

**Contours and Barriers:
What Is It to Draw the Limits of Moral Language?**

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I am not inclined to urge that because such statements sound out of tune (or whatever an Austinian might call it) they therefore must be meaningless, [...]; instead I should want to enquire what they might mean and to test the possibilities.

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Is God's power limited—in particular, by logic? Is our power of thought limited by the very fact that we use language, or the fact that we are cultured? A family of questions about limits—the limits of being, of the world, of thought, of the mind, of life, of freedom, and of meaning—have been troubling philosophers for centuries. I propose to explore the usefulness to moral philosophy of the idea of a *limit*. My concern will mostly be with the question whether sense could be made of the idea that there is a limit to the moral meanings or thoughts that language can grasp.

The idea that language has limits can be given two senses. We may imagine a barrier to what language can grasp. Alternatively, we may think of our linguistic activities as having their own characteristic contours. Within the first category we may make a sub-distinction between contingent barriers that are the result of a certain education or political situation, and necessary barriers that are embedded in the very nature of language. The idea that there are some necessary barriers in language that restrict the meanings it can grasp is sometimes confused with the idea that our linguistic activities have characteristic contours.

I begin by diagnosing a confusion of that sort in Sabina Lovibond's moral philosophy. I shall then explore what is involved in drawing the contours of moral language, and later focus on whether trying to improve on the language we have might be part of drawing those contours. Here I shall contrast the discussions of Richard Rorty, and Sarah Bachelard. Lastly, I shall ask whether drawing the contours of some linguistic activities requires recognition that there is an essential barrier to what we can think and mean. Here I shall examine the moral philosophy of Roy Holland. In many of the arguments I will make I take myself to be following in the footsteps of Cora Diamond. I shall try to make that explicit, although I shall not examine any of her works in any detail. This paper is a tribute to Diamond's philosophy.

I.

John McDowell suggested that we investigate ethics “from the inside out.”¹ Philosophers have taken him to mean that our conception of right conduct, for example, is graspable only via the knowledge we have as members of our moral form of life. In accounting for this knowledge, on this understanding, we should not try to articulate principles of conduct that could be understood by an alien. According to this “quietism,”² gaining an insider’s moral knowledge is a matter of assimilating into our moral form of life.³ We can easily see an issue of limits here: the barriers between us, who are on the inside, and some imaginary others, who were not cultured the way we were—barriers that seem to restrict where we and they can travel in thought.

Sabina Lovibond has devoted two books to defending and developing such a view of ethics.⁴ Lovibond puts forward a conception of things that cannot be done. We cannot, she argues, “codify” moral thought and practice—that is, make them understandable to an outsider. Lovibond also defends an “uncodifiability” thesis, according to which, the forms of knowledge deployed in practical reasoning “outrun anything we could “reduce to a set of (mechanically applicable) rules”” (EF, 32). That thesis articulates Lovibond’s understanding of McDowell’s quietist advice.

Lovibond’s understanding of the quietist advice further involves the claim that it is impossible to make explicit all that one has learned by being initiated into a culture (EF, 29-30). Moral reasoning has to be partly inexplicit. Our various moral activities, Lovibond holds, reveal a moral space of reasons that we are cultured into, and know and develop our way about. Determinate meanings and intentions are grounded in a common practice (EF, 48), which sustains “the inexplicit element in moral understanding” (EF, 47), which “we cannot make (fully) explicit” (EF, 50). Here it is clear that the issue is not particular cases of moral inexplicitness, but the inexplicitness of moral thinking per se. Recognizing this, Lovibond argues, amounts to “admitting” (her word) that “there is something we *cannot* do,” namely, say things of moral significance in such a way that “their correct uptake owes nothing to any substratum of *tacit* likemindedness on the part of our audience” (EF, 50; Lovibond’s italics). One cannot reason fully explicitly,

¹ “Virtue and Reason,” *The monist*, Vol. 62, 1979, pp. 331-50—hereafter VR—p. 331.

² See McDowell’s *Mind and World*, Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996, p. 93.

³ This “quietism” in ethics supposedly parallels McDowell’s quietist reading of Wittgenstein on rule-following. Here, too, our next move in following a mathematical series is justifiable only from within the language and knowledge we have as members of a linguistic life in which we develop mathematical series, teach the practice, correct those who fail to do it right, and so on. Only from within can there be standards of objectivity. I do not think that this is a necessary description of McDowell’s views. Below I indicate, not defend, a different reading of McDowell’s advice to think “from within.”

⁴ *Realism and Imagination in Ethics*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983; *Ethical Formation*, Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University press, 2002—hereafter EF.

Lovibond maintains, not because it is a very hard thing to do. It is not an empirical, but a conceptual impossibility of going outside the space of moral reasons while retaining the meanings of our sentences—going outside these barriers while retaining the grammatical identity of our words. Any attempt to reason explicitly or go “outside,” in this sense, she argues, would essentially amount to not saying what we have intended or anything at all. If we are to think ethically, we have no other choice but to think form within.

Lovibond seems to think that we are compensated for what we cannot do: “[T]he uncodifiability of what is apparent to [morally cultured people] is offset [...] by the endless availability of real-life material from which the spirit of their thinking can be reconstructed” (EF, 50). Involved in moral thinking, according to Lovibond, there is a kind of indirection, as Cora Diamond called it, and a necessary one.⁵ The kind of account of ethics we are sometimes tempted to give, or might like to supply, is impossible for us, logically impossible. However, we have another, logically valid, even if a bit of a roundabout option. We can account for ethics from within. Accordingly, Lovibond thinks, “the ethical theorist is pictured not as a mere onlooker, but also, and primarily, as an ethical subject, actively engaged in the mode of thought on which (as a theorist) she reflects, and finding her incentive to theory precisely in the desire to think more competently or intelligently about ethical matters” (EF, 8). Moral philosophy is part of ethics; it happens inside the moral space of reasons and not from a perspective outside it.

II.

To examine Lovibond’s argument I suggest that we turn to Wittgenstein. “In the actual use of expressions” he says, “we make detours, we go by side roads. We see the straight highway before us, but of course we cannot use it, because it is permanently closed.”⁶ Here, Wittgenstein gives expression to a general kind of philosophical fantasy. His remark is applicable to various issues: the existence of infinite numbers, of past facts, and of other people’s minds. We may think that *there are* infinite numbers, that *there are* past facts, or that *there are* thoughts in other people’s minds. We want our minds and language to capture *these*. But, alas, they are out of reach. The highways are blocked, so we have to make detours and approach all those things by indirections. We need to

⁵ See Cora Diamond’s “Wittgenstein, Mathematics, and Ethics: Resisting the Attractions of Realism,” *The Cambridge Companion to Wittgenstein*, Sluga, H. and Stern, D. (eds.), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, pp. 226-260, p. 246. There the idea of indirection is connected with Lovibond’s views. Indirections are also discussed in Diamond’s “Wright’s Wittgenstein,” in: Diamond’s *The Realistic Spirit*, Cambridge, Mass: MIT, 1991—hereafter TRS—pp. 206-223, pp. 210-2, and Diamond’s “Does Bismarck Have a Beetle in His Box?” in: Crary and Read (eds.) *The New Wittgenstein*, London: Routledge, 2000, pp. 262-292, pp. 267-8.

