how they seem to offer alternative ways of thinking about ethics without falling foul of the problems that beset virtue theory.

1. Anscombe, Hursthouse, and Virtue Theory

Anscombe argues for three main theses in “Modern Moral Philosophy”: that all major English moral philosophers from Henry Sidgwick to the time she was writing are not significantly different from each other; that the concepts of moral obligation, moral duty, what is morally right and wrong, and the moral sense of “ought” should be jettisoned if psychologically possible; and that at least for the present time we should stop doing moral philosophy. The second of these theses is well known and will not be much expanded on here.² Roughly

speaking, Anscombe's claim is that the concepts in question make sense only in a certain kind of context, most obviously one in which God is held to be the giver of the moral law and our judge, and that modern moral philosophers try to use the concepts outside such a context. It would be much better, then, according to Anscombe, if we followed Aristotle and if "instead of 'morally wrong', one always named a genus such as 'untruthful', 'unchaste', 'unjust'."³

Anscombe's Aristotelian sympathies are clear throughout the paper, but it would be a mistake to conclude from her argument that only a divine law or Aristotelian conception of ethics will do. Alternatives she explicitly considers and rejects, not as incoherent but as morally undesirable, include following the norms of society, using our conscience as a guide, and looking for moral laws of nature.⁴ This still leaves us with a pretty open field to choose from.

Anscombe's own view is that moral philosophy "should be laid aside at any rate until we have an adequate philosophy of psychology."⁵ She takes it that we need an explanation of what makes an unjust act or man a bad act or man. Such an explanation requires an account of justice as a virtue, and this requires an account of what type of characteristic a virtue is and how it relates to the actions that are instances of it. This in turn requires an account of what a human action is and how its proper description is affected by its motive. The conceptual analysis needed for understanding virtues belongs, she says, to the philosophy of psychology rather than to ethics.⁶ Until this work has been done we should leave ethics alone.

This recommendation has not, of course, been taken up. Ethics is still practiced and, while much effort has gone into the philosophy of psychology since Anscombe's paper, no one claims that the specific questions she raises have been solved and that ethics can now proceed on a firm basis thus supplied. Virtue theorists should thus take little comfort in Anscombe's paper. Alternative theories are no better off in this regard either. Deontological theories are clearly a major target of Anscombe's attack on the concept of moral obligation. She attacks consequentialism also, on three counts.⁷ The first, Anscombe suggests, is that consequentialists pretend that they could say what we should do in any particular situation. But on their own account, it is the consequences of an action that determine whether it should have been performed. No one can know what the consequences of any particular action and the manner in which it is performed will be. Nor can we know in advance what possibilities of action will be suggested by particular circumstances.⁸ Secondly, in order to discuss borderline cases, the consequentialist must follow some standards other than her own. In practice those relied upon are the conventional standards of the consequentialist's society or circle. The whole range of conventional standards is unlikely to be decent, Anscombe claims. Thirdly, consequentialists tend to make bad use of hypothetical examples.

Examples are important, though, because we cannot rely on rules alone. Even if we embrace the traditional virtues we are not thereby equipped with a trusty moral calculus. For:

that *such-and-such* a delay of payment of a *such-and-such* debt to a person *so* circumstanced, on the part of a person *so* circumstanced, would or would not be unjust, is really only to be decided “according to what’s reasonable”; and for this there can *in principle* be no canon other than giving a few examples.⁹

But examples cannot always be trusted. All students of ethics are familiar with fantastic examples designed to elicit, for example, utilitarian intuitions. It seems often to be thought that the way to decide what to do in situations we are likely to come across is to consider situations we are unlikely to come across, such as runaway trolleys heading for one or more unsuspecting and effectively immobile persons, and sadistic terrorists in jungles.

Such examples are not entirely fantastic. R.M. Hare speaks of his own experience of seeing trolleys run out of control while helping to build a railway.¹⁰ He points out, however, how unrealistic it is to think that people have time to think in such situations and how wrong it is to think we could or should have intuitions to help us deal with every such unlikely disaster or tragedy. Interestingly, Hare makes these points to defend his version of utilitarianism from criticisms based on hypothetical examples.

