Ethics After Wittgenstein: Contemplation and Critique, edited by Richard Amesbury and Hartmut von Sass

Oskari Kuusela

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Recent years have witnessed a surge in work on Wittgensteinian moral philosophy with the publication of several monographs, edited collections and journal articles. As the editors of this collection note, and as is typical of philosophy, however, "there is little agreement on what it means to do ethics in the light of Wittgenstein" (p. 1). Whilst the book doesn't aim to resolve all relevant debates – there are fundamental disagreements, such as whether Wittgenstein's outlook is better understood in terms of realism or anti-realism and how his rejection or philosophical theories might affect the contribution of his thought to moral philosophy – it aims to "move them forward" (p. 2). It seems fair to say it does achieve that. But the volume also brings into discussion some new, or in any case less addressed issues, such as how Wittgenstein might help to resolve problems relating to the critique of liberalism by political theology inspired by Carl Schmitt, as well as

Wittgenstein's relation to critical theory, in particular how his philosophy could be used to resolve the – perhaps merely apparent, but contemporarily keenly felt – tension between the dependence of moral criticism on particular experiences and knowledge immanent to certain strands of social life (such as being a black woman) and the aspiration of moral philosophy to universality. The book also discusses and seeks to clarify the contribution of certain established Wittgensteinian figures, such as Stanley Cavell, Cora Diamond, and D. Z. Phillips, to moral philosophy. It is divided into three parts: "I. Ethics and Wittgenstein", "II. Wittgenstein, Ethics and Metaethics", and "III. After Wittgenstein".

The book's opening chapter by Lars Hertzberg addresses Wittgenstein's rejection in his early philosophy of propositions about ethics as nonsense, arguing that rather than being directed against ordinary talk about ethics Wittgenstein is objecting to how philosophers have

construed it. Making use of examples from literature, Hertzberg brings out illuminatingly how talk about ethics is not concerned with stating facts or informing, but serves other functions, such as reminding of what is important or inviting to contemplate something. As Hertzberg's discussion also brings out, it is not necessary to use any explicitly moral terms to bring up and address such issues, a point which also brings out something important about moral discourse. (This last point has been discussed earlier by Diamond 1996, Lovibond 2002 and others.) Hertzberg suggests – plausibly to my mind – that attention to this kind of features of moral discourse, and the precariousness of talk about ethics, may be part of what motivated Wittgenstein's earlier rejection of propositions about ethics.

The function of examples from literature is important for the next chapter too, where Nora Hämäläinen raises questions about the role of empirical knowledge as part of Wittgensteinian conceptual investigation, and argues for the relevance of Austinian field studies for Wittgensteinian moral philosophy. Although I found lots to agree with here too, and thought Hämäläinen's discussion of the functions of literature as part of Wittgensteinian moral philosophy was helpful, her argument seems largely directed against a strawman Wittgensteinian moral philosopher or a particular already controversial Wittgensteinian approach that has not played a very significant role in Wittgensteinian moral philosophy. Relatedly, although my work on Witt-

genstein's methodology was referred to in this connection, I do not recognize it as having the kind of commitments or implications criticised by Hämäläinen. Instead her objections seem to target a position like that of Peter Hacker, characteristic of which is that it regards Wittgensteinian philosophy as concerned with the clarification of grammatical rules, with statements about the latter construed as having an *a priori* status – contrary to Wittgenstein's explicit rejection of the notion of *a priori* in his later work. Indeed, Wittgenstein himself acknowledges the relevance of scientific knowledge to philosophy in a way that seems congenial to Hämäläinen's argument, i.e. that new empirical findings can help to stimulate new ways of thinking about the objects of philosophical examination. Hence, although the contribution of empirical knowledge to philosophy may call for further clarification (it might help to look more carefully into what Wittgenstein says about the role of natural history in philosophy), I had a problem with Hämäläinen's strategy of arguing for her point.

Next is Sandra Laugier's chapter on Cavell and Diamond on the notion of importance, i.e. on the task of philosophy as "recounting importance" or making that which is important emerge. Although Laugier's discussion of this issue, with reference to the role of literature and film in moral philosophy, struck me as well worth reading, and the notion of importance is certainly worthy of more attention, I found the chapter at times under-

developed (sometimes repetitious rather than helping to get deeper into the issue) and intermittently unclear. (I am not sure what to make of e.g. her characterization of experience as the perception of what is important (pp. 56, 63), or of the claim that Wittgenstein's notion of family resemblance is the "negation of all ontology" (p. 59).) Although Laugier's description of Wittgensteinian moral philosophy as starting from the particular and that which is important, as opposed to being concerned with generalities captured in a "half dozen" concepts, and as aiming to change our views rather than simply describing linguistic practices undoubtedly captures something important about the Wittgensteinian approach, I was left wondering what the rightful place of general insights is in ethics, and how this ought to be fitted into the picture.

