

Essärecensioner
Essay Reviews

Attempts at reviving earlier thought

Lucy Bolton: *Contemporary cinema and the philosophy of Iris Murdoch*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019. 238 p. ISBN 9781474481359, hbk.

Cora Diamond: *Reading Wittgenstein with Anscombe going on to ethics*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2019. 331 p. ISBN 9780674051683, hbk.

During the last few decades or so analytic philosophy has shown a growing concern for (the writing of) its own history. It has also become increasingly common to engage with thinkers of the past to illuminate the problems of today. Beginning with the revival of so-called “virtue ethics” as an attempt to break a stalemate between utilitarians and (by-and-large Kantian) deontologists, analytic philosophers have started looking to the past for inspiration and new perspectives on current problems. In like manner the debate over metaphysics has been rejuvenated by the addition of (neo-)Aristotelian concern for so-called “grounding”—on this see Jonathan Schaffer: “On What Grounds What” in Chalmers, Manley and Wasserman (eds.): *Metametaphysics: New Essays on the Foundations of Ontology* (2009) and Amie Thomason’s attempts, in her *Ontology Made Easy* (2015) and other writings, to revive a kind of Carnapian Deflationism as alternatives to more ontologically restrictive Quineian approaches that have been dominant since ordinary language philosophy’s heyday. However, these revivalist attempts have, despite obvious scholarly virtues, at times been somewhat shallow in their engagement with their source material. The two volumes that are the concern of this review—Lucy Bolton’s *Contemporary Cinema and the Philosophy of Iris Murdoch* and Cora Diamond’s *Reading Wittgenstein with Anscombe Going On to Ethics*—stand out against this revivalist background as excellent examples of how attempts at reviving earlier thought in the service of contributing to current debates can enter into active and rewarding dialogue with the source material in a way that does not neglect or overlook the history that lies between the philosophy of the past and today. This focus makes these volumes of interest not only for (analytic) historians of philosophy but for historians of ideas generally, and so for readers of *Lychnos*.

The central question driving Lucy Bolton’s *Contemporary Cinema and the Philosophy of Iris Murdoch* is whether engagement with cinematic art can be a form of “exercise in moral training” (1). As such, this book is not primarily

a contribution to the steadily growing genre of Murdoch-scholarship, but rather a study at the intersection between the philosophy of film and moral philosophy that seeks to “bring Murdoch’s thinking into dialogue with cinema in a sustained way for the first time” (1). Given these ambitions it is impressive that Bolton does so much with so little; the totality of Murdoch’s writings directly addressing cinema amount to no more than 937 words, the 1965 essay “On the Cinema” for British *Vogue*. Bolton emphasises how Murdoch’s engagement with cinema as art in the 1965 essay steers clear of some of the problems that plagued other early approaches to the philosophy of film by concentrating on the way in which cinema can deal with human meaning making and personal stories: “Murdoch is looking for meaning in the faces, not bathing in their aura or stunned by their mechanical reproduction” (33).

Bolton’s most significant contribution lies in how she not only applies Murdoch’s thinking to her particular chosen medium, but does so to great effect in a way that can guide further endeavours not only in the arts but in general. Bolton thus provides a small piece of a puzzle that has haunted Murdoch-scholars and certain kinds of moral philosophers for ages, such as for example those drawing on thinkers such as Emmanuel Levinas or Maurice Merleau-Ponty; on the latter’s relation to Murdoch, see Fredriksson and Panizza: “Ethical Attention and the Self in Iris Murdoch and Maurice Merleau-Ponty” in *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* (2020); “While all this talk of ‘moral vision’ and ‘seeing the other’ sound both plausible and insightful, how do we actually go about achieving this in our daily lives?” That is, Murdoch scholarship has, despite Murdoch’s detailed discussions of what today is commonly referred to as the “skill-model” of virtue—on this see for example Annas: *Intelligent Virtue* (2011)—been struggling with how to get actual guidance from what Murdoch is saying. Bolton’s engagement with the particulars might help us see how to go about “seeing the other”, at least in one particular medium.

Bolton’s use of previous research is smart, and the brief treatment of Murdoch’s larger philosophical output is insightful while at the same time short enough to allow space for the real central stuff of the book, namely the close-readings and analyses of contemporary movies. That Bolton draws on a wide array of contemporary cinematic output is especially welcome given that much of the discussion concerning Murdoch and cinema up to this point have centred around Murdochian readings of George Cukor’s 1940 *The Philadelphia Story*, by Murdoch scholars such as Forsberg in *Language Lost and Found: On Iris Murdoch and the Limits of Philosophical Discourse* (2013), 138–150; Wolf in “Loving Attention: Lessons in Love from *The Philadelphia Story*” in Wolf and Grau (eds.): *Understanding Love: Philosophy, Film, and Fiction* (2014), 369–386; and Cavell in *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood*

Comedy of Remarriage (1981), chapter 4. Overall, this is a prime example of a scholar progressing the discussion through careful consideration of an earlier body of work while also adding something important and insightful of their own.