⁶ *Philosophical Investigations*, 3rd edition, Rhees, R. and Anscombe, G. E. M. (eds.), Anscombe, G. E. M. (trans.), Oxford: Blackwell, 1958—hereafter PI—§426.

compensate for what we cannot do. We, thus, form the idea of our sentences having an ideal use (as opposed to their actual use), except that we cannot implement it.

In discussing one such indirection, Wittgenstein says: “The great difficulty here is not to represent matters as if there were something one *could* not do” (PI, §374). The idea that an indirection must be present in thought involves the idea that there are some thoughts we cannot think, or some things that logically cannot be done: count to infinity, go back in time, think other peoples’ thoughts, and so on. However, the very ideas of a thought that cannot be thought, and of a logically impossible activity are fishy. Wittgenstein warns that presenting things as if something cannot be done preserves this fishiness.

Take Lovibond’s idea regarding that which we supposedly cannot do: namely, offer moral reasons whose correct uptake owes nothing to any substratum of tacit likemindedness. This sounds as if there is a kind of reasons we cannot offer, and a kind of activity of reason-giving in which we cannot engage. For only if we could conceive of such reasons and activities, would there be any point in telling us that we cannot offer or engage in them. Presumably, to conceive of such an activity would be, among other things, to conceive of what would constitute trying to engage in it, or learning it, or encouraging or forbidding it; and to conceive of such reasons would presumably be to conceive of the ways they are connected to actions, and of the sort of thinking that goes into estimating how good they are. All this is irrelevant in the case of the reasons and reason-giving Lovibond rules out. However, if one could not clarify that, yet still wanted to say that *something* is impossible, it would very much seem that one would not be saying of *anything* that it cannot be offered or done. The words “We cannot offer moral reasons whose correct uptake owes nothing to any substratum of tacit likemindedness” would seem to be empty. Lovibond, however, appears to want to have it both ways. She wants there to be a kind of reasons and a kind of activity, about which she could argue that we cannot offer or engage in. At the same time, her claim is an attempt to deny the existence of that very subject matter. If she is right, it seems, she can only be right about nothing. What is, then, the point of emphasizing, as she does, that “there is something we *cannot* do,” if nothing is thereby excluded?⁷

⁷ Other quietists seem to fall into similar confusions. McDowell writes: “If one attempted to reduce one’s conception of what virtue requires to a set of rules, then, however subtle and thoughtful one was in drawing up the code, cases would inevitably turn up in which a mechanical application of the rules would strike one as wrong – and not necessarily because one had changed one’s mind; rather, one’s mind on the matter was not susceptible of capture in any universal formula” (VR, 336). And again: “[T]he ascription of value that one cites in giving an agent’s reason for an action, so far from revealing the rationality in the action to an imagined occupier of the external standpoint, need not even be intelligible from there” (in “Non-cognitivism and Rule-Following,” *Wittgenstein: to Follow a Rule*, Holtzman, S. H. and Leich, C. M. (eds.), London: Routledge, 1981, pp. 141-162, p. 155). Alice Crary argues against the view that it is “possible to

At some point, Lovibond talks about a “fantasized external standpoint” and about a delusion of an intellectual vantage point that would presumably allow for fully explicit reasoning. At the same time, she seems to think the conception of this vantage point is intelligible enough to reject, and argues that “it” “is in fact inaccessible” (EF, 22). To perform this feat Lovibond has to occupy the same, or a very similar, and according to her confused, vantage point. It would thus seem inevitable to ascribe to Lovibond the very same fantasy she diagnoses, if only the content of this fantasy could be clarified. Nothing that made sense could, for that very fact, be the content of those fantasies and delusions. If it did, it would not be the kind of content Lovibond’s argument needs it to have. I suspect that Lovibond utilizes the language of fantasies and delusions, rather than of opinions, because she senses that the ideas she is attacking are more than just wrong. They are too confused to even be fully negated as mistaken opinions. However, the retreat from ‘mistake’ to ‘fantasy’ cannot give Lovibond what she needs. For the familiar problems, as we just saw, rise here again. I return to the idea of necessary indirection in [section XI](#).

III.

The attempt to think what is on the far side of the limits of sense is confused, even when putting up philosophical warning signs to indicate that upon entering such talk we are risking great logical confusions. What causes the confusion is the conception of limits we are working with. As long as we keep thinking of those limits of moral sense as barriers, and of the drawing of those limits as a kind of fencing something out, we will repeatedly find ourselves in the same sort of trouble. Can we think of them otherwise?

We can see the confused conception of the limits disintegrates under the pressure of a kind of clarification. We found that Lovibond’s would-be conceptions of activity we cannot engage in and of reasons we cannot give do not allow us to answer certain questions: What is it to fail to engage in that activity, or learn it? How can one estimate the soundness of a reason of the intended kind? Questions of this sort would help to clarify the grammar of that purported activity and those purported reasons, and thus would allow for clarity regarding what Lovibond wants to reject. The failure to answer those questions indicates that she does not have anything clear in mind. When we realize that, we can also learn to see that investigation—the one that asks such questions and

make sense of the idea of a wholly non-circular mode of discourse” (“Wittgenstein and Ethics: A Discussion with Reference to *On Certainty*,” *Readings of Wittgenstein's On Certainty*, Moyal-Sharrock, D. and Brenner, W. (eds.), New York: Palgrave, 2005, pp. 275-301, p. 293). These reflect understandings of the quietist advice. Whether they are indeed unstable depends on how one goes on to use them, for example whether, and how, one tries to support cognitivist or other kinds of theoretical views with them.

thereby attempts to clarify the grammar of “activity” and “reasons” in particular cases—we can see that investigation as an instance of drawing the limits of sense. We can speak here about a drawing of the limits of sense “from within,” or of drawing the contours of sense. This would be a different understanding of the quietist advice. Contour drawing does not imply that something is out of reach, but merely that something is not clear.⁸

Now, our practices can be investigated in a variety of ways, and some involve studying our practices from “sideways-on.” It is possible to offer kinds of re-description of linguistic activities. These might have different kinds of interest in them. For example, scientific-like re-description of what is involved in calculating—in some sorts of calculation—could be useful in programming some machines to perform certain functions. Now, if someone gave such re-description as description of what we do when we calculate, we might feel that this re-description misses something important about the reality of human calculations. We might express that by saying it is given from “sideways-on,” and we might try to explain what we find missing by pointing out some of the actual contours of the practice, by looking “from within.” We might point out, for instance, that calculations are done for particular purposes, and that we learn and are not programmed to calculate. This would not be to say that the “sideways-on” re-description is wrong. The point of making those remarks would be to enable one to see that the usefulness of that re-description does not necessarily lie in its truth or falsehood. Rather, it itself can reveal some of the contours of the practice. For example, its usefulness shows something about the interest we might have in calculations. For some purposes, like building bridges, it usually does not make much of a difference to us if a computer arrived at the result of some arithmetical problem. This helps to distinguish calculating from other activities, like writing condolences letters for example, where it would make a difference if we made a certain use of computers.

