

BOOK REVIEWS

Editor: Martin Gustafsson

Wittgenstein's Moral Thought
edited by Reshef Agam-Segal and
Edmund Dain

Daniel Sharp

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Wittgenstein's Moral Thought assembles ten original essays which are, according to its editors, united by the “basic conviction” that “Wittgenstein’s work has something important to contribute to our understanding of moral or ethical thought” (1).¹ It is easy to share this conviction; it is more difficult to identify what exactly Wittgenstein’s contributions to ethics are. The volume, to its credit, contains a rich variety of distinct and sometimes incompatible proposals about what exactly Wittgenstein has to teach

us about ethics. This review assesses the most provocative proposals, though regrettably it can neither discuss all the volume’s suggestions nor give each its due.² I first consider those answers which draw primarily on Wittgenstein’s early work, and then turn to those which draw primarily on Wittgenstein’s latter work.³

The Early Wittgenstein

What does the early Wittgenstein have to teach us about ethics? The volume offers a plethora of answers. In order

¹ All citations are to *Wittgenstein's Moral Thought* unless otherwise indicated.

² I focus on the positive proposals the volume offers, rather than its many interpretive discussions. In addition, I neglect two pieces: Eli Friedlander “Logic, Ethics and Existence in Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*” and Kirstin Boyce’s “Logic, Ethics, Aesthetics: Wittgenstein and the Transcendental”, both of which discuss the sense in which ethics is “transcendental”. Friedlander’s largely

interpretive essay links the ethical with the recognition of the “unquestionable”. Boyce’s essay draws on Anscombe and Diamond to argue that aesthetics is also transcendental. Boyce’s contribution is highly original, but strays quite far from Wittgenstein’s texts.

³ This does not exactly mirror the volume’s structure, as many contributions span both periods and comment on the development of Wittgenstein’s thought.

to better survey them, it is important to distinguish three distinct though interconnected questions: What does Wittgenstein's philosophy have to teach us about

- (1) the nature of ethics and moral psychology?
- (2) philosophical reflection about ethics?
- (3) how to live together?

The first question is (roughly) meta-ethical; the second, methodological; the third, normative. The essays which concentrate on the early philosophy largely (and understandably) focus on the first. Initially, the pessimistic answer – that the early Wittgenstein has little to teach us about the nature of ethics – might seem appealing. After all, one might argue, Wittgenstein's view of ethics changes dramatically, rendering his “earlier views on ethics obsolete” (25). Many contributors question this understanding of the development of Wittgenstein's views on ethics, emphasizing the relationship between Wittgenstein's early and later thought is more continuous than one might think. Do they succeed in dispelling pessimism?

The most radical view of this kind is Edmund Dain's, whose essay, “Wittgenstein's Moral Thought”, offers a lucid reconstruction of the early Wittgenstein's argument that “there can be no moral or ethical propositions” (20). Dain's reconstruction rests on “just three premises”: (1) Ethical propositions (if there are any) hold necessarily; (2) all genuine propositions are bipolar, i.e. can be

conceived of as either being true or false; and (3) the negation of what is necessary is inconceivable. Dain maintains that Wittgenstein never *really* abandons this argument.

Dain is certainly correct that “*if* Wittgenstein does change his views about ethics, that change cannot be explained *merely* by pointing to his talk of language games” (29). But, to my mind, Wittgenstein abandons all three of Dain's premises. I am not alone in this opinion. Oskari Kuusela, in his contribution, “Wittgenstein, Ethics and Philosophical Clarification”, argues that the later Wittgenstein gives up the idea that ethics “should have a single common essence” (51). Instead, Wittgenstein comes to see that the “complex unity” of the concept of good consists in “the various relationships between” its uses (52). The point applies broadly: it implies giving up on the claim that the essence of the ethical lies in its necessity. In this light, the simple opposition – relative or absolute value – comes to look inadequate to capture the range of moral evaluation we engage in, for there are different *uses* of “necessity” and “absolute”, too. A similar move seems to occur with bipolarity (see PI, §134–138). Here, Wittgenstein rejects the claim that there is only one kind of “proposition” – the kind described by the *Tractatus* – endorsing instead the position that “proposition” is a family resemblance concept. And, while Dain is right to emphasize that some part of the third claim may be preserved *via* the idea of a “grammatical proposition”, Wittgen-

stein certainly never claims that *all* ethical claims are grammatical propositions in this sense.⁴

Still, even if Wittgenstein abandons the view that the ethical is inexpressible, his early work may have something to teach us. Agam-Segal's essay, "Moral Thought in Wittgenstein: Clarity and Changes of Attitude", argues that the notions of moral clarity and attitude change are Wittgenstein's main contributions to moral philosophy (67). There is much to be said for this line: clarification and attitude change do remain important throughout Wittgenstein's thought. However, as Kuusela argues (51–53), Wittgenstein's rejection of the search for a common essence in ethics also entails giving up the view that ethics is fundamentally a problem of the relationship between the will and the world. As a result, the particular kind of clarity the early Wittgenstein and Agam-Segal emphasize becomes less central for the later Wittgenstein. Although Agam-Segal notes that that the idea of an attitude change can be better understood by "reference to [Wittgenstein's] later discussion" (67), he fails to appreciate the differences between Wittgenstein's early views and his later ones.

