Ethical Inquiries after Wittgenstein edited by Salla Aldrin Salskov, Ondřej Beran and Nora Hämäläinen

Joel Backström

Salla Aldrin Salskov, Ondřej Beran and Nora Hämäläinen (eds.), *Ethical Inquiries after Wittgenstein.* Cham: Springer, 2022. 272 pp.

This collection contains many valuable and thought-provoking, if also variously problematic, contributions. Other recent anthologies in post-Wittgensteinian ethics have focused on Wittgenstein-exegesis (e.g. Agam-Segal & Dain 2018), or on methodology and metaethics (e.g. De Mesel & Kuusela 2019; Amesbury & von Sass 2021). This volume, the editors write, eschews exegesis and "comparisons with contemporary analytical ethics"; it doesn't aim for "a well-rounded normative philosophical 'account' of ethics, or of philosophical methodology", but focuses on "ground-up ethical reflection of cases as they present themselves […] in various areas of (social) practice", examining "examples and contexts", particularly "topics of an independent contemporary interest" (p. 2 f.). Furthermore, many contributions investigate "moral conceptions, perspectives and concepts that are undergoing change", thus challenging "synchronic and ahistorical" construals of moral "grammars" or "forms of life" (p. 18). The topical socio-conceptual changes discussed range from climate change (Ryan Manhire) and proposals for police and prison abolition (Naomi Scheman), to our relation to humanoid robots (Ondřej Beran) and even the changing place of tattooing in our culture (Michael Campbell).

The volume is thus even more emphatically "anti-theoretical" than post-Wittgensteinian ethics generally. If there's a general lesson here, the editors say, it concerns "what it means to pay attention to the contextual (to practices, to situations, to particularity)" (p. 3). Let me flag a potential problem with this particularism. Examples – the responses of real or fictional human beings to various situations – may certainly show moral possibilities we hadn't considered, revealing that what we suppose self-evident may manifest "particular, and problematic, ways of being human", "that how we see is shaped by where we stand, and that others, differently placed, will see differently, and often

more accurately" (Scheman, p. 154). However, examples don't speak for themselves, but only in dialogue with the understanding we bring to them. Examples are, as Lichtenberg (2013, 91) said of books, like mirrors, and if a monkey looks into one, a monkey will look back. (No offense to monkeys; cf. Anne LeGoff's chapter.) Examples afford illumination, are examples *of* something, only in relation to specific philosophical questions or confusions. A particular example may reveal, say, something about love or injustice one had overlooked. The importance of that one case comes, then, from the illumination is casts – if we allow it to – on life "in general", in an open-ended manner. There can thus be no question of concentrating on particular examples *rather than* on elaborating "general" philosophical perspectives, for the latter give the former their point. An inability to make sense of particular examples from within a given perspective is one way in which the perspective's limitations and distortions may be revealed, but examples have no meaning or importance in isolation from the larger quest for philosophical understanding.

I'll briefly discuss a few important general problematics raised, sometimes explicitly, sometimes unwittingly, by the volume. One concerns the sense in which moral difficulties and decisions are, to quote the title of Lars Hertzberg's contribution, "absolutely personal" (cf. also the Editors' Introduction, p. 14–15, and many other chapters), but are also in some sense formed by a conceptuality, a "grammar" that individuals inherit from their culture and that changes with the times. Nora Hämäläinen's discussion of changing conceptions of 'consent' in contemporary sexual life illustrates the difficulties and ambiguities here. As she notes, contrary to one campaign-slogan, "Saying no to sex is not like saying no to tea", because in sexual encounters, saying no (or yes) typically occurs "in relationships and situations where both parties are emotionally engaged and where complex, culturally shaped […] expectations are at play", so that a "no" can occasion "feelings that range from unease and awkwardness to frustration, rejection and hurt" (p. 159). In her subsequent discussion, however, Hämäläinen is nonetheless inclined to accept that the simplistic tea notion of consent is, or is fast becoming appropriate to our changing times, where sexual autonomy, gender equality, etc. are (officially) taken for granted, and "bit by bit, daily life becomes such that there is a place for a more demanding notion of sexual consent" – which is to say, for a simpler, black-and-white notion; "one that does not allow for the shades-of-grey register of persuasion, or for sexual entitlements based on situation or relationship status [of earlier times]" (p. 165). She also suggests that the proper business of philosophers is limited to registering and describing these changes, rejecting facile notions of linear "moral progress" and focusing instead on "the plurality of

moving parts in any process of moral change" (p. 169–170).