Shusaku Endo, in his novel *Silence*, describes the fate of a Catholic priest in sixteenth-century Japan faced with the choice of apostatizing or seeing three apostates drowned because of his stubbornness.¹¹ This is close enough to the Jim-in-the-jungle example of Bernard Williams to show that such cases are not unimaginable, but its realistic treatment in the novel has a flavor absent from most philosophical discussions. In the case Endo describes, the priest runs into the water, where he drowns, shouting out a prayer for the innocent victims of the cruel samurai. This is not the result of a decision about what is right or appropriate to do in such a situation. The priest reacts. If his response seems noble it would not have seemed so were he acting on a preformulated principle developed in a seminar about just such tricky moral circumstances. It would be ridiculous to act on such a principle as: “When faced with a choice between responsibility for the deaths of innocent people and renouncing God, let the people be killed but make a desperate, futile gesture of support.” Any nobility in the priest’s suicidal prayer seems inextricable from its being, as it were, the spark created by violently clashing principles. How could such reactions be codified?

This is not, presumably, the kind of example Anscombe has in mind. For the way in which such examples are used by philosophers does not meet with Anscombe’s approval:

the point of considering hypothetical situations, perhaps very improbable ones, *seems* to be to elicit from yourself or someone else a hypothetical decision to do something of a bad kind.¹²

Anscombe, then, favors attention to particular cases and examples but is against the use of very improbable hypothetical examples because of their corrupting influence. She also opposes consequentialism and, by extension, any ethical theory which deals inadequately with the existence of endless borderline cases, as shallow. By now, if we accept Anscombe's arguments, we seem to be left with no possible theory at all. Despite Anscombe's recognition of the problems it faces, we might try to save virtue theory by doing the work in the philosophy of psychology that she says is necessary. This would no doubt be difficult, but not necessarily impossible. However, there are other reasons for wanting to avoid virtue theory. These are summarized nicely by Rosalind Hursthouse in her paper "Virtue Theory and Abortion."¹³

Hursthouse offers a skeletal view of virtue theory for purposes of comparison with generic deontological and utilitarian theories and then defends it against nine different criticisms. Much of this defense is successful but Hursthouse herself concedes that even after her defense has been mounted, problems remain.

The bare bones of any virtue theory, according to Hursthouse, are these:

An action is right [if and only if] it is what a virtuous agent would do in the circumstances.

A virtuous agent is one who acts virtuously, that is, one who has and exercises the virtues.

A virtue is a character trait a human being needs to flourish or live well.¹⁴

We may divide into three categories the nine criticisms of this theory that Hursthouse discusses. The first category consists of criticisms that Hursthouse disposes of well. We need say nothing about them. The second consists of criticisms that might apply equally to the kind of approach to ethics that we will consider instead of virtue theory. These criticisms, as treated by Hursthouse, are two strands of the single criticism that, "Virtue theory can't get us anywhere in real moral issues because it's bound to be all assertion and no argument."¹⁵ This is part of Hursthouse's formulation of a view expressed by Onora O'Neill that Cora Diamond has responded to at length.

Let us turn our attention to the third category of criticisms of virtue theory. These criticisms are as follows: that the concept of flourishing or *eudaimonia* is obscure, that there is disagreement about which character traits are virtues, and that the requirements of the virtues can conflict. These criticisms belong together because in each case Hursthouse's response is the same: rival theories are no better off. The notion of *eudaimonia* is somewhat obscure, but so,

Hursthouse argues, are the notions of rationality and happiness, which are so integral to deontological and utilitarian theories. Similarly, people do indeed disagree about what counts as a virtue, but so too do they disagree about deontological rules. Theorists of both kinds must face the resulting challenges of moral pluralism, skepticism, or relativism. Thirdly, again, the requirements of justice and charity, say, might conflict, but so might two deontological rules. The obvious response for those persuaded by Anscombe's and Hursthouse's arguments is to look for some alternative to utilitarian, deontological, and virtue theories. The idea that virtue theory is no worse off than deontological theories is little comfort for philosophers who reject such theories. The only reason to try to shore up virtue theory would be if there were no alternative.

The works of Murdoch, Diamond, and Taylor offer ways of approaching ethical questions that avoid the kind of problems identified by Anscombe and Hursthouse in the main three ethical theories. Such approaches might be regarded as versions of virtue theory, or as being outside theory altogether. What is important is that they differ sufficiently from Hursthouse's bare bones virtue theory to be worth distinguishing from it.

2. Murdoch and Attention

Murdoch's concern is with pictures and images of morality and the self. She is critical of the dominant picture and the tendency to be unconscious of the picture and its shortcomings. She finds the picture not only in philosophy but also in literature and, we might assume, contemporary culture more generally. However, it is in philosophy that she locates its origin, and it is to philosophers, or at most a philosophically literate general audience, that she addresses her response. In place of what she criticizes, she offers another picture and a more reliable method, by her lights, for thinking about ethics.