⁸ James Conant argued that some philosophical talk about the limits of language is deeply confused. He ascribes to Wittgenstein the idea that upon seeing that confusion we would be “able to simply *throw* the sentences in the body of the [*Tractatus*]*—sentences about “the limits of language” and the unsayable things which lie beyond them—away.”* “The Search for Logically Alien Thought: Descartes, Kant, Frege, and the *Tractatus*.” *Philosophical Topics*, Vol. 20(1), 1991, pp. 115-180, p. 159. in the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein puts forward the idea of drawing the limits of language from within: “the limit can, therefore, only be drawn in language and what lies on the other side of the limit will be simply nonsense” *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Ogden, C. K. (trans.), London: Routledge, 1922, p. 27. For discussion of this idea in regards to Wittgenstein’s early philosophy see James Conant’s “The Method of the *Tractatus*,” *From Frege to Wittgenstein*, Reck, H. (ed.), Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002, pp. 374-462, and Cora Diamond’s “The *Tractatus* and the Limits of Sense” (unpublished). Drawing the limits of sense from within may be attempted in different ways, and Wittgenstein’s understanding of the ways in which that might be achieved has changed dramatically from the *Tractatus* to his later writings. Nevertheless, Diamond and Conant maintain that the kind of perspective thereby achieved on philosophical questions marks continuity in Wittgenstein’s philosophy. See Diamond’s “Criss-cross Philosophy,” *Wittgenstein at Work: Method in the Philosophical Investigations*, Ammereller, E. & Fischer, E. (eds.), London: Routledge, 2004, pp. 201-220; and Conant’s “Why Worry about the *Tractatus*?” *Post Analytic Tractatus*, Stocker, B. (ed.), 2004, pp. 167-192.

Note that here looking at the activity from “sideways-on” denotes a certain kind of activity, and not a confusion. The confusion I discussed above, which is a product of a conception of the limits of moral sense as barriers, is not confusion about a particular activity. It arises when one attempts to look in a certain way at ethics as a whole. One might think that the general quietist advice rejects as confused a particular sort of accounts, namely the hypothetical-theoretical ones. This is not so. True, giving such a “sideways-on” account is somewhat like giving a purely geometrical description of a smile. In both cases we might say that the description does not capture certain dimensions of the human reality of the relevant phenomena. However, there might be purposes that call for such descriptions.

IV.

What, one might ask, happens to Wittgenstein’s idea of language-game? It is often taken for granted that Wittgenstein thought of language as a many-faceted rule-governed activity or set of activities,⁹ and that the idea of a language-game is meant to be an image of those activities: each defined by its own grammatical rules that also separate it from all other activities. In this image, the different language games are like tiles in the great mosaic of language. The following quotation from Wittgenstein is thought to substantiate this reading: “if you follow other rules than those of chess you are *playing another game*; and if you follow grammatical rules other than such-and-such ones, that does not mean you say something wrong, no, you are speaking of something else.”¹⁰

The remark is subtle. It implies that chess is largely rule-governed and that some grammatical remarks are rules, but not that the same things hold for all other activities and grammatical remarks. Here is another Wittgenstein quote about how games can help us look at language:

Doesn’t the analogy between language and games throw light here? We can easily imagine people amusing themselves in a field by playing with a ball so as to start various existing games, but playing many without finishing them and in between throwing the ball aimlessly into the air, chasing one another with the ball and bombarding one another for a joke and so on. And now someone says: The whole time they are playing a ball-game and following definite rules at every throw.

And is there not also the case where we play and—make up the rules as we go along? And there is even one where we alter them—as we go along. (PI, §83)

⁹ See, for example, Baker, G. P. and Hacker, P. M. S., *Wittgenstein: Rules, Grammar, and Necessity*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1985, p. 38.

¹⁰ *Philosophical Grammar*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1974, p. 185; Zettel, Anscombe, G. E. M. And von Wright, G. H. (eds.), Anscombe, G. E. M. (trans.), Oxford: Blackwell, 1981—hereafter Z—§320.

The activities Wittgenstein mentions here are unlike chess in various ways. They do not have sharp boundaries. It is not always clear when one game stops and another begins, when a game has come into being, or when it has been altered. The games he considers are also not all rule governed. Not all involve rules, and those that do, do not all involve rules in the same way.

I suggest that we read Wittgenstein's remarks about games and language games not as articulating a picture of language as a mosaic of domains of discourse, each surrounded by barriers of sense. Those remarks are rather meant to call attention to the reality of different linguistic activities. Let us call such remarks "helpers." They are designed to give a kind of guidance to drawing the contours of activities and to help us to be sensitive to their different dimensions, even to remind us about them. The chess example helps us to see what some games and some grammatical remarks are like. It helps us to see how superficial similarities between games might hide important differences. However, it is not meant to be generalized over the whole of language, which is another way of saying that it is not helpful when it comes to other dimensions of our linguistic activities. The ball-playing examples shed light on some of those other dimensions. My suggestion is, then, that to take Wittgenstein's remark about chess and generalize it beyond the activity it is meant as a clarification of is a symptom of what Wittgenstein called "making the wrong, inappropriate gesture for a verbal expression" (Z, §450). In other words, it is to mistake its use.

V.

I would like to make a few comments about Wittgensteinian helpers. It is often tempting to take Wittgenstein's remarks—the various kinds of reminders and grammatical remarks he makes—as putting forward theses, or as making hypothetical generalizations about language. There is nothing in those remarks themselves to prevent it; that is, one cannot recognize a helper just by looking at it. Consider sentences like "a rule is something that is kept," or "spheres do not have sides." Think of situations in which you would use them. Sometimes they can be appropriate responses to philosophical questions like "can it be a rule if no one follows it?" but also to grammatical confusions like "can you please count the sides of that ball?" This would be to use them as helpers, as if to help someone regain linguistic balance. However, such sentences can be used differently. Take the sentence "to think truly is to think what is the case." According to Sabina Lovibond it is a "truistic thesis" (EF, 19). She treats it accordingly, and takes McDowell to infer from it "that for language using animals, the content of experience is essentially such as to lend itself to conceptual articulation" (EF,

19-20). She even goes on in a footnote to ask whether “the uncontroversial fact that we often find it hard to put our thoughts and feelings into words” discredits the inference, or constitutes counterevidence against it.