Several of the contributors suggest, more promisingly, that Wittgenstein's key lesson is that ethics "lacks a subject matter". Nevertheless, they offer different interpretations of this thesis. Duncan

Richter's "Sketches of Blurred Landscapes: Wittgenstein and Ethics", elucidates the no subject matter thesis by contrasting Wittgenstein's position with G.E. Moore's claim that ethics is about the simple property "goodness". Richter argues that "Wittgenstein [early and late] denies that words like 'good' denote anything" (167), although for different reasons. However, this version of the 'no subject matter claim' is not particularly controversial: *no one* (to my knowledge) endorses Moore's view these days. Agam-Segal advances a more ambitious view, arguing that ethics lacks a subject matter because *any* proposition or utterance may be morally clarifying. Surely, there is insight in this. However, one may come to grasp something *about* a subject matter without citing a truth *within* that subject matter; so, the conclusion – the no subject matter thesis – doesn't follow from the premise – anything can be clarificatory. Perhaps Wittgenstein, early and late, endorses a version of the no subject matter thesis on which the ethical, to use Dain's words, "does not consist of a specific body of truths" (22). Attributing this (anti-realist) claim to Wittgenstein would require further argument. In any case, though, that ethics lacks a subject matter in this technical sense is compatible with its having a subject matter in the non-technical sense – e.g., it is about living well.

⁴ Even if Wittgenstein endorses some of these premises, it is clear he rejects the conclusion. Indeed, his remarks about the variety of *ethical*

meanings that terms like "good" might have are unintelligible without it.

Where does this leave matters with respect to Wittgenstein's early work? On the one hand, Wittgenstein's early work contains a restrictive conception of both ethics and language. It is uncontroversial that Wittgenstein abandons the latter, but it seems to me equally evident that he abandons the former. And rightly so. As Joel Backstöm emphasizes in his contribution, "From Nonsense to Openness: Wittgenstein on Moral Sense", Wittgenstein's early conception of ethics is unduly solipsistic and largely neglects that ethics is *intersubjective*: about one's relationship to *other people*. This, Backstöm argues, is a distorting picture of the nature of moral life, one which the latter Wittgenstein's thought allows us to challenge. While Backstöm's position is not unassailable – Kevin Cahill's contribution, "An Exclusively Self-Regarding Ethics: Response to Sluga", provides a partial rebuttal – the more moderate claim that the early Wittgenstein pays insufficient attention to intersubjectivity is beyond dispute. If neither his conception of ethics, nor of language, nor his claim that the ethical is inexpressible survive into the later period, then it seems the pessimistic answer holds: we have little to learn about ethics from Wittgenstein's early work. On the other hand, the early Wittgenstein's work emphasizes certain themes important to the later work. Despite the fact that these important themes – e.g., attitudinal change and the importance of clarity – only blossom later, one can only fully appreciate their later form by tracing their

development, as many of the contributions admirably do. Moreover, Wittgenstein's early writings contain criticisms of some meta-ethical views – most notably Moore's – which are worth serious consideration, whether or not one endorses them. Beyond these limited, if important, claims, the contributors haven't, to my mind, made the case that we have much to learn about ethics from the early Wittgenstein. So, we have grounds for qualified (if not absolute) pessimism.

The Later Wittgenstein

Matters are different when we turn to Wittgenstein's later philosophy. In this case, perhaps unsurprisingly, the varied proposals about what lessons one can take from the Wittgenstein's thought are considerably more compelling. Again, most (though in this case not all) of the answers on offer concern the nature of ethics and moral psychology, and it is best to begin with these.

One theme that is emphasized, by both Kuusela and Richter, is the multiplicity of uses that ethical terms have. This was a point the middle and later Wittgenstein himself was keen to emphasize, particularly about the term "good" (PI, §77). Richter emphasizes that this plurality of uses of "good" entails a rejection of the Moorean view of goodness as a simple property. Kuusela notes that the alternative picture Wittgenstein provides is one in which ethical terms are "bound up" with the plurality of language-games in which they may figure. As a result, Kuusela argues, we not only ought to

expect a Wittgensteinian ethics to accommodate a wide variety of types of moral assessment, we also ought to doubt that these types of moral assessment will be explicable in a uniform manner, as some moral theories (e.g., classical utilitarianism) would have it.

