Wittgensteinian Approaches to Moral Philosophy

Introduction

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While Wittgenstein's moral convictions represent one of the more fascinating features of the man, they are not usually associated with his undeniable impact both inside and outside the discipline of philosophy. Two main reasons for this are (1) that Wittgenstein's explicit remarks on ethics are (with the exception of the *Lecture on Ethics*) short, scarce and scattered, and (2) his repeated suggestion that the very enterprise of doing moral philosophy is deeply problematic and may even be impossible.

These obstacles have not prevented scholars from nevertheless trying to spell out Wittgenstein's ethical views. The scarcity of remarks on ethics opens up a lot of room for interpretation, which could be seen as a lack, but also as an invitation. As a result, accounts of Wittgenstein's ethical views are highly divergent. Wittgenstein has been associated with almost the entire spectrum of –isms in contemporary ethical theory (although, ironically, no one disputes that he had no theoretical aspirations): relativism, realism and anti-realism, cognitivism and non-cognitivism, naturalism and non-naturalism, intuitionism, emotivism, projectivism, particularism, individualism, solipsism and quietism. The only common ground between commentators seems to be that Wittgenstein eschewed reductionism and scientism in moral philosophy as elsewhere, and that he did not offer normative guidance in the form of a decision procedure that could help us to solve moral problems, to decide what to do in particular cases.

Not only are there considerable differences between accounts of Wittgenstein's ethical views, these views are also very differently assessed. While some think that we have much to learn from Wittgenstein's remarks about ethics, others find these remarks puzzling and obscure. Some have been irritated by religious and mystical elements in them or accuse Wittgenstein of aestheticizing ethics. While Wittgenstein scholars are often quick to stress how important Wittgenstein's remarks on a certain topic are, they do not agree at all in their evaluation of Wittgenstein's ethical views. Hans-Johann Glock, for instance, writes that "as a philosophical dialectician, Wittgenstein was a genius. But as a moral mentor and cultural critic he was a loose canon." It remains an open question whether Wittgenstein's moral convictions are philosophically defensible.

Even if one thinks that Wittgenstein's explicit remarks on ethics are not very interesting or illuminating, the question as to the relevance of Wittgenstein for moral philosophy does not have to be answered in the negative. The title of this special issue is not "Wittgenstein's moral philosophy", but

"Wittgensteinian Approaches to Moral Philosophy". Instead of focusing on Wittgenstein's explicitly stated ethical views, one could look at other aspects of his work and assess their possible relevance for moral philosophy. One could think here, first, about the usefulness of introducing some of Wittgenstein's terminology into the moral discourse: for example, one could speak of moral language-games and forms of life, moral aspect-seeing and moral blindness, moral certainty, family resemblance concepts, … Second, one could look into the consequences of some of Wittgenstein's arguments for moral philosophy: meaning as use and the private language argument, for example, or the remarks about rule-following and their relevance for our understanding of what it means to follow moral rules. Third, some of the things Wittgenstein emphasizes again and again seem to merit some emphasis in moral philosophy, too: the importance of training and learning, the embeddedness of speaking and acting in concrete situations, the fact that justification comes to an end, the impossibility of an external standpoint or "view from nowhere" in philosophy, the social setting of communication and subjectivity, and the influence of contingent general facts of nature on our ways of thinking and behaving.

If we seek to apply Wittgenstein's views in new domains, what ultimately counts is that they help to improve our thinking in these domains. Maybe they will thereby lose some of their purity and become *Wittgensteinian* ideas or approaches instead of *Wittgenstein's* ideas or approaches. As philosophers, we should be courageous enough to transgress that border. It is easy to repeat what Wittgenstein has said, but far more difficult to understand it and explain it to others. The real challenge is to show that one has learned from him, that one is able to stand on one's own philosophical feet and to tackle new problems with the help of Wittgensteinian tools. That means that one should take the risk of doing things in philosophy that Wittgenstein might very well not have approved of in order to move forward, and thereby attempt to accomplish something he might have approved of.

Wittgenstein's views on ethics and other topics are possible starting points for Wittgensteinian approaches to moral philosophy. Another strategy is not to start with certain views or ideas of Wittgenstein in specific philosophical domains, but with Wittgenstein's philosophical *methods.* It is, of course, difficult and not always possible to separate views from methods. For our purposes, it suffices to say that methods are general ways to approach, deal with or think about a certain class of problems, while views are mostly the result of applying methods to problems.