“Theses” and “helpers” are classifications by use. First, the point of using sentences as helpers is to help draw the contours of activities. Theses might be involved in drawing such contours, but it is not their function, and some philosophical theses confuse the ideas of drawing the contours and of drawing the barriers of sense. Second, used as theses, it is intelligible to say such sentences are erroneous. (Saying they are truistic possibly means they will never actually turn out erroneous.) Used as helpers, there will normally not be a question regarding their truth, and if there is such a question—if, for instance, one thinks that for some reason it would be useful to have a way of talking about spheres as having sides—the question regarding their truth is of a different sort; it is more like a question regarding their usefulness. Third, used as a thesis it is possible that different people understand the same sentence differently—for example, understand differently what is involved in “saying what is the case.” A moral realist, for example, may hold that saying what the case is involves affirming the existence of an irreducible moral reality, whereas a moral anti-realist may hold that it involves no such reality. Both might still agree that “to think truly is to think what is the case.”¹¹ Theses can thus support different theories. In contrast, sentences can be used as helpers in so far as people *do not* understand them differently. These are parts of the grammar of being a thesis and of being a helper.

To argue that “theses” and “helpers” are classifications by use allows that sometimes the same philosophical text can be used in two different ways. I have shown how the idea of comparing linguistic activities to games can be used as a “helper,” and there are other many such ideas in Wittgenstein that could be put to such use. This is actually a useful rule of thumb for reading a lot of Wittgenstein. It is often the case that when readers of Wittgenstein rephrase his claims, their employment of the word “must” indicates that they use his ideas as theses rather than helpers.¹² The possibility of using formulations of philosophical doctrines as helpers rather than as theses is not limited to Wittgensteinian ideas,¹³ and the distinction is useful not only for philosophical texts. Take the quotation

¹¹ Such moral realism is defended in Mark Platts’ *Ways of Meaning*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979. For such moral anti-realism see Simon Blackburn’s “Wittgenstein’s Irrealism,” *Wittgenstein: Eine Neubewehrung*, Brandl, L. and Haller, R. (eds.), Vienna: Holder-Richer-Temsky, 1990, pp. 13-26; “Morals and Modals,” *Essays in Quasi-Realism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993, pp. 52-74.

¹² Consider for instance Wittgenstein’s claim that justifications come to an end (PI §§1, 485). He does not say that justification *must* come to an end, but the fact that they do, the fact that they come to different ends in different practices, can help us regain sensitivity to the reality of those practices.

¹³ Diamond shows how the philosophical ideas of *Realism* and *Anti-realism*, usually used as theses, could also be used as helpers. See her “Realism and the Realistic Spirit,” in TRS, pp. 39-72. David Finkelstein shows how something of the sort can be done with the idea of *Holism*. See his “Holism and Animal Minds,” in: *Wittgenstein and the Moral Life: Essays in Honor of Cora Diamond*, Cambridge, MA: MIT

from Shakespeare’s Hamlet: “there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so” (Act 2, scene II). Wittgenstein once used it to sound a kind of idealist thesis.¹⁴ Arguably, this is not how Hamlet uses it. I take it to be a Wittgensteinian philosophical method: to show that theoretical remarks can be used differently. Often, but not always, showing a philosopher that and how her theoretical remarks can be used as helpers captures a lot of what she wanted in the first place.

VI.

The discussion thus far puts pressure on a sort of use of the idea of a limit. I have suggested that we can put the idea to use in clarifying the contours of our linguistic activities. However, does this not entail conservatism? It seems to assume that we can only investigate where the limits of language are, but not where they should be. To confront this worry, I would now like to discuss a kind of linguistic investigations conducted with a view to improve on the language we have.

In his *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*¹⁵ Richard Rorty conducts such investigations. He is interested in the language of politics, and in how we talk and think about the mind, and he investigates this by asking what concepts it is better to have. According to Rorty, we make transitions between vocabularies. Each such transition involves passing through an interregnum during which we witness a contest “between an entrenched vocabulary which has become a nuisance and a half-formed new vocabulary which vaguely promises great things” (CIS, 9). During those interregnums, Rorty argues, we are invited to try new ways of making sense, tempted to ask new questions, and encouraged to leave old difficulties behind. This process lasts until new patterns of thought and behaviour are formed and settle as the new regime.

Rorty insists that the process is completely contingent. At one point he compares language to a coral reef, and argues that “This analogy lets us think of “our language” [...] as something that took shape as a result of a great number of sheer contingencies” (CIS, 16).¹⁶ Rorty thus stirs clear of any commitment to a particular story about how

Press, 2007, pp. 250-278. Perhaps most strikingly, Stanley Cavell does something similar with the idea of *Skepticism*. See his *the Claim of Reason*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979. See also Diamond’s discussion of Cavell on Skepticism in Diamond’s “The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy,” in *Partial Answers*, Vol. 1(2), 2003, pp. 1-26. Above, I implicitly gave a similar treatment to the idea of *Quietism*.

¹⁴ In his “Lecture on Ethics,” *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 74(1), 1965, pp. 3-12—hereafter LOE—p. 6.

¹⁵ Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999 – hereafter CIS.

¹⁶ Rorty also claims that “genuine novelty can [...] occur in a world of blind, contingent, mechanical forces” (CIS, 17), and shares an evolutionary picture of language: new languages, like “new forms of life constantly [kill] off old forms—not to accomplish a higher purpose, but blindly” (CIS, 19). He often treats thinking as passive, saying that vocabulary changes may be a natural result of prolonged muddles and confusion, at the end of which we simply find ourselves asking different questions and in general utilizing a

these changes come about. Despite first impression, Rorty is not committed to completely non-intentional explanations that leave no room for reasoned changes. He argues that a language that has been newly accepted might be “a tool which happened to work better for certain purposes than any previous tool” (CIS, 19). At least to some extent and sometimes, then, vocabularies develop in response to certain purposes, and we might be at least a causal factor in the process.