The last point is important, and describing what's going on properly is obviously key to any meaningful moral-philosophical critique. I think that there *is* room for such critique, however, and that Hämäläinen's *description* is unsatisfactory precisely insofar as she suggests that "understanding consent" really is becoming as "easy" as the tea conception implies (p. 170). Against this, I would say that the moral-emotional complexities and challenges of consent in intimate relations haven't disappeared or even been lessened by the important changes in social and legal norms surrounding the issue. They *could* disappear only if sex became an utter triviality. Our difficulties in sexual relations, tied to fears of various kinds, to shame, self-disgust, etc., often make it hard for us to listen to the other (to hear or accept their "no" or "yes") or to know (admit, explore) what we ourselves want. These difficulties cannot be solved by changing norms precisely because they are personal matters in the way moral difficulties are. Indeed, insofar as sexuality is about personal relations, it's an inherently moral matter (and note that *moralism* doesn't create this moral charge, but perverts and exploits it).

My claims may be challenged, of course; the point is simply that different conceptions of the personal character of sexual, and more generally moral matters will also change the significance one sees in, and the kind of description one gives of, changes in social mores – and one question this raises concerns the sense of speaking of *moral* changes in such collective contexts at all. This is one important tangle of questions raised by engagement with the book's contributions. It connects closely with the question, explicitly raised, in different forms, in many chapters, of how best to conceive of the individual's relation to the communally shaped *language* she speaks and in whose terms she learns to articulate moral matters. Niklas Forsberg suggests that this relationship is itself moral and personal in a way that undermines simplistic relativist notions of the individual's moral understanding being directly determined by "the language" (or "the culture"). In his view, and, he suggests, Wittgenstein's, "our uses of words, our efforts to reach out to each other and seek […] understanding, are, in a profound sense, moral" precisely insofar as they are (inter)personal: "*Your* effort to reach the other is not guaranteed by 'language'" and "when we encounter the need to reach out to one another in new ways, we change language" (p. 191). Similarly, Camilla Kronqvist writes that "our philosophy cannot be merely linguistic, it has to be explicitly moral", considering "what *moves* us to speak, and even more when it appears *necessary* for us [as individuals] to speak (what we feel we *cannot but* say, or what we feel we *must* say)" (p. 215).

Yet, such pronouncements may be in tension with other aspects of the book's philosophical interventions, as illustrated by Forsberg's own discussion of changes in the public discourses around, e.g., immigration

and national identity, and the role of alt-right actors in fomenting them. Starting from the observation that when we start "talking in new ways" this will "change what is possible (in a broad and loose sense of the term) to see, think and say" (p. 194), he poses a dilemma. On the one hand, "changes in our conceptual space", in "what we find important, laughable, sad, too cruel, and so on", which shape "the 'frames' of our conversational space", are "of far greater importance than quarrels within them"; "[t]he formation of a political 'we' is far more important than disagreements among 'us'" (p. 194–195). However, since such changes happen beneath "the level at which thinking […] itself takes place"; since "the level at which the decisive moves are made is not at the level of argument", it seems difficult to resist, or even become aware of them (p. 194; 199). But now what individuals think and how we "reach out to one another" would appear nonetheless, contrary to Forsberg's earlier suggestion, to be determined by changes in language that happen anonymously, beyond individual decision or awareness. However, Forsberg's own discussion partly contradicts this picture. He credits alt-right activists with having understood that "fundamental changes come about through hardly perceptible changes of the moral hue of our language", and having consciously set out to effect these changes, e.g., by "saying the intolerable […] so that the boundaries of what can be thought […] are moved" (p. 199). But if "our language" determines our thinking, how could these activists think the unthinkable, and then set about manipulating the language?