Applying Wittgensteinian methods to questions and problems in moral philosophy could consist, for example, in showing that the questions cannot be meaningfully formulated in the first place and that the problems are pseudo-problems, that we have failed to distinguish between conceptual and empirical or scientific questions and investigations, that we have been misled by certain analogies between the forms of expression in different regions of our language, that we have misunderstood the logic of our language, that we did not see clearly the actual application of certain words and lack an

overview of their use, that we have been held captive by pictures, that all the parties in a debate dogmatically share certain unwarranted presuppositions and assumptions, and so on.

We have indicated so far that there are at least three common ways to approach problems in moral philosophy that qualify as "Wittgensteinian", although we certainly do not want to restrict the application of the latter term to the approaches we have mentioned. (1) One could start from Wittgenstein's ethical views and try to work them out in order to develop a more detailed and systematic account of them than Wittgenstein himself did. (2) One could try to apply some of his views or arguments concerning other topics in moral philosophy. (3) One could approach problems in moral philosophy with some of his general methodological directions in mind. Each of these paths harbours certain difficulties, and none of them are easy to traverse. They are not incompatible: a Wittgensteinian approach could combine them, and most of the authors in this issue do so. Our and their intention has been not to restrict discussion to the ascertainment and further development of Wittgenstein's own ethical views, but to encourage an experimental attitude toward ethical and moral dilemmas in a Wittgensteinian sense.

What many of the authors represented here also do is compare their conception of what a Wittgensteinian approach would be to others' conceptions of such an approach, as well as draw connections to and critique other figures already in the contemporary discourse of moral philosophy. They thereby explicitly situate their work not only within the rich tradition of Wittgenstein scholarship, they also show what place a Wittgensteinian approach occupies in the context of debates in moral philosophy where Wittgenstein has been largely absent. Their work and interests traverse across different philosophical traditions, both moving from Wittgenstein in the direction of a more general ethical discourse as well as from this general discourse toward Wittgensteinian ideas.

Wittgensteinians are sometimes accused of isolating themselves, of locking themselves up in their own world, of endlessly debating each other's work on Wittgenstein while remaining aloof from debates that concern the larger philosophical community. These accusations are justified when Wittgensteinians treat other thinkers as if they are only of interest insofar as they have influenced or were influenced by Wittgenstein. It is at least as crucial, however, to confront Wittgenstein with thinkers to which he is not, or much less directly, related. Authors in this issue have, with laudable disregard for the distinction between continental and analytical philosophy, staged conversations with philosophers from different times and traditions such as Aristotle, Bourdieu, Diamond, Hobbes, Hooker, Kant, Levinas, Løgstrup, McDowell and Nietzsche. These conversations bear upon issues concerning such topics as the necessity of moral aims, justifications, and explanations, the possibility of meta-ethics, the constitutive role of practices, whether moral certainty can exist, the sources of moral obligation, and so on.

The sheer breath of topics and thinkers brought into contact with one another in the contributions assembled for this special issue is a testament to the ideas it embodies and the project it is trying to move forward. The authors show, moreover, how confronting Wittgenstein with other thinkers helps to bring out strengths and weaknesses on both sides. Wittgensteinians sometimes forget that Wittgenstein was a human being and that, therefore, his thought has its weaknesses, and they will often be inclined to criticize other philosophers from a Wittgensteinian perspective rather than the other way round (although, knowing Wittgenstein well, they are excellently placed to criticize him). As a consequence, Wittgenstein is all too often criticized by those not very familiar with his works, for the wrong reasons and with the wrong arguments, which may make it seem to non-Wittgensteinians as if his thought had been definitively disqualified or superseded. Several authors in this issue, though deeply convinced of Wittgenstein's relevance for moral philosophy, do not hesitate to criticise him when needed, and such honest assessments seem to us more respectful than almost unconditional admiration.

By introducing Wittgensteinian ideas in new contexts and showing the contribution they can make there, the authors in this issue engage in the attempt to open Wittgenstein's thought to moral philosophers. While we are convinced that the present issue will be of interest to Wittgenstein scholars, we hope in the first place that it will appeal to moral philosophers who had not previously considered the possibility of using Wittgensteinian ideas in their work or had not previously been persuaded by their power to improve our thinking in moral philosophy.