There is thus room for Rorty for a kind of discussion of language that does not participate in already given forms of thought and talk, but attempts to create them. For example, we might produce effects on our listeners or readers. One way of doing this is by using metaphors. Metaphors, according to Rorty, are like slaps and kisses: they are at bottom meaningless. They are sounds we emit or signs we create on paper which have effects on our audience. Nevertheless, metaphors might be involved in changes of vocabulary. A metaphor might “*become* a truth-value candidate [...] it will gradually acquire a habitual use, a familiar place in the language game. It will thereby have ceased to be a metaphor—or, if you like, it will have become what most sentences of our language are, a dead metaphor. It will be just one more, literally true or literally false, sentence of the language” (CIS, 18).¹⁷

Rorty places one central constraint on the process of vocabulary change: namely, that it is not aimed at discovery of some independent truth, which the new vocabulary is better suited to capture. He insists that such investigations in general achieve their goal “not by inquiry but by imagination” (CIS, xvi).¹⁸ He thus contrasts the kind of investigations he favours—investigations that involve imaginative creation and invention, the investigations of “the poet,” as he calls them—with what he calls discovery or inquiry of truth, which characterize the investigations of “the physicist.” Rorty rejects the idea that changes of vocabulary are aimed at truth. He goes further: “The moral is not that objective criteria for choice of vocabulary are to be replaced with subjective criteria, reason with will or feeling. It is rather that the notions of criteria and choice (including that of “arbitrary” choice) are no longer in point when it comes to changes from one language game to another” (CIS, 6). This places a constraint on the intentions behind metaphorical uses of language: The user of metaphors “is typically unable to make clear

new vocabulary and a new way of problematizing things. “Europe did not *decide* to accept the idioms of Romantic poetry, or of socialist politics, or of Galilean mechanics. That sort of shift was no more an act of will than it was a result of argument. Rather, Europe gradually lost the habit of using certain words and gradually acquired the habit of using others” (CIS, 6).

¹⁷ Rorty thereby accepts a Davidsonian view of metaphor. See CIS, p. 19. See also Rorty’s “Unfamiliar Noises: Hesse and Davidson on Metaphor,” in his *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991, pp. 162-72.

¹⁸ Rorty’s main goal is the articulation of a conception of a utopia (see CIS, xvi). However, he also utilizes his conceptual tools to describe past events.

exactly what it is that he wants to do before developing the language in which he succeeds in doing it. His new vocabulary makes possible, for the first time, a formulation of its own purpose. It is a tool for doing something which could not have been envisaged prior to the development of a particular set of descriptions, those which it itself helps to provide” (CIS, pp. 12-3).

Rorty is thus a proponent of the mosaic picture of language. To investigate language in an attempt to improve on it, according to Rorty, requires that we leave behind the vocabulary we have, and cross a barrier of sense. *There are* meanings on the far side, but we cannot gasp them from where we are. I shall not attempt to argue that Rorty’s argument is confused. Instead, let me contrast it with an investigation conducted by Sarah Bachelard.¹⁹

VII.

Bachelard, like Rorty, attempts to improve on the language we have. She focuses on what we might come to do with words, not on established use of words. However, she does not think that in order to do that, we must cross a barrier of sense.²⁰ Like Rorty, Bachelard conducts a partial investigation of the concept of a human being. She argues that in the discussion of euthanasia we sometimes use a concept of a human being, which deprives us of the possibility of making sense of certain experiences, and of giving meaning to suffering. This is connected to a parallel we draw between humans and animals when we think of people who are terminally ill and suffer great pains as creatures who can be put out of their misery. Bachelard thinks it is wrong to draw that parallel, but to justify this claim she does not examine what human beings are, and whether it would or would not make sense to say of them in the relevant situations that they can be put out of their misery, and if so in what sense. She rather asks: “is there an argument for thinking that the concept of a human being as a being who can be put out of his misery is the ‘right’ concept of a human being to have?” (OE, p. 133). Ultimately, Bachelard thinks, it would not be a good concept to have, because “to act in the spirit of putting a human being out of his misery is radically demeaning. It is to treat a human being as someone incapable of responding to the claims of the meaning of his suffering, and hence as less than fully our fellow, as less than fully human” (OE, p. 138).

¹⁹ ‘On Euthanasia: Blindspots in the Argument from Mercy,’ *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, Vol. 19 (2), 2002, pp. 131-40—hereafter OE.

²⁰ Another difference between Rorty’s and Bachelard’s investigations is that Rorty is interested in much bigger chunks of language. The narrower focus of Bachelard’s investigation, however, helps to get into focus the particular needs and purposes that motivate her investigation.

It is tempting to describe Bachelard's question as adopting a point of view outside our—outside *her*—concept of a human being, in an attempt to contrast it with a competing conception. It is tempting to describe her as investigating from a point of view outside our natural dealings and linguistic life—outside the kind of sensitivities we have as the users of this particular language. Indeed, if we read Bachelard's question with Rortian eyes, Bachelard would seem to have a choice: either she is a “poet” (in Rorty's sense) in the process of creating a new concept of a human being, which would help us to make sense of certain experiences that we currently cannot make sense of, or she is asking a question that already has an answer about a concept that we already have. What Bachelard cannot do, according to this view, is assume that we have a concept of a human being which does not allow us to make sense of certain experiences, and at the same time think that by investigating our concept of a human being she can come to a conclusion regarding how those experiences can or should be made sense of.

This view of Bachelard's investigations assumes a theoretical interest in language, and accepts various theses about it: for instance, that language games have fixed contours and cannot be changed but only replaced. Such theoretical characterization of language might have some interest in it. In opposition we might come up with a different theory, in which language can be changed and developed in response to different needs. But we might have an altogether different sort of interest in language: an interest in drawing the contours of linguistic activities. And we can use both theoretical ideas—that language games have definite contours, and that language develops in response to changing needs—as helpers to shed light with on different dimensions of language.

Exploring the contours of linguistic practices may involve different activities. One of them is pointing out established contours of linguistic practices—saying for instance that we do not talk of spheres as having sides or that we calculate for particular purposes. But we may also note that it characterizes a concept that some ways of extending its use, are, for example, more natural than others. What can be naturally done with a concept—even if it is something new—is thus part of the concept, part of its contours, and we can investigate that. Bachelard talks about the ‘right’ use of a concept. We can also talk about more and less natural, intelligent, interesting, useful, needed, and even compelling, extensions of concepts. Investigating all that would be investigating the contours of concepts by exploring their horizons.

VIII.

Although I said I would not attempt to argue that Rorty is confused, I want to point out a shortcoming of his argument. The idea I put forward of examining the contours of

concepts by examining their horizons can show that Rorty's discussion conceals something about what Cora Diamond called "the good of concepts."²¹ Rorty deals with the question of changes in ways of thinking—changes of concepts—in connection with the idea that we care about how we think. Vocabularies change, Rorty holds, when we lose interest in certain questions, and start caring about others. He himself wants to bring about such a change. Rorty's argument draws a sharp distinction between two ways of caring about how we think: the conservative and the revolutionary. Either we keep our concepts, or we throw them away and get new ones. This leaves unintelligible some of the ways in which we care about how we think.

Our interest in how we think is reflected in the ways we care about how people used to think in the past, and also about how they will think in the future and how they think today. Political-theologians, for instance, find it important to employ old theological ideas to explain modern politics. Christians find it important to identify Buddhist as having religious thoughts. Science fiction novelists warn us about the possibility of losing touch with ways of making sense that we find important. Philosophers promote moral conceptions by trying to persuade us to stop making certain distinctions and start making others. What it is to care about our concepts, about the possibilities of making sense, will be clarified in part by an examination of such different cases. But if we accept Rorty's a-priori theoretical reasons for thinking that our relations to foreign ways of thinking must take certain shapes, then there is little point in looking at the different kinds of interest people actually have in them.