And, relatedly, from where does Forsberg himself speak? How can he even recognize the changes in the language that are taking place and remain unaffected enough by them to *judge* them, seeing here an instance of "how harmful seeds (such as violent and anti-democratic movements) can grow in good soil" (p. 189)? Similarly, in her discussion of newly emerging patterns of family life where, e.g., a child may have two mothers, Kronqvist presents our ability to "seek and find ways of re-envisioning what our words mean and creating alternative mythologies to picture our place in the world" as a positive possibility (p. 214). But from which perspective does one 'mythology' (one challenging 'heteronormativity', say) afford "grounds for radical hope", as Scheman says about prison abolition (p. 155), whereas another (say, that of the alt-right) appears as a moral threat? Surely, the contributors to the volume don't want to characterize this as just a matter of "preferences", but as they also – I think rightly – reject the idea that theoretical arguments could prove a moral position correct as "illusory", as Pär Segerdahl says (p. 187), then what provides the moral understanding in whose light changes are judged good or pernicious? How, or in what sense, may we speak of moral understanding or insight at all, and not merely of changes and differences?

As far as I can see, this crucial question isn't directly engaged with by anyone in the volume (cf. the editors' tentative, inconclusive remarks on realism and relativism at p. 11–14).

Here's a related problematic. The contributors to the volume presumably agree with Hertzberg's statement that post-Wittgensteinian ethics "does not aim to be action-guiding" in the sense of arguing for normative claims about what people should do, but rather "attempts to make us recognise ways in which we ourselves are inclined to act, react and judge" – ways that for some reason we apparently find it hard to recognize (p. 112–113). But then the question arises *why* it's hard to recognize these things about oneself. What's the difficulty at stake in moral matters? As Tony Milligan notes, while "none of the things that really matter to being human are hidden […] it remains difficult to speak about them in non-evasive ways" (p. 64). Why? In his chapter, Hugo Strandberg suggests that moral matters, specifically, "speak[ing] about happiness and love, also in philosophical writing", are difficult due to the painfulness of acknowledging the "conflict of [social] appearance and being, in one's own life and in the lives of other people", where the difficulty of that conflict may make it "hard even to say" anything about it; "And this difficulty is indicative of the importance to us of saying it" (p. 89). To develop Strandberg's suggestion further would seem a central task.

While post-Wittgensteinian philosophers have mostly not been very articulate about the nature of the difficulty presented by moral matters, they have at least realized that they have a special *kind* of difficulty, whereas analytic philosophers typically regard them as simply a species of intellectual problems. Pär Segerdahl's chapter provides perceptive critical reflections on the tendency "to discuss human forms of moral unease as if they were intellectual issues of truth and falsity" (p. 174). Taking debates on embryonic stem cell research as his example, he suggests that the argumentative, "epistemic approach to moral concerns" emerges in settings of personal conflict, where it provides "momentary personal feelings with [apparent] reasons"; "I have a *right* to be angry, my anger is *justified*, what these researchers are doing is *in fact* murder!" (p. 183–184). In other words, the intellectualist way in which "bioethics misunderstands people" mirrors "how most of us misunderstand ourselves when fear and conflict awaken our tendency to defend doctrines as if our ways of relating to life depended on them" (p. 185). In morally charged situations reasoning, which we imagine should settle issues and bring agreement, actually "perpetuates conflict", and "the ideal of purifying the intellect as a depersonalised path to truth itself mimics and reinforces how the problem arises from the beginning, namely, through reasoning"; instead of applying more reasoning to moral matters, then, we should try to "calm the agitated intellect as we calm anxious and hyperactive children" (p. 184; 186).

Crucially, Segerdahl does "not recommend following our feelings rather than reason"; that's a spurious contrast, as "[f]ollowing our feelings presupposes that we paraphrase the feelings, interpret them and give them a voice within us", persuading ourselves "that our feelings are 'correct'" (p. 185). Revenge, for example, is not some "primitive animal instinct" but "a primitive *intellectual* phenomenon"; "[w]hat makes revenge primitive is the monotonous *thinking* that supports the desire for revenge" (p. 186). Moral understanding, then, cannot be captured within this supposed contrast. Segerdahl's discussion, I would say, illustrates how ethics at its best challenges philosophical preconceptions that might seem independent of it: he unsettles the standard distinction between reason and feeling precisely because he sees it from a properly *moral* perspective. Not new examples, not context-sensitive particularities, but a different general perspective, is the decisive factor here.