Let us now turn to a brief overview of the articles collected here. It has been our aim to present a varied collection. Many edited volumes on Wittgenstein demonstrate a preference for one or another school or strand of interpretation. While one can hardly avoid having preferences in this respect, and some agreement in interpretation can lend unity to a collection of articles, we have deliberately decided to go with plurality over a more unified treatment, and the plural "approaches" in our title is meant to underline that choice. The main reason for choosing plurality over unity is that we believe that Wittgenstein's thought can contribute to moral philosophy in a variety of different ways. There is not just one method or way of approaching moral problems that counts as Wittgensteinian. Furthermore, we do not want to push people in one or another direction of interpretation. Instead, we see great potential in the engagement in an open dialogue and exchange with other schools of thought and disciplines.

In "Relational Views of Ethical Obligation in Wittgenstein, Lévinas and Løgstrup", Anne-Marie Christensen distinguishes between two views of ethical obligation: individualistic and relational. The former places the source of ethical obligation in the individual, and is exemplified in the ideas of Hume, Kant and Rawls. The latter contends that the source and binding force of ethical obligation lies in our relation to something outside of us, and is typified by figures like Levinas, Sartre, Løgstrup and

Wittgenstein. Although Christensen sees a shift taking place between Wittgenstein's earlier and later ethical views, she contends that both can rightly be called relational.

Christensen treats Wittgenstein's moral thought not only as an example of a relational view of ethical obligation, and thus as providing an answer or exemplifying a view in debates about the source of ethical obligation, she also uses it because it helps to formulate certain challenges that relational views are confronted with. She claims that Wittgenstein confronts us with two main challenges: (1) what she refers to as the "make it personal"-challenge, and (2) the "content"-challenge. The "make it personal"-challenge arises when we ask: if ethical obligation arises from the outside, then why would a subject be interested in or motivated by it? Levinas provides an answer to this challenge in that it is only by taking on moral obligation that human beings become subjects, thus ethical obligation is always personal in the relevant sense. However, according to Christensen, Levinas cannot adequately address the "content"-challenge. This challenge emerges when we realize that, because ethical obligation arises from a particular relation to something else, the content of the obligation will crucially depend on that particular relation or that specific "something else". The question then is: how can we, in concrete cases, establish the content of the ethical obligation that we face? For an answer to this question, Christensen turns to the Danish philosopher K. E. Løgstrup, who helps us to provide content in concrete cases by asking us to "care for the other person in a way that best serves his or her interest". It is through the mutual interdependency in a trusting relationship that one grasps his or her obligation to the other given one's particular finitude and limitations.

What Christensen calls a relational view of ethical obligation is closely related to the "I-you"-perspective discussed in Joel Backström's "Of Dictators and Greengrocers. On the Repressive Grammar of Values-Discourse". Backström calls into question an almost ubiquitous assumption regarding the fundamental status of values in morality. Although he does not deny that values are indeed pervasive in moral life, Backström does not view them as "original phenomena", but instead as repressive responses to a sense of good and evil beyond values. It is this sense of good and evil, relating to the direct encounter between individual human beings, that is basic to morality, and because this sense of good and evil cannot be reduced to valuation, values are not as basic as one might think. Moreover, values-discourse is inherently morally problematic and dangerous, because it is interwoven with social pressure, neglect of the other, self-aggrandizement, moralism, relativism and even narcissism.

Backström takes his approach to be "basically Wittgensteinian in spirit". Instead of taking sides in a debate or trying to answer a question, he aims to uncover an assumption shared by all those who ask certain questions about value. He also defends Wittgenstein's methodological maxim that philosophy should be purely descriptive, protecting it against the charge that it calls for moral neutrality

or conservatism by showing that it is compatible with the possibility of criticizing current moral practices. (It is conspicuous, in this regard, that none of the authors in this issue sides with the often-heard charge that doing moral philosophy in a Wittgensteinian spirit would have to leave our moral practices untouched or keep our moral lives as they are.) Lastly, like Wittgenstein, Backström insists on the importance of speaking for oneself in ethics, yet he also criticizes Wittgenstein for failing "to make the crucial connection to the second person", a connection that Backström's "I-you"-perspective, stressing the unmediated, mutual moral responsiveness between human beings, is meant to bring to the fore. It should be noted here that, while Backström criticizes Wittgenstein for failing to make the connection to the second person, Christensen sees this connection as prominently present in Wittgenstein's later work, more specifically in its relational approach to language.