Not all differences between ways of making sense are distances between cultures. Differences between people and how they make sense of things can be seen in the ways their different thoughts bear on each other. We sometimes have a choice in such matters: we can connect thoughts we have about a certain matter to other thoughts in more than one way. Furthermore, sometimes such choices are forced on us. This may happen when we feel that our established ways of making sense do not equip us with the means of making sense of certain experiences, or that they equip us with contrasting ways. Bachelard is investigating such a case. She points out that when a terminally ill person is in great pains, people sometimes find themselves asking questions like "What if she were a dog? – What would I do then?" (OE, 132). This connection they make between animals and humans is part of what people do in trying to make sense of such suffering. This connection does not force them to accept a way of thinking about humans, for although it may make them think about the similarity between animals and humans, it may equally

²¹ 'Losing Your Concepts' *Ethics*, Vol. 98, 1988, pp. 255-277—hereafter LYC—p. 269.

make them think about the difference. Bachelard wants to show that we have a choice: we may bring into the way we make sense of human suffering the idea of a kindness that we do to suffering animals by putting them out of their misery. This, she says, would give expression to a “particular understanding of the human” (OE, 136). Alternatively, she argues, we may bring into the way we think about human suffering ideas about how we mourn our dead, pray, and recognize each other’s humanity, or fail to—ideas that reflect the meaning of being human in ways that make it foreign to the kindness there is in putting a creature out of its misery. By exploring those different possible connections—their naturalness or rightness—Bachelard is guided by her sense of the importance of the concept of a human being. At the same time she enables an investigation of what is important about that concept—the good of that concept. This goes to characterize (the grammar of) the sort of investigation she conducts, as well as the sort of interest she has in language, which is neither wholly conservative nor completely revolutionary.

A pattern of talk is a token of a pattern of care. Changes in vocabulary and language signify or express changes in the way we care about things. Rorty, I believe, would accept those claims. However, his argument makes a sort of theoretical use of them. His underlying reasoning involves the thought that if a linguistic pattern changed, one can conclude that the patterns of care that were connected to it vanished. It also involves the idea that being interested in our established linguistic patterns must be different from being interested in improving on them. You are either a poet or a physicist. You cannot be both, and insofar as you are interested in language, if you are not the one, you must be the other. Because Rorty makes such a sharp distinction between inventing and discovering, he is unable to distinguish between kinds of inventing and kinds of discovering, and allows no room for the idea of re-inventing our vocabulary, or recovering it, or of claiming traditional vocabularies as our own. He is prevented from seeing how patterns of care are actually reflected in language.

We can employ the idea that patterns of talk signify patterns of care differently. The idea can be used as a helper, to utilize the term I used in sections IV-V. We can utilize it to call attention to the life of linguistic practices. For example, we can use it to help someone stay sensitive to the significance of slight differences in wording; or we can, like Bachelard, look at different linguistic patterns—different ways of connecting ideas—to investigate what we care about. Saying, like Diamond, that concepts are goods, is not saying what goods they are. It is meant to supply us with a tool for looking at our lives, a tool for asking about how in different cases different questions, worries, assumptions, and confusions about concepts—how all this can teach us about the different types of interests

we might have in our ways of thinking. It is a tool for reflecting about what it is to care about how we think.

Among other things, concepts allow us to bridge distances between what we experience and what we can express. This is part of their good. However, this also means that we are vulnerable to situations in which language does not keep up with experience. That such things happen does not entail that the very nature of language restricts thought. Rather, other people might restrict us in ways that involve interference with the language we are taught or allowed to have. Blindness to this is part of the price that inattention to the good of concepts, such as Rorty's, has to pay.²² In the remaining three sections I revisit the idea that there are meanings that language essentially cannot grasp.

IX.

I began this paper by posing the age-old question whether God is or is not limited by logic. It might seem that the upshot of my arguments so far is not only that God is unlimited, but that we humans are unlimited just as well, and that no sense can be made of the idea of there being a limit restricting the meanings or thoughts that language can grasp. However, coming to see and draw the limits of language from within or from without in the ways I described leaves open the possibility of doing more with the idea of a *limit*. What I have in mind is the idea that we are limited by the very nature of thought and talk; that is, not merely empirically, being the kind of linguistic creatures we are, but essentially by our very being linguistic thinking creatures. That idea may lie at the base of some moral thought.

An idea of limitedness lies at the base of much of the thinking of R. F. Holland.²³ Holland is mostly interested in how our limitedness is reflected in language, and in moral language in particular. He raises the question of the nature of good and evil. To a certain extent, he holds, we can answer that question by, for example, “distinguishing and characterizing certain forms or typical faces of good and evil” (AE, 95). There are other ways, connected to particular sorts of evaluation. For example, we can explain what makes something a good or a bad action by examining it relative to the function it was supposed to fulfil, or to its outcome. That is different, Holland holds, from explaining the nature of good and evil in themselves—good and evil considered purely, as it were, not relative to some goal or standard or purpose. That, Holland says, he cannot explicate: “I

²² For further discussion see James Conant's “Freedom Cruelty and Truth: Rorty versus Orwell,” in: *Rorty and His Critics*, Brandom, R. B. (ed.), Oxford: Blackwell, 2000, pp. 268-341.

²³ All references to Holland are to his book: *Against Empiricism*, Barnes & Noble Books: Totowa, 1980—hereafter AE.

can see the good or the evil without difficulty; I see it in the action. I recognize quite clearly *that* it is there. But *what* it is I cannot for the life of me explain.” He continues:

So a mental fog descends and what precipitates the fog is not just the fact that I find myself unable to make plain something that I feel I ought to be able to make plain, but also the fact that the nature of my inability is itself not plain. [...] I find myself unable to do something and I do not have even a moderately clear idea of what it is that I cannot do. (AE, 96-97)

The difficulty is conceptual. Holland says he “cannot imagine what would be conceptually appropriate” (AE, 97). He explores the bounds of what is conceptually appropriate, or conceivable. According to him, that something is conceivable is shown in how we think of it, in how thoughts about it interlock with one another, and in how this thinking forms part of an established common understanding. For example, that the concept *horse* is conceivable is shown in how it connects with concepts like ‘animal,’ ‘work,’ and ‘wild,’ in how we make these connections in our dealings with horses, and in how all that forms an established common practice. Beside this kind of interest in the contours of what is conceivable, Holland is also interested in its outward limits; he is interested, in other words, in the inconceivable. He struggles to make room for the possibility of a meaning that is untied from what is conceptually possible—room, for example, for the idea that we can make inconceivable claims, claims we cannot (fully) wrap our minds around, and yet maintains that those claims are not empty.