The image of what a person is that we get from modern moral philosophy, according to Murdoch, is behaviorist, existentialist, and utilitarian.¹⁶ It is behaviorist in connecting "the meaning and being of action" with what is publicly observable, since behaviorists deny the inner.¹⁷ It is existentialist in eliminating "the substantial self" and emphasizing "the solitary omnipotent will."¹⁸ It is utilitarian in having us assume that morality's sole concern must be with public acts, because they are all that matter to the utilitarian. This behavioristic, existentialist, utilitarian position on the nature of action, self and morality, she says, "represents . . . a happy and fruitful marriage of Kantian liberalism with Wittgensteinian logic solemnized by Freud."¹⁹ Needless to say, she is being ironic.

It seems benign enough to hold that action, or "the meaning and being" of action, is connected with what is publicly observable. It hardly follows from this view that all action is publicly observable. It is not immediately clear just

what eliminating the substantial self entails. Nor is it clear how many modern moral philosophers would take the position that the will is solitary or omnipotent. We might think that the three-headed monster she describes is a real chimera. This suspicion is likely to be confirmed when we ask which of Kant, Wittgenstein, and Freud is the utilitarian, which the existentialist, and which the behaviorist.

It would be wrong to read Murdoch in this kind of critical light, because Murdoch's target in *The Sovereignty of Good* is not Kant, Wittgenstein, or Freud, but a certain kind of view of human life and ethics which she sees in the work of Stuart Hampshire, R.M. Hare, A.J. Ayer, Gilbert Ryle and "almost every contemporary novel" and which, most importantly, she says, "is to be found more or less explicitly lurking behind much that is written nowadays on the subject of moral philosophy and indeed also of politics."²⁰ Rather than search through all the novels and moral philosophy of the last few decades, it is more fruitful to examine Murdoch's criticisms of the view she describes to see whether they are any good. If they are, we can worry about where this view is lurking. If they are not, we can get on with something else.

At the core of her claim is the idea that there is excessive emphasis, in philosophy and in literature, on a picture of human life that either omits the mental or else deals crudely with it. It seems unfair to blame this on Wittgenstein, Kant, or Freud, but that does not mean that the picture does not exist. "What are we to do?" is the main concern of many philosophy courses, books, and papers. The question of right action, more than right thinking or good character, is primary even in virtue theory as it is presented by Hursthouse.

It is not that Murdoch holds that the question of what we should do is unimportant. What is interesting is Murdoch's account of what is missing from such a question: what more there is to ethics. Seeing what more there is opens our eyes to what more there is to us. What we see might not be new or surprising, but it is in the process of being swept aside, and we do well to keep it in view and in mind. Or so Murdoch claims. To evaluate this claim we need to look not at the culprits she fingers but at what she says we are being blind to.

Murdoch counters the dominant conception of morality and the self with an example. A woman M feels hostility toward her daughter-in-law, D, because she considers that her son has married beneath him. Despite her feelings, M behaves impeccably and her real opinion of D does not show in any way. Murdoch's targets would stop here, satisfied with impeccable behavior; but she is not satisfied. Nor is M.

M is aware that her assessment of D might be unfair, or that it might be more prejudice than assessment. She reconsiders, taking another look at D. She sees D to be "refreshingly simple" and "delightfully youthful," whereas before she had seemed vulgar and "tiresomely juvenile."²¹ Murdoch would

want to stress that the change of heart reflects a discovery made by giving careful and just attention to D. It is not just a matter of looking on the bright side. There is such a thing as seeing her as she truly is. Even were there not, what M does is a matter of looking rather than public conduct. Her observable behavior does not change.

Murdoch also emphasizes the difficulty involved in what M does. She struggles. If we attend only to overt acts we ignore such struggle, the inner acts that connect the outer. We see life in slices. As Murdoch puts it, the neo-Kantian, behaviorist picture, “makes no sense of [M’s] inner acts . . . forming part of a continuous fabric of being: it is precisely critical of such metaphors as ‘fabric of being.’ Yet can we do without such metaphors here?”²² This is an important question, but not an easy one to answer. One way to try to answer it might be to try to describe the situation without resort to any such metaphors. But the list of possible redescriptions must be endless, and what would be the criteria for a successful description? It is not that we should throw up our hands and dismiss the whole issue as hopelessly subjective. The point is that accurately describing situations, characters, and actions for the purpose of moral philosophy is not easy and requires something like artistic sensitivity.

As well as action, she argues, we need attention, a concept she takes from Simone Weil. The mark of the true moral agent, according to Murdoch, is “a just and loving gaze directed upon an individual reality.”²³ Focusing our attention on the world around us takes us away from vanity and requires patience, honesty, courage, and sympathy. There is a central role in Murdoch’s philosophy for at least some of the virtues, but it does not invoke the notion of *eudaimonia* or the focus on action that we find in Hursthouse’s virtue theory. So Murdoch’s theory, if it is a theory at all, is not the same as Hursthouse’s and does not suffer from the same problems. Murdoch’s ideas are developed in different ways by Diamond and Taylor.