I'll end by briefly discussing a curious feature of the volume: the place *love* assumes in it. In one way, it appears to be a central concern: in striking contrast to most writings in ethics, the word "love" appears a whopping 403 times in the book, much more frequently than such staples of mainstream ethics as "rights" (24) or "virtue" (16), even beating "ethics" (189) and "Wittgenstein" (339) in frequency. The word occurs, principally, in Raimond Gaita's fine discussion of "Love in Teaching and Love of the World" and in the chapters by Kamila Pacovská and Tony Milligan, both of which explicitly focus on the nature and difficulties of interpersonal love. Additionally, Hugo Strandberg's and Martin Gustafsson's chapters both discuss, in different ways, difficulties of love, although the latter hardly uses the word. The prevalence of the word and thematic in the book notwithstanding, the question of love may nonetheless appear coincidental to its main concerns. The Editors' Introduction doesn't foreground it, and while Pacovská's and Milligan's chapters – particularly Pacovská's discussion of "the tension between admiration and love" (p. 51–52) – contain good observations, they don't envisage any systematic, fundamental place for love in ethics, but rather treat it as one "topic" among others we may reflect on ethically. That is, they don't consider the possibility – as one might, and the present reviewer would – that a perspective on and *of* love might transform one's conception of ethics itself. Love wouldn't, then, be an "area of life" in need of regulation by moral norms or by conceptions of the good, but rather the moral character of such norms and conceptions would be revealed in the light of love – love not understood in any narrow, romantic sense, but in terms of the openness and concern between human beings.

I mention this possibility not as a curiosity, but because it might allow us to see the unresolved questions of the personal in ethics and of moral

understanding and its relation to language in a new way. Thus, Camilla Kronqvist notes that being, and reflecting on what it means to be, a mother "is not merely a matter of relating to the concept of motherhood […] represented in my community and culture" but, primarily, about "being engaged in the relationship to my children, as their mother, and acknowledging how these relationships *give* meaning to the concept, through my own ways of responding to them"; these things about motherhood, and its concept, "I learn not from my parents but from my children", and here, "the love of a child […] is the mystery that makes our bond meaningful" (p. 217; 215). The question of what our words mean would ultimately be a moral question, then, insofar as it's a question that arises, that we raise and that gets its significance within, the personal relationships of love in which we stand to others, and that concerns the very meaning of those relationships.

Martin Gustafsson's chapter discusses striking examples of love – in the love-of-neighbour, not the romantic sense, and hardly using the word – from films by the Dardenne brothers; "moments of transcendence" where the protagonists "come face-to-face" with another human being in a way that forces them "to change their lives radically" (p. 32; 39; 42). In Gustafsson's struggle to articulate this, we see both the importance and the difficulty of the question of love to ethics. He wants to show that these acts of love open the protagonists "to other human beings in a way that goes beyond reasoning" and insists that they are "unequivocally *good*" (p. 45; 38). Yet, he also sees the protagonists as driven by an "unreasoned 'must'" to act, "without knowing why", in ways that appear to themselves and others "impossible", even "mad"; stressing "the depth of the significance of reason in our moral lives", he warns of "how deeply dangerous those moments [of love's transcendence] are" (p. 43; 45-6). Gustafsson doesn't seem to feel the great tensions between these statements, or between his insistence on the supposed incomprehensibility and paradoxicality of these acts of love and the fact that, as viewers of the films, we in fact have no difficulty at all understanding them but "hope for these things to happen, and are unhesitatingly satisfied when, against all odds, they do" (p. 38). Love may indeed appear incomprehensible, but to whom? And dangerous, but to what? If something "unequivocally *good*" can threaten one with "losing one's foothold [...] putting one's own self-understanding and sanity at risk" (p. 46), doesn't that indicate deep moral problems with where one is standing and what one presents as self-understanding and sanity? These questions are not rhetorical. They are questions I think ethics, following Wittgenstein, should *ask*.

Åbo Akademi University and
University of Helsinki
jbackstr(at)abo.fi

References

Agam-Segal, R. & Dain, E. (eds.), 2018. *Wittgenstein's Moral Thought*. New York: Routledge.

Amesbury, R. & von Sass, H. (eds.), 2021. *Ethics after Wittgenstein. Contemplation and Critique*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.

De Mesel, B. & Kuusela, O. (eds.), 2019. *Ethics in the Wake of Wittgenstein*. New York: Routledge.

Lichtenberg, G. C., 2013. *Aus den "Sudelbüchern"*. North Charleston: Create Space Independent Publishing Platform http://www.zeno.org/Lesesaal/N/9781482645446?page=0)