A second theme, emphasized again by Kuusela, concerns the nature of moral justification. Kuusela ascribes two interesting views about moral justification to Wittgenstein. First, successful moral justification – A justifying a moral claim C to some person B – requires there to be at least some “common ground” between discussants, since “giving reasons aims at [...] making another ‘see what you see’” (60). This picture of justification as requiring a common ground also follows from the more ambitious claim, defended by Backström, that the latter Wittgenstein conceives of ethics as something inherently “between us” or intersubjective.⁵ Furthermore, Kuusela ascribes to Wittgenstein the view that moral justification is by its nature “inconclusive”, since there is no “external” justification that takes us beyond any ethical outlook (57–59). Yet, Kuusela maintains that these claims do not imply relativism. Ethical frameworks can be altered and transformed, and there is “no need to think on the Wittgensteinian account that we would be able to judge cases [only] from the point of whatever

ethical framework one might be assuming” (62). This seems to me quite correct. However, it remains unclear whether this amounts to a denial of relativism or just a sophisticated and perhaps unobjectionable form of it.⁶

A further question raised by the volume is whether Wittgenstein’s emphasis on context sensitivity and pluralism implies a sort of particularism, on which moral principles have little or no role to play in moral life. In “Perception, Perspectives, and Moral Necessity: Wittgenstein, Winch, and the Good Samaritan”, Martin Gustafsson criticizes Peter Winch’s Wittgensteinian reading of the aforementioned biblical parable. Gustafsson rejects Winch’s conclusion that ethical expertise consists in an unmediated perceptual grasp of what is to be done. Instead, he maintains that a Wittgensteinian ethics can make room for both moral principles and moral sensitivity. It offers a picture on which “the law without sensibility is empty [and] sensibility without law is blind” (219). Christensen’s “What is Ethical Cannot Be Taught’ – Moral Theories as Descriptions of Moral Grammar”, broaches the issue as well, and is more sympathetic towards particularism (176–177).

However, Christensen’s primary aim is methodological: to sketch an alternative, Wittgensteinian conception of what doing moral philosophy

⁵ I find the basic suggestion intriguing, though I have qualms with Backström’s particular development of it. See Darwall (2006) for a different take.

⁶ For a proponent of sophisticated relativism, see Velleman (2013).

amounts to. Taking inspiration from Gordon Baker's reading of grammar, Christensen argues that traditional moral theories can be understood as descriptions of moral grammar. However, no moral theory is "the description of *the* grammar" of morality. Instead, each is a partial, "particular representations" of morality, selecting out certain features and not others. Thus, Wittgensteinian moral philosophers needn't *reject* moral theories. They can reinterpret substantive moral theories as reminders of particular aspects of moral life. Christensen's suggestion is appealing, in that it allows Wittgensteinian philosophers to hang on to the important insights embedded in substantive moral theories, while tempering their pretensions to totality. Still, one might wonder what it means to understand moral philosophy as a descriptive rather than a normative enterprise. After all, what is being described – moral life – *is* a normative phenomenon. Moreover, Christensen emphasizes that "the very activity of describing a particular form of moral grammar itself influences our understanding of what is moral" (190). As a result, it remains somewhat unclear what the distinction between her *descriptive* approach and a *normative* moral theory that is pluralist or particularist in nature.

As illustrated, the essays treating Wittgenstein's latter work offer many potentially fruitful suggestions. Surely, they will be greeted warmly by receptive Wittgensteinians. But one need not be a Wittgensteinian to

endorse many of the views expressed. Many (though certainly not all) contemporary moral philosophers agree that morality is deeply pluralistic – that it involves different kinds of assessment (Scanlon 2008) and appeals to many distinct values (Heathwood 2015) – that acting well requires moral sensitivity (Herman 2007), that morality is partially intersubjective in nature (Darwall 2006), and that any moral "theory" will highly intricate and complex. The volume could have benefited from more sustained engagement with these discussions. A further front on which the volume could have expanded brings us back to the third sense of our guiding question: what does Wittgenstein's work have to teach us about how to live together, practically? Duncan Richter tells us that a Wittgenstein approach to this question would not consist in describing the various uses of right and good but rather "might clarify or remind us of the differences we care about" – such as particular aspects of "our relationships" with others (170–171). It would have been helpful to see this approach in action; that is, to see exhibited what a Wittgensteinian 'applied ethics' might look like. To have achieved both these tasks, in addition to elucidating Wittgenstein's own remarks on ethics, would have been too much to ask of a single volume. But I fear that, until Wittgensteinians do so, Wittgenstein's potential contributions to ethics will continue to be neglected by the wider philosophical community.

Nevertheless, *Wittgenstein's Moral Thought* is a timely volume on an important topic. It is full of intriguing proposals, and it will hopefully inspire further discussion of Wittgenstein's ethical thought. For that, we should thank its editors.

New York University,
USA
des361@nyu.edu

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