3. Diamond on Art and Persuasion

Cora Diamond, like Murdoch, is critical of the ideas that moral philosophy should concentrate exclusively on actions, judgments, and decisions and that argument alone should be the tool or weapon of the moral philosopher.

Diamond’s paper “Anything but Argument?” begins with a quotation from Onora O’Neill, part of which is: “if the appeal on behalf of animals is to convince those whose hearts do not already so incline them, it must . . . reach beyond assertion to argument.”²⁴ According to Diamond this sentence exemplifies a view of how philosophical discussion in ethics should be carried on. It is this view that Hursthouse regards as the most important criticism of virtue theory. Interestingly, Hursthouse expresses considerable sympathy for Diamond’s response to it, but Diamond is not a virtue theorist, at least not in

Hursthouse's sense. Indeed, what Diamond says suggests that no theory, conceived as one or more rationally defensible abstract generalizations about what we should do, is right. If we are truly in sympathy with Diamond, then, we should not accept virtue theory. Let us look at Diamond's position in some detail.

O'Neill's view, says Diamond, "rests on a conception of moral thought which is not merely false, but which also renders unaccountable and incomprehensible the moral force of many kinds of literature."²⁵ It is false because argument is not always necessary to change someone's moral convictions. It can even be counterproductive. Perhaps this ought to be obvious. If a man does not believe in love or in God, might not experience rather than argument convince him otherwise? It seems possible that someone's mind might be changed without reaching far beyond assertion. Renford Bambrough, for instance, describes dialectic as a process of assertion and counter-assertion in which one person says, "This is so, isn't it?" and the other replies, "Yes, but. . . ."²⁶ This seems to blur the line between assertion and argument, which perhaps O'Neill would not like, but the persuasive power of dialectic and experience should not be news to philosophers. However, it is not these things that Diamond cites.

Diamond is particularly interested in the role of literature in shaping our moral outlook or convictions. A novel may, she suggests, lead us to a concern for children, for instance. Certainly a novelist might try to write such a novel. If the novel fails to have the desired effect, it may be that the novelist has failed, but the fault may equally lie elsewhere. "If we judge such a work to be convincing, we may recognize nevertheless that there are certain kinds of incapacity which would leave someone unlikely to be convinced by reading the novel. Two examples of such incapacities: a very limited moral imagination; an intelligence inadequately trained and incapable of recognizing irony."²⁷ When successful, such a novel can convince even those whose hearts were not originally inclined in the required direction without resort to arguments. It can "enlarge the moral imagination."²⁸

This does not mean enlarging our stock of morally salient facts. There is no reason why a work of philosophy could not include any such facts. The importance of literature for moral philosophy lies not in the potential of literature to impart mysteriously unutterable facts but in its potential to show us the world in a way that philosophy cannot do without itself becoming literature. In showing us a world, or a certain vision of the world, good literature can change the way we look, think, and behave.

This does not simply mean that the heart is inclined as the novelist desires. Novels such as *Oliver Twist* and *David Copperfield* are not mere propaganda, and to read them responsively is not to be brain-washed. Art that changes our way of looking at things is not like a pill or blow to the head that changes our way of looking at things. It does not cloud or distort our vision but, if

convincing, clarifies it or widens its scope. The emphasis here is not on passion as opposed to reason, but on attention. There is no interest in escaping from truth into sentimentality, or from reality into fiction. The fictional redirects us to the actual. Its purpose is to show some of what is lost when we view things otherwise.

This understanding of the way literature and perhaps other arts can enlarge the moral imagination is not a glorification of subjectivity or an attack on rationality. Diamond cites approvingly Stephen Clark's view that becoming more objective about values: "depends on our coming to attend to the world and what is in it, in a way that will involve the exercise of all our faculties; and that religion, poetry, and science, if uncontaminated by self-indulgent fantasy, are the most important modes of thought leading to that kind of attentive imaginative response to the world."²⁹ Similarly, the aim of Dickens, "like Wordsworth's, is to enlighten the understanding and ameliorate the affections by providing descriptions which stimulate imagination and moral sensibility."³⁰ This may be the aim of Dickens and Wordsworth, but it is not the aim of all writers. Nor does an author always achieve his or her aim. If we are to take notice of Dickens, Wordsworth, and others in philosophizing about ethics, surely we should attend only to what is good, what is convincing, just as we only want to be convinced by convincing arguments. How are we to tell which presented attitude toward children, animals, or beggars we should adopt?