In her clumsily but accurately titled *Reading Wittgenstein with Anscombe Going On to Ethics* Cora Diamond, at times, channels the spirit of the late Bernard Williams at his very best as a historian of philosophy. Diamond sees herself as being part of a tradition where her latest contribution continues a discussion begun by Wittgenstein and continued by Anscombe. Diamond is attempting, in Miles Burnyeat's memorable phrase, to practice "the history of philosophy done philosophically". See Burnyeat: "Introduction" in Bernard Williams: *The Sense of the Past: Essays in the History of Philosophy*, edited by Miles Burnyeat (2006), xiii. As such there is much to be gathered methodologically from the book, but it also raises questions such as "what is it to do the history of philosophy historically?", "is this actually what Diamond is doing (that is, is she actually practicing what Williams preached, and did he himself)?", and "if so, is that a good thing (is this approach methodologically sound)?" Some of the difficulty in answering questions such as these lies in the fact that the (Nietzschean) approach favoured by Williams was never given a thorough and sustained treatment in its own right. The nearest we get is the excellent "Descartes and the Historiography of Philosophy" reprinted in *The Sense of the Past*, 257–264. For more on this see Johnathan Barnes' critical review of the Williams collection in the *Journal of Philosophy* 104:10 (2007), 540–545. The guiding idea for Diamond, however partially this idea is spelled out by Williams, is to carry on Anscombe's legacy by taking special heed of how "our contemporary assumptions shaped what we took the problems to be" (4). Thus, the *philosophically* part of Diamond's attempt to "do the history of philosophy philosophically" is a conscious effort to use Anscombe in the same way Anscombe herself used Wittgenstein (as well as Hume and Aristotle), that is, to bring to our attention problems that are not our problems as well as to make clear to us the benefits of considering these. This involves doing philosophy *against* the shared preconceptions of the time, a hard enough feat for someone on the margins, but a monumental task for someone like Diamond who, as a leading figure of the so-called "new Wittgenstenians"—after the seminal collection of essays by like-minded Wittgenstein scholars edited by Alice Crary and Rupert Read entitled *The New Wittgenstein* (2000)—was very much herself part of establishing our current preconceptions. Nevertheless, it is the conscious effort to challenge our preconceptions by paying careful attention to the no longer so recent past (Anscombe's *Introduction to Wittgenstein's Tractatus*, Diamond's primary sparring partner, came out in 1963) that serves as the guiding light that make this volume into a coherent and cohesive whole. The book brings

together seven separate main essays, substantially revised or not previously published and written over the last twenty years. The essays are grouped into three parts. Each part also comes with a lengthy introduction, so there is plenty of new material even for those well acquainted with Diamond's work.

The first part of the book concerns the activity of philosophy, and what it means to do it well. The second part concerns Diamond's disagreement with Anscombe over the latter's suggestion that there are sentences, not allowed for by the *Tractatus* (on Anscombe's reading), that can only be true (such as for example "Someone' is not the name of someone"). Even if the opening essays on the activity of philosophy and Wittgensteinian epistemology are well worth reading, the real pay-off of the book, at least for this particular reader, comes in the third and final part, when Diamond turns to ethics proper by entering into dialogue not only with Wittgenstein and Anscombe, but also with David Wiggins and Bernard Williams. The final essay connects Diamond's disagreement with Anscombe over sentences that can only be true with a debate between Wiggins and Williams. Wiggins had argued that there are questions in ethics such that were someone to ponder them they would conclude that *there is nothing else to think in response to that question but that p* (for example, there is nothing else to think but that slavery is unjust and insupportable). Williams argued that on the basis of the heterogeneity of thick ethical concepts all that Wiggins actually gets is that there is nothing else for *us* to think, since conclusions of this sort will be dependent upon some particular vocabulary of evaluation. The book is a thrilling education in Wittgensteinianism by one of the field's most prominent scholars, but it is also an interesting attempt at "doing the history of philosophy philosophically".

Both of these books are outstanding achievements. Diamond is open-endedly and in dialogue reconsidering a lifetime of scholarship and Bolton brings much that is genuinely perceptive and genuinely her own into her dialogue with Murdoch. Both books will be obvious reference points for discussions in their respective fields for years to come, but they are also prime examples of philosophically fruitful and historiographically responsible engagement with the past.

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