Holland rejects the idea that what is conceivable could be clarified completely in terms of what is logical, or imaginable. Not everything that is logical, and not everything that is imaginable, is also conceivable. Holland argues that the fact that we can imagine something—portray it in a picture or express it in a proposition that are internally coherent—does not entail that it is conceivable. We can, for example picture a talking stove, but this would not yet be to make conceptual room for the idea of a talking stove (AE, 195-7). Holland also argues that the New Testament story of the turning of water into wine could be true. It is not logically impossible, and contains no contradiction. Still, it is inconceivable that water would turn into wine as the story tells (AE, 184). Miracles, Holland says, would thus constitute a sort of contradiction in experience—an experience of something that is inconceivable. There is thus, according to Holland, room for content beyond that which we can conceive of, and at least some of it is shown in logic, or in the imagination.

Holland defends a conception of goodness in which it is a kind of miracle. In this conception, the inconceivability, the mystery, of absolute goodness is not contingent on our supposedly limited powers of conceptualization, but essential. Some mysteries, he

says, “present themselves as offering a more than accidental resistance to explanation” (AE, 92). In a different context he says that the use of concepts in absolute senses brings down a barrier against the understanding (AE, 190), and paraphrasing Wittgenstein he says something similar about absolute value: “I see as it were in a flash of light, not only that no explanation I can think of would do to explain what I mean by absolute value, but that I would reject every explanation that anybody could possibly suggest, *ab initio*, on the ground of its significance” (AE, 109).²⁴

Absolute goodness is also like miracles in that it can be experienced. Holland refers to “what can be seen in the unprofitable fineness of certain deeds or characters” (AE, 2), and elsewhere he talks of the recognition “that in some action of suffering there was pure goodness” (AE, 127-8). Experiences of absolute goodness are beyond conceptualization. They are not necessarily, however, beyond words. We can refer to them, and even describe them to a certain extent, but the surface grammar here of description might be misleading. A judgement that some action, say, is absolutely good “is in one sense not a judgement at all—it does not confer anything, does not assign a top grading, but is like exclaiming at a revelation. [...] [W]hat is seen by the beholder of goodness stirs something in him deeply without giving him the feeling of being close to it” (AE, 128).

The word ‘revelation’ is important. The sort of experience Holland has in mind inherently defies the possibility of conceptualization. This bafflement is part of the experience. Such experiences, as it were, shoulder one’s words from their established sense. One is thus left with words she cannot fill with meaning herself. Still, those words are meaningful, and it is as if the only explanation for this meaningfulness is that they were filled with meaning by revelation “from without.”

Without employing his conception of goodness to the defence of any theistic doctrine, Holland calls it “religious” (AE, 85). He contrasts it with broadly speaking empiricist conceptions of absolute goodness.²⁵ The latter conceptions—in various ways—relativise goodness. One of the chief reasons for that, according to Holland, is the unwillingness of those who defend such conceptions to allow for the idea of something that is both meaningful and inconceivable—to allow, that is, that we may face a barrier of sense. Holland argues extensively against such conceptions, and finds all sorts of inadequacies

²⁴ See Wittgenstein’s LOE, p. 11. Holland also quotes with approval Wittgenstein’s claim, which he made in a conversation with Friedrich Waismann, that the conception of the good according to which Good is good because God wills it “is the deeper one; Good is what God orders. For this cuts off the path to any and every explanation ‘why’ it is good.” See Waismann’s, “Notes on Talks with Wittgenstein,” *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 74(1), 1965, pp. 12-16, p. 15.

²⁵ Holland ascribes religious conceptions to Plato, Kant, Kierkegaard, and Wittgenstein, and contrasts those with the conceptions of Aristotle, Hume, and interestingly also with conceptions that draw on Wittgenstein’s concept of form of life.

in them. However, he does not think that he has a knockdown argument. He is aware that calling goodness a mystery would inevitably create the impression not of answering the question of the nature of good and evil, but of obscuring it (AE, 93). He also says that not everyone would be able to understand what talk of absolute goodness means (AE, 3).

If this last claim of Holland is true, it is part of the nature of his claims that some will not be convinced by them, or even see their point. In the remaining two sections, I shall not try to argue that Holland's claims have such a point, but rather say some things about the grammar of absolute uses. This, in turn, will help clarify why Holland's claims will not convince everyone.

X.

The very assumption that talk of absolute goodness has grammar assumes that Holland's claims have a point. This is what Holland's opponent denies. At best, the opponent would say, in talking about absolute goodness the way Holland does there is merely the illusion of grammar. Here is how Holland puts this objection:

To speak of something which is conceptually impossible is to speak of a nullity. To ask for an example of something that is conceptually impossible is not [...] like asking for a sample for a substance and you cannot in order to comply with this request produce anything visible or tangible, you cannot point to an occurrence. Indeed you cannot, strictly speaking, offer a description either: you can only utter a form of words. (AE, 186)

Holland answers that objection, essentially, by putting his foot down: "sense can be made of a conceptual impossibility in the respect that one can see often enough that there *is* a conceptual impossibility there and also, often enough, what kind of a conceptual impossibility it is and how it arises" (AE, 186-7). This is little help, though, for if no sense can be made of conceptual impossibility, then no sense can be made of "identifying conceptual impossibility," or of "telling what kind of conceptual impossibility something is," and of "telling how a certain conceptual impossibility arises." Let me try another approach.

There are two sorts of reasons for considering talk about some conceptual impossibility as merely uttering a form of words. The first relates to Holland's claim that the nature of his inability to explain the essence of value is unclear (AE, 97). The second relates to his claim that a proposition might be internally coherent and yet express nothing that is conceivable (AE, 197-8). Let me clarify this, and explain why it does not undermine Holland's views.

Holland says the nature of his inability to account for the nature of value is itself not plain. This characterizes it as a difficulty of the kind, which Cora Diamond called

“riddles” or “exploratory problems.”²⁶ Their solution requires first a clarification of the nature of the difficulty. Take the Sphinx’s riddle: what has four legs in the morning, two at noon, and three in the evening? It looks as though it has a familiar shape: ‘find me something that has such and such characteristics.’ The relevant procedure would then be to look in a zoology book, or perhaps among the fabulous beasts. As we know, this will not help solve the riddle. To achieve that, one has to reorient one’s conception of the difficulty, and come up with a new way in which to use the riddle phrase. The phrase, “Something that has four legs in the morning...” does not describe any familiar beast. When Oedipus discovers that it describes Man, he does not discover a new fact about people, or a new kind of animal; he discovers a new kind of description: a way of using words. Before, one could say that the riddle phrase described something, but the meaning of the word ‘describe’ was undetermined. Until one reaches the solution to a riddle, we could say that the riddle phrase is only a form of words.

Holland, I suggest, is trying to solve a sort of riddle. He is not working with a particular riddle phrase, but with the language of absolute value as a whole, which he wants to put back to use. The different attempts made by philosophers like Aristotle and Hume to account for absolute value, Holland believes, ultimately relativise it. Those philosophers are thus left with a language whose moral significance is depleted. To paraphrase Raimond Gaita, Holland is trying to reclaim the wondrousness of the language of absolute value for philosophical reflection.²⁷ The fact that he is working with a form of words is thus no argument against him.