One way to do so is by comparison: "the shoddy thought can be shown up by being placed alongside the genuine."³¹ Where this does not seem possible, or where it is not enough to satisfy us that the work in question is genuinely convincing, matters get more complicated. We cannot abstract from the particular case to form a general, abstract principle by which we can then judge other particular cases. The trustworthiness of such a method would depend precisely on the particular conclusions drawn from the general principle. But it is how to judge such conclusions or recommendations that we are concerned with. Besides the circularity in judging the particular by the general, there are the additional problems of knowing how to apply an abstract principle and the concomitant danger of reaching absurd conclusions once we cut ourselves free from the concrete and try to drift up above it. As Diamond says:

In the case of an attitude like that Dickens shows us towards children, . . . the one thing we cannot do is ask, quite independently of the form the attitude is given in particular works, whether *that* sort of attitude towards such-and-such kind of thing is appropriate. How would that go? Are the facts about children such that the kind of interest Dickens takes is fitting? *What* facts? 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, and not the way to get at what is right (when it is right) or wrong with a presented attitude.³²

Presumably the word “lives” could have been substituted for, or added to, the word “works” in this passage. The attitude Dickens shows toward children is not an attitude that can be seen only in literary works. A person who shared the attitude Dickens exhibits might show it to others, wittingly or otherwise, by what he or she does or says. Diamond’s point remains intact even with this addition.

The idea that a novel might offer a perspective which is relevant to moral philosophy and unabstractable or impossible to generalize is alien to the view that ethics is a matter of systematizing generalizations about what to do. This is the standard, rationalistic view of philosophers which Murdoch criticizes. If we accept this conception of how to do ethics, then we must do our moral thinking in the abstract, on pain of bad faith.

Thus when we come across such claims as that Individual A has a right at time t that state of affairs S obtain at time t^* only if Individual A is the type of object that is capable of desiring that state of affairs S should obtain at time t^* (etc.), we should greet this not with blank disbelief that anyone should want to think such a thought but with the reassuring certainty that here at any rate is moral philosophy critically assessable as such.³³

Diamond stresses that we need not do our moral thinking in this way. Nor must we regard other types of moral thinking as inferior to this rationalist ideal. The standard understanding of how best to decide what to do, which goes hand in hand with the idea that deciding what to do is what ethics is about, embodies a very intellectual conception of moral life and a specific conception of what moral thinking involves. Principles, for example, are taken as paradigmatic elements of moral thinking, while perception, in the sense to which *Oliver Twist* is relevant, does not, so to speak, get a look in.³⁴ It is action and the immediate springs of action that are taken to matter. Perception on its own, unconnected with overt action, is generally ignored. Nevertheless, Diamond suggests that the rationalistic conception of moral life and moral thinking is a possible one to share: “We *can* hold the following: that a *convincing* appeal for a moral view is one which shows the view in question to be connected systematically with a rationally acceptable morality. *Argument* is the way in which we make such connections clear; to make a moral assertion rationally acceptable is to show such connections by argument.”³⁵

In “Anything but Argument?” Diamond sees a problem facing her attempt to reject the idea that the standard, rationalistic, head view is the only one we can sensibly take of how to do moral philosophy. The problem, as she states it, is this: “[T]he arguments I have given are in a sense quite useless. For if someone takes a view of the relation between human nature and morality from

which it follows that only argument can convince, you cannot convince him by examples that convincing *does* not need to go by arguments, nor can you show such a person by examples that assessment of a moral view *does* not rest on its argumentative elaboration.”³⁶ The nature of this problem will become clearer if we look at the notion of convincing. Something, whether an argument, a novel, a portrayal, or a display, can be called convincing simply if it succeeds in convincing somebody. In a different sense, something can be convincing if it is well constructed, well written, and well done, so that we will be convinced if we understand it and are sufficiently rational or sensitive. The idea of persuasion might have similar senses. In that case we might call it good persuasion or being persuasive in the good sense. The view we supposedly can hold, but which Diamond herself does not, is that a convincing appeal in the second sense is one which shows the moral view in question to be connected systematically with a rationally acceptable morality. If the word “convincing” is taken in the other sense then we are no longer dealing with an ideal but with an empirical claim, and one which it would not be difficult to show false. People are convinced irrationally or non-rationally all the time.