Benjamin De Mesel critically examines a set of closely interconnected claims about "Wittgenstein, Meta-Ethics and the Subject Matter of Moral Philosophy" made by Cora Diamond, Duncan Richter, Lars Hertzberg, Stephen Mulhall and James Conant. Taken together, these claims are expressive of a way of reading Wittgenstein that the author finds problematic. The first of these claims is that, according to Wittgenstein, ethics has no particular subject matter. Arguments for this statement often start from the observation that both moral language and the moral landscape are far more varied than we tend to think. It does not follow from this, however, as some commentators maintain, that there is no moral vocabulary or that ethics has no particular subject matter. Moreover, Wittgenstein explicitly talks about "the subject matter of ethics" in his *Lecture on Ethics.* Those who think that, according to Wittgenstein, ethics has no particular subject matter, are bound to offer a convincing interpretation of what Wittgenstein says here. The second claim criticized in this article is that, according to Wittgenstein, there can be no such thing as meta-ethics. De Mesel shows how that claim depends on a conception of meta-ethics as a normatively neutral enterprise that most contemporary meta-ethicists do not share.

The third claim is that "ethical" is a classification by use and not a classification by subject matter. Here, De Mesel argues that the suggestion of a conflict or opposition between subject matter and use is mistaken in the light of Wittgenstein's "meaning is use". Apart from a characterization by use, another alternative to a characterization by subject matter is to think about ethics, as the fourth claim asks us to do, as a pervasive dimension of life rather than a distinguishable region or strand of it. The problem is again that there is no conflict here: that something is pervasive does not mean that it is not distinguishable. Moreover, if the ethical were not distinguishable, if it could not be specified or demarcated in any way, our notion of what counts as ethical threatens to become rather empty.

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Like De Mesel, Hans-Johann Glock is mainly concerned with how Wittgenstein should and should not be read. In "Wittgensteinian Anti-Anti Realism – One 'Anti' Too Many?", he argues that attempts to use Wittgenstein's views on language in order to defend forms of realism and cognitivism in ethics fail both exegetically and substantively. According to Glock, Wittgenstein's remarks on ethics clearly point in the direction of what he calls communal or communitarian variants of expressivism and relativism. He agrees with Backström that Wittgenstein's ethical views are egocentric, that they display "a tendency to ignore the perspective of others". He therefore prefers to take Wittgenstein's influential reflections on language and the nature of philosophy as his point of departure. The problem is, however, that these reflections have inspired irreconcilable views. First, they have played a role both in the reduction of moral philosophy to meta-ethics in the works of Ayer, Stevenson and Hare and in the rehabilitation of normative ethics in the 1950s and 1960s by von Wright, Anscombe, Murdoch and Foot. Second, while some (John McDowell and Sabina Lovibond, for instance) have thought that they support kinds of realism or cognitivism, and more specifically so-called "anti-anti-realism" (AAR), others (Simon Blackburn, for instance) have claimed them in support of anti-realism or non-cognitivism.

Glock focuses mainly on the second point. Defenders of AAR, he says, invoke Wittgenstein's claims on particular topics, notably truth, rather than his methods. While the early Wittgenstein's account of truth can best be characterized as an obtainment theory of truth (and not, as is commonly thought, as a correspondence theory), the later Wittgenstein's account of truth is deflationary. On such an account, there is no problem in saying that moral statements like "Killing is wrong" are truth-apt. As far as truth is concerned, indicative moral statements are in the same boat as other indicative statements. That does not mean, however, that all propositions that can be called "true" or "false" have the same semantic status, and Glock accuses supporters of anti-anti-realism of drawing precisely that conclusion.

In "Second Nature, *Habitus,* and the Ethical. Remarks on Wittgenstein and Bourdieu", Sabina Lovibond offers a comparative discussion of Wittgenstein and Bourdieu. She welcomes Bourdieu's project of "using sociological inquiry to facilitate social critique", but wants to distinguish this commendable aspect of his thought from certain problematic views in what could be called Bourdieu's philosophy of mind. Her way of working is similar to what Christensen does with Levinas and Wittgenstein: Lovibond sees Bourdieu and Wittgenstein as allies up to a certain point, but concludes that Bourdieu cannot provide a satisfactory answer to certain questions or challenges that a Wittgensteinian perspective, inspired by his remarks on rule-following and the non-theoretical character of philosophy, invites her to raise.