The second reason for considering Holland’s talk about conceptual impossibility a mere form of words is connected to his idea about picturing inconceivable states of affairs. He raises that idea while discussing the claim “that an absolutely unending duration is attributable to something physical” (AE, 190). This, he argues, is inconceivable. One could at best capture it with an image, and Holland suggests the image of a rotating sphere. However, he argues, that image is merely that—an image. It does not, and we have no idea how to, relate it to anything physical. In fact, he thinks, we would probably not want to.²⁸ Insofar as a phrase like “ever-turning sphere” could do the same function as an image, it is a mere form of words.

²⁶ See Diamond’s “Riddles and Anselm’s Riddle,” in TRS, pp. 267-89, and her “What if x isn’t the number of sheep? Wittgenstein and Thought-Experiments in Ethics,” *Philosophical Papers*, vol. 31(3), 2002, pp. 227-250.

²⁷ *Good and Evil*, 2nd edition, Routledge: London, 1991—hereafter GE—p. xv.

²⁸ Holland argues that if we are to connect it to something physical, our image would have to include all sorts of physical data about friction and velocities, and we just do not have any idea how to imagine the relevant data, or even what imagining all that would come to. To the extent that we do, Holland argues, we would not consider what we imagine to be a description of something, but an abstracted idealized construction.

Now, one could turn Holland’s argument here against him, and say that his talk of absolute value is at best a mere form of words, an image of valuation, but nothing more. However, this does not undermine Holland’s view. Although he does not discuss that, his examination of imaginative thought supports his defence of the notion of inconceivable content. According to Holland, we can imagine—have images of—such content. Saying that it is inconceivable means, among other things, that we cannot have more than images. This is the case with absolute value. Talk of absolute value inherently involves images. A sort of figurative thinking is required by the very nature of the case.

XI.

It is important to Holland that the objection raised against him has a Wittgensteinian ring to it. It is by surveying the contours of the use of concepts that their grammar becomes visible. But if nothing would count as pointing to an occurrence, or as a description, of conceptual impossibility, then, the Wittgensteinian objector holds, it becomes unclear whether this phrase, “conceptual impossibility,” is useful and questionable whether it has any grammar. This indicates, for Holland, that the Wittgensteinian philosopher might be working with a too narrow understanding of what surveying the contours of language might come to.

The essential role that figurative thinking has in absolute evaluations indicates a connection with what Wittgenstein called a use of a term in a secondary sense. I would like to explore the relation between the two issues. Cora Diamond has pointed out that with regard to both absolute and secondary senses, Wittgenstein warned against saying they are metaphors.²⁹ This was a warning against a possibly misleading terminology. We often use metaphors to express indirectly things that in principle we could express directly, that is, non-figuratively. So, for example, if ‘Juliet is the sun’ is a metaphor then this is an indirect way of saying, for instance, that she is radiant, makes everything clear, or possibly painful to look at. However, it can also be put to a secondary use. In that case, paraphrasing it would involve re-using the same image one had in first making the claim; for example, saying that Juliet is the source of life, or that life is a dark place without her. One could not paraphrase without the image.

There is also an important difference between secondary and absolute uses. In the case of secondary uses, no barrier is brought down against the understanding. Even though we cannot paraphrase without the image, this does not indicate a genuine impossibility. It merely characterizes the kind of meaning we want to convey. Recall the discussion in

²⁹ “Secondary Sense,” in TRS, pp. 225-41. Wittgenstein discusses secondary senses in Part II of PI, and absolute senses in LEO.

section II above about indirections. There I rejected Lovibond’s claim that a necessary indirection is forced on us in moral thinking. I argued that this was confused, essentially because it did not involve any clear idea regarding that which we cannot do. I would now like to suggest that with secondary senses we could talk of necessary indirections. In light of the availability of direct, literal, paraphrasing in the case of metaphors, one could say that secondary senses are inescapably indirect. However, unlike in Lovibond’s case, saying this would not involve any idea about that which we cannot do. We have no need in this case for the idea of capturing the content of a secondary use non-figuratively—directly, as it were. To say that it is “impossible” to supply a non-figurative paraphrase for a secondary use is somewhat like saying that it is impossible to castle in checkers. It merely goes to characterize an activity. It is a helper that marks the contours of a certain practice.

Unlike secondary senses, when a term is used in an absolute sense, a barrier is being brought down against the understanding. Absolute goodness, Holland holds, is an essential mystery. It naturally invites the idea of other-worldliness: it requires “an attitude to the world to be expressed by speaking of something beyond the world” (AE, 85). This involves a picture: a picture of something beyond. However, it is essential to this picture that one cannot say what lies beyond. We have to wait for it, as it were. The sense would only come from without, by revelation, and this is another related image. Again, the image contains the idea of something we essentially cannot influence. We thus have here another sense of necessary indirection. This time saying that an indirection is essential does not describe a practice, but figuratively asserts the existence of a conceptual impossibility, a barrier against the understanding. We can utter the words, but at best that would only be talking indirectly—as if through someone else’s grace. There is thus meaning beyond that which our language can contain. By themselves, our words could only be an empty shell, and that barrier against the understanding is brought down by the very nature of language.

As Holland recognizes, his claims will not convince everyone. If one were unwilling on theoretical grounds to allow that serious moral thinking can take the form of extensive figurative employment of forms of words, one would in effect be dogmatically rejecting, and perhaps refusing to recognize, some genuine phenomena. However, it might still seem opaque to some (Holland seems to believe that it would be opaque to most moral philosophers) what willingness to allow for such essentially imaginative moral thinking would mean. In other words, one may not be able to share Holland’s views, having no inclination to appeal to Holland’s images. Such a person might find other images more appealing, or she might try to teach herself to use Holland’s images. But nothing short of

a revelation, nothing she can do by her own self would make the language of absolute value necessary for her. This is essential; it goes to characterize the situation grammatically: There is a barrier set against the understanding here, and bringing that barrier into full view is an essential part of drawing the contours of the language of absolute value.³⁰

XII.

Cora Diamond once wrote that “it is not a plain business finding how to write illuminatingly about human experience.”³¹ Using Diamond’s methods, I hope I have shown that the difficulties of drawing the limits of thought and language are part of the problem.

³⁰ According to Holland, there is an abyss between religious and non-religious views of value. Elizabeth Anscombe, Dorothea Krook, Peter Winch, Raimond Gaita, and others have articulated intermediate positions. It seems to me worth asking whether the gap could be completely bridged, and not less importantly, whether it should.

³¹ “Having a Rough Story about What Moral Philosophy Is,” *The Realistic Spirit*, Cambridge, Mass: MIT, 1991, pp. 367-81, p. 379.