What then are we to say of Diamond’s perceived problem? No doubt there will be difficulties in practice in persuading a moral rationalist that there is more to good moral persuasion than argument, but is there a sense in which we cannot convince him or her by examples that convincing does not need to go by arguments? Might he or she not read Dickens and change his or her mind? Of course, someone might read all the novels in the world and still regard them as relevant to moral thinking only in the sense that they provide useful examples, but this is not inevitable. Then again, our moral view might shift as a result of reading Dickens or Henry James without us coming to accept Diamond’s opinion. We might, for instance, believe there must be arguments implicit in a novel, whether we can identify them or not. Or we might regard the shift as roughly on a par with a shift arising from a blow to the head – not necessarily a bad thing, but not a matter of persuasion in the good sense, precisely because it is not a matter of rational persuasion. Purported counterexamples might be rejected in this way. But there is no inevitability that they will not work. We might read Dickens, change our mind, and see that this is not a mere shift, or the effect of hidden arguments. Diamond’s arguments cannot make this happen, but it is only in this sense that they are useless, or so it seems. We might be brought round to Diamond’s view by reading the right novels, especially if we also read Murdoch, Diamond, or Martha Nussbaum on the importance of novels for moral thinking.³⁷ Perhaps that is why Diamond only says her arguments are useless in a sense.

As we have seen, Diamond does mention a couple of incapacities that would make someone less likely to be convinced by a novel. But she does not claim that any such incapacity would make it impossible for someone to be so convinced. The two incapacities she mentions are “an intelligence inadequately

trained and incapable of recognizing irony,” and “a very limited moral imagination.”³⁸ In each case, the problem seems potentially solvable by the reading of carefully chosen novels. This would not be easy, but it does seem possible, or at least not *a priori* impossible. It might be thought that this is *a priori* impossible because only imaginative or sensitive people will see what Dickens, say, is trying to show the reader. No amount of Dickens will increase our sensitivity or enlarge our moral imagination. This argument is not convincing, however. We are not considering a person with no moral imagination or zero sensitivity. It is fairly easy to imagine someone being sensitive to the feelings, needs, suffering, and hopes of, say, her family only, and from there being brought gradually to have this kind of sensitivity toward others in her village, tribe, race or, with more difficulty, species. Peter Singer’s aim in his book *Animal Liberation* is to get people who are already opposed to racism and sexism to extend their opposition to include speciesism. A novelist might have a similar aim. A novelist might try to increase sensitivity or moral imagination more generally. In drawing our attention to the details of human life a novelist can at least increase the chances that we will be more attentive when we put the book down. Such exercises in attention might increase our moral fitness, if it is accepted that attention has moral value, as Weil and Murdoch claim.

It is because Diamond is right that there is more to persuasion than argument that her arguments and examples can convince even a confirmed rationalist. This need not be because of her arguments alone but might rely on a combination of argument and example, or might depend on her argument not simply convincing but leading someone to look differently, from a different perspective. Such persuasion can be reasonable and truth-oriented. Diamond is not a mystic or transcendentalist suggesting that we forget the facts or logic. We must pay attention to the facts. We must pay attention rationally, imaginatively, sensitively, and with feeling. In this way we can appreciate people and situations, not simply cognize them. “[T]o appreciate is to avoid as far as possible all simplification (simplification which would be in place if one’s concern were action and practical application), to convey the sense and taste of a situation through intimacy with a man’s specific behavior, intimacy with his given case, and so to see that case as a whole.”³⁹

Such appreciation can be the concern of moral philosophy just as much as questions about action and judgment. Again this is something novels can help us with in ways philosophy is unlikely to. They can offer us not only new perspectives or moral vision but also what Diamond calls, following Murdoch, “texture of being.”⁴⁰ “The opening chapters of *Anna Karenina* – what do they give us so much as the texture of Stiva’s being? His good-hearted, silly smile when he is caught at something shameful, his response to the memory of the stupid smile, the failure of his attempt to look pathetic and submissive when he goes back to Dolly – what he blushes at, what he laughs at, what he gives an ironical smile at, what he turns his eyes away from: this is Stiva.”⁴¹ Stiva here

could be said to be defined in terms of his behavior, in a sense made clear by the examples given. It is this behavior we must understand and appreciate if we are to judge him or his actions, or if we are to decide whether or not such a man is to be emulated. But he is not defined by a few obviously moral, or immoral, actions or decisions. If we judge him we judge a man, not a set of acts. Diamond is not suggesting that we judge him at all, or look for a practical application of his case, but that we appreciate him. This is likely to involve appreciating aspects of his character including his virtues and, perhaps, his vices too. There is room here for the Aristotelian language of virtue, and there is a response to O'Neill's criticism, without the problems we have seen in virtue theory proper. Indeed, Diamond presents a powerful argument against any kind of ethical theory while at the same time showing us a way of thinking about ethics that is capable of encompassing a concern with virtue, as long as virtue is conceived in a non-theoretical sense. Diamond can care about justice, chastity, and honesty, without having to link them to any conception of human flourishing. The words simply have to be used in their familiar, everyday sense and not in a sense specifically derived from or linked to a particular philosophical theory.