Bourdieu and Wittgenstein share the idea that rule-governed, socially informed activity is grounded in our natural history, the Aristotelian insight (recently expounded by McDowell) that "our

first (biological) nature is such that we are not complete as humans until we have acquired a 'second' (largely social) nature, comprising a repertoire of rational capacities". As such, "natural behaviour" does not stand in opposition to "learned behaviour". Human life is, naturally, such that we have to be initiated, through training and habit, into what could be called forms of social life. Both Bourdieu and Wittgenstein understand our ability to follow rules, to act on instructions, "to operate in the manifest world of normativity", as a natural ability. Yet, whereas Wittgenstein sees no need to supplement our ability to understand and follow linguistic norms, rules or instructions with a distinct kind of normativity, Bourdieu holds that it rests on or is mediated by a level of normativity located "below" the level of articulate thought. Bourdieu's conception of *habitus* as a spontaneity without consciousness or will, and his talk about a species of belief that is "not a state of mind, but rather a state of the body" are questionable, according to Lovibond, because they seem to stand in the way of (much needed) critical reflection on our second nature. Bourdieu's thought threatens to deterministically foreclose possibilities of social critique, because it sharply separates the level of habitual behaviour from the level of consciousness.

As in Lovibond's article, considerations concerning rule-following and what is natural for human beings are also prominent in Michel Meliopoulos's "Does Morality Have a Point?" Meliopoulos proceeds "from the assumption that moral discourse is best conceived of as a practice in the technical sense specified by John Rawls", and sets out to evaluate the merits of a legislative perspective on the constitutive rules of that practice. He discusses two contemporary projects in normative ethics that offer such a perspective and show that both of them run into particular difficulties. The first, neo-Hobbesian contractarianism, understands morality as restricted by instrumental rationality, and holds that "morality cannot ask us to do anything that rationality would not allow and that rationality has to be understood in the more or less well-known instrumentalist way". The second kind of legislative perspective can be found in Brad Hooker's rule-consequentialism. While contractarianism evaluates the practice of morality from the perspective of what it considers to be more important, namely instrumentalist rationality, rule-consequentialism evaluates common morality with respect to its alleged point, purpose or *telos*: the production of good consequences.

Meliopoulos confronts these legislative perspectives on morality with the idea that morality is a teleologically autonomous practice, that is, the idea that its constitutive rules are not assessable from an independent perspective. According to the autonomist position, the analogy between morality and the law breaks down at certain important points. Morality is not in need of justification. It may be thought that autonomism is incompatible with ethical naturalism, understood as the attempt to base ethics on considerations of human nature, but Meliopoulos shows, drawing upon Wittgenstein's remarks on rule-

following and general facts of human nature, that these worries are unwarranted, because there is a fundamental difference between saying that (human) nature has influenced the shape of our moral practice and justifying moral practice by referring to facts of human nature. As Wittgenstein repeatedly emphasizes, justification comes to an end. That does not mean that there is no such thing as justifying one's behaviour, but only that not every demand for a reason or justification is legitimate.

Similar questions about justification play a major role in Nigel Pleasants's contribution "If Killing Isn't Wrong, Then Nothing Is. A Naturalistic Defence of Basic Moral Certainty". Pleasants has previously argued that Wittgenstein's observations of empirical certainty, and his distinction between certainty and knowledge, as they appear in *On Certainty*, can fruitfully be transferred to the moral domain. That is, some of our true moral beliefs that are susceptible to justification, challenge and doubt can properly be called "moral knowledge", while some things of which we are certain and which are immune to justification, challenge and doubt are more aptly described as "basic moral certainties" or should at least be distinguished from the former class of beliefs. These basic moral certainties "cannot be sensefully asserted, explained, justified, questioned, or denied first-personally".

Pleasants's article is a reply to two points made by his critics. First, some of them accept Wittgenstein's idea of basic empirical certainty, but argue that moral certainty is significantly disanalogous to empirical certainty. Second, some critics claim that what is morally certain in one moral language-game may be rejected or absent in another. Pleasants contends, however, that basic moral certainty does exist, and transcends history, culture and moral language-games. It is universal, natural and grounded in our biological and social nature, and Pleasants sides with Lovibond and Meliopoulos in that he applauds this Wittgensteinian naturalism. What is learned and variable are not moral certainties, but the discourses through which people come to accept exceptions to and suspensions of their basic moral certainty. What is relative are beliefs on what counts as killing, not the wrongness of killing as such.

We would like to end this introduction by expressing our gratitude to all those who have helped to make this issue possible. The idea for this special issue has its roots in a conference we organized (together with Stefan Rummens) at the KU Leuven in 2013, entitled "Wittgensteinian Approaches to Moral Philosophy". Although several (though not all) of the articles published here were first presented at that conference, all contributions were subject to a process of blind peer review. To this end, we were pleased to have so many contributions accepted. Furthermore, given that the conference was the impetus for this issue, we would like to extend our gratitude to our sponsors (the Flanders Research Foundation, the Centre for Ethics, Social and Political Philosophy and the Doctoral Commission of the Institute of

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