4. Taylor and Articulation

Appreciation of the kind Diamond describes is a moral task, Murdoch argues. It is a moral task in two senses. Murdoch, following Weil, values justly attending to the truth for its own sake. But it is also true that only such just attention is likely to prompt a just response. Just action has few enemies, at least among moral theorists *qua* theorists. Murdoch's critics, then, are likely to focus on the idea of appreciation or attention. Are we to pay attention to just any facts, studying bus timetables for the good of our souls, or memorizing the performance each day of the Nasdaq or the Seattle Mariners? Charles Taylor, another philosopher influenced by Murdoch, explains why not.

Taylor is particularly concerned with articulation. He believes that moral thought and action depend on our pre-theoretical intuitions. If we take ethics seriously then we will take such intuitions seriously: we will examine them closely and seek as fine an understanding as possible of them and their objects. In normal circumstances, we have no moral intuitions about bus timetables or the Nasdaq, so these things are irrelevant to moral inquiry. As Taylor says:

Moral argument and exploration go on only within a world shaped by our deepest moral responses, . . . If you want to discriminate more finely what it is about human beings that makes them worthy of respect, you have to call to mind what it is to feel the claim of human suffering, or what is repugnant about injustice, or the awe you feel at the fact of human life. No argument can take someone from a neutral stance towards the world, . . . to insight into moral ontology.⁴²

A fine and discriminating moral philosophy, then, will begin with attention or appreciation or sensitive recollection. It is on this theory that moral philosophy should be based. This is not an attack on metaphysics: it is a recognition of the proper place of metaphysics. In Taylor's words:

What is real is what you have to deal with, what won't go away just because it doesn't fit with your prejudices. By this token, what you can't help having recourse to in life is real, or as near to reality as you can get at present. Your general metaphysical picture of "values" and their place in "reality" ought to be based on what you find real in this way. It couldn't conceivably be the basis of an *objection* to its reality.⁴³

If, when we pay attention to the world as a sensitive novelist would, we find that we cannot make sense of it without recourse to, say, Plato's theory of Forms, then forms must go into our ontology. However queer they might seem, they are here, and we must get used to it. Only the kind of attention Murdoch advocates, it seems, can enable us to articulate the contents of our moral ontology. What better aid to attention, and to seeing the world as a sensitive novelist would, is there than the works of a sensitive novelist? Here again we see the potential value of literature for moral philosophy.

The articulation Taylor describes can, he says, allow us to make more sense of our lives, to see the truth more clearly, "to acknowledge the full range of goods we live by," to liberate ourselves from the "cramped formulations of mainstream philosophy" and perhaps even to reconcile our disagreements.⁴⁴ Even if we do not accept the view of Murdoch, Weil, and Diamond, then, that attention and appreciation are moral tasks in themselves with their own value, Taylor argues that there is instrumental value in attention that leads to articulation.

Taylor's view is not just Murdoch's with an added bonus. Taylor is recommending what might be called morals as a guide to metaphysics, whereas Murdoch speaks of metaphysics as a guide to morals.⁴⁵ This in itself is not a huge difference: both have in mind acknowledging what will not go away, and Murdoch's view might be better expressed by Taylor's formulation. However, there are real, if somewhat cloudy, differences between Taylor and Murdoch. Taylor sees us as valuing incompatible goods, although he hopes for some kind of progress and solution to the moral dilemmas we face.⁴⁶ Murdoch speaks of "the Good" and seems less interested in different conceptions of it. If we justly attend we will see it. Taylor speaks of metaphysics and moral ontology, apparently with a straight face, whereas Murdoch advocates only a metaphorical Platonism, albeit this is an irreplaceable metaphor.⁴⁷ Taylor has his eyes on where we might get in the future. Murdoch is more worried about what we can salvage from the past now that God is dead. For Taylor, God is not dead and Christianity is a real option. Yet if God

is retrieved, it is through self-expression or articulation, not through purely objective attention to the world. The most striking difference between Taylor and Murdoch, though, is not his preference for God against hers for Good, or their disagreement about whether it is God or Plato who is dead, but the degree to which they work out their beliefs. Taylor's picture is much more detailed and colored in than Murdoch's. Both of them share a sense of the importance of attending to and articulating our most rooted intuitions, and of the importance of metaphysics in the process of understanding and expression. Insofar as Taylor's picture is different from Murdoch's, we have here yet another alternative to virtue theory that allows for a full range of goods including, presumably, the virtues.

5. Conclusion

There are clear differences, then, between Taylor, Murdoch, and Diamond on exactly how to think about ethics. What they have in common, though, is a rejection of the standard type of ethical theory, including virtue theory as represented by Hursthouse. This basic virtue theory is first and foremost, if not exclusively, concerned with action. The concerns of Murdoch, Taylor, and Diamond include overt action, but also go beyond to questions of attention, self-expression and imagination. Each of these philosophers rejects precisely the kind of formula that Hursthouse uses to characterize the most popular current moral theories. It is for this reason that Murdoch, Taylor, and Diamond can be called anti-theorists.

Yet they seem to offer what virtue theorists who have written since Anscombe's "Modern Moral Philosophy" want. The ideas of attention and articulation are emphasized as a call for a richer, more sensitive moral vocabulary. General and legalistic notions of being morally wrong are likely to be avoided by anti-theorists, as they are by Anscombe, in favor of the more specific notions of being unchaste, or untruthful. There is no need, though, for anti-theorists to be locked into any neo-Aristotelian theory of virtue. We can use the word "unjust" without having any theory about what is necessary for human flourishing. There do seem to be ways of doing moral philosophy that are available even to philosophers persuaded that Anscombe is right. Of course the ways might be beset by problems too, but we can share Aristotle's, Anscombe's and Hursthouse's concern for virtue, without having to subscribe to virtue theory with its attendant problems. We can have virtue without theory.⁴⁸

Notes

1. G.E.M. Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy," in *The Collected Philosophical Papers of G.E.M. Anscombe Volume III: Ethics, Religion and Politics* (Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 1981).

2. For a sympathetic account of Anscombe's view see Duncan Richter, "The Incoherence of the Moral 'Ought'," *Philosophy* 70 (1995).
3. Anscombe, op. cit., p.33.
4. See *ibid.*, pp. 37–38.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 26.
6. See *ibid.*, p. 29.
7. See *ibid.*, pp. 36–37.
8. See *ibid.*, p. 36.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 39.
10. See R.M. Hare, *Moral Thinking* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), p. 139.
11. Shusako Endo, *Silence* (New York: Taplinger Publishing Company, 1980).
12. Anscombe, op. cit., p. 37.
13. Rosalind Hursthouse, "Virtue Theory and Abortion," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 20 (1991).
14. *Ibid.*, pp. 225–226.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 230.
16. See Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (London and New York: Ark Paperbacks, 1985), pp. 8–9.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 9.
18. *Ibid.*
19. *Ibid.*
20. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 17.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 22.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 34.
24. Quoted in Cora Diamond, "Anything but Argument?," ch. 11 of *The Realistic Spirit: Wittgenstein, Philosophy, and the Mind* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: M.I.T. Press, 1991), p. 291.
25. Diamond, op. cit., p. 291.
26. Bambrough attributes this idea partly to F.R. Leavis. See Renford Bambrough, *Moral Scepticism and Moral Knowledge* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1979), pp. 102–103.
27. Diamond, op. cit., p. 293.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 294.
29. Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 296.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 299.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 303.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 301.
33. Diamond, op. cit., pp. 304–305. The example is taken from Michael Tooley, "A Defense of Abortion and Infanticide," in Joel Feinberg, ed., *The Problem of Abortion* (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth, 1973), p. 61.
34. See Diamond, op. cit., p. 305.
35. *Ibid.*, p. 307.
36. *Ibid.*, p. 306.
37. See, for instance, Martha C. Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990) and Cora Diamond, "Martha Nussbaum and the Need for Novels," in *Philosophical Investigations* 16 (1993).
38. Diamond, *The Realistic Spirit*, p. 293.
39. Diamond, from "Having a Rough Story about What Moral Philosophy Is," in *The Realistic Spirit*, p. 376. What Diamond says here is drawn from Henry James's Preface to *The Princess Casamassima* (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1977), p. 12.

40. Diamond, *The Realistic Spirit*, p. 374.
41. Ibid.
42. Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 8.
43. Ibid., p. 59.
44. Ibid., p. 107.
45. See Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics As A Guide To Morals* (London: Penguin, 1993).
46. See James Tully, ed., *Philosophy In An Age of Pluralism* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 213.
47. See Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, p. 93.
48. This paper has benefitted from criticisms of earlier drafts by Nancy Schaubert, Christopher Dustin, Cora Diamond, Margaret G. Holland, Stephanie Wilkinson, and the editor. I am grateful to them all.