The second part of the book on Wittgenstein and metaethics starts with three interventions by Julia Hermann in current metaethical debates concerning the notion of objectivity, thought experiments regarding an "ideally coherent Caligula", and error theory. Here too I found myself largely in agreement with the content of what the author was saying, whilst not feeling entirely comfortable with the way she proceeded. Described as "corrective" (p. 90), I found Hermann's interventions a little too quick and assertive rather than inquisitive. Can it really be expected to have clarificatory effect on someone convinced otherwise to more or less simply state that an immoralist like Caligula is not recognizably a moral agent, and that the thought experiments that involve such characters are therefore irrelevant for moral philosophy? What are we to make of Wittgenstein's insistence that, should anyone disagree with his clarifications, he would drop the point and proceed differently? Is any room left for this arguably important methodological point in the context of interventions such as Hermann's?

The next two chapters of this section are intimately connected. The first one is a previously published paper by Hans-Johann Glock that takes a critical aim at John McDowell and Sabina Lovibond's account of realism in moral philosophy in her early book *Realism and Imagination in Ethics* (1983), as well as arguing for an anti-realist interpretation of both the early and later Wittgenstein on ethics. This is followed by Lovibond's response to Glock, where she clarifies various aspects of her early book and the aims of its argument. More specifically, Glock argues, against the background of a standard history of early Wittgenstein's influence on non-cognitivism, and based on his interpretation of the later Wittgenstein as a "communitarian expressivist" (p. 117), that McDowell's and Lovibond's "anti-anti-realism" fails both exegetically as an interpretation of Wittgenstein and philosophically as an account of morality. To this Lovibond responds with some elegance dismantling Glock's objections, and pointing out how his expressivist Wittgenstein runs together matters Glock himself urges ought to be kept separate (communal

agreement and truth), and how Glock himself attributes to Wittgenstein a substantial thesis of the kind he is not supposed to have. As Lovibond explains, that there is a distinction between agreement and truth is part and parcel of her account of mature moral agency (discussed at more length in her *Ethical Formation*), a crucial aspect of which is being able to adopt a critical stance towards the moral practices that are the context of one's moral upbringing. Although I had read Lovibond's chapter (or a very similar draft version) before, it seemed very helpful for understanding her points to read it together with Glock's. I still have to make up my mind about what to think of the way Lovibond distinguishes between a metaphysical level of discourse (the fact-value distinction as drawn by the non-cognitivists) and an empirical level of discourse about language, i.e. whether it is sustainable to assume such a metaphysical level. If it is assumed merely to find a space to engage critically with the non-cognitivists, or for the purposes of a "philosophical therapy", I presume it is fine.

The last chapter of section two is Hartmut von Sass' discussion of D. Z. Phillips's contemplative approach to ethics which emphasizes the ethical demands placed on philosophy and its methodology, whereby the aim is to do justice to the complexity of moral considerations and a "hubbub of voices" by contrast to the reductivist tendencies of philosophy. Here ethics emerges as a mode of thought relevant to all philosophy rather than a particular subject or topic. As von Sass argues, a dilemma emerges for Phillips in that he seems to fail to apply his contemplative approach to the contemplative approach itself, whereby it comes out as authoritative rather than multi-voiced. As von Sass illuminatingly points out, however, it is one thing to reject e.g., consequentialism as general account of moral reasoning and another to fail to recognize the relevance of consequentialist thinking in particular cases, where it is what that particular situation calls for. As this illustrates, Phillips's rejection of the generalizations of normative ethics puts him at risk of not giving particular cases their due. Von Sass' discussion is quite helpful in bringing out this problem, and showing how it can be addressed. Here the question arises again (as in the connection with Laugier's chapter) what the place is in moral thought for "generalized ethical commandments" (p. 155). This, as von Sass observes, is left unclear in Phillips's attempt to avoid theorizing by focusing on particular cases.

Section three is opened by another discussion of Phillips' contemplative approach by Mikel Burley. More specifically, Burley addresses the question of how what Phillips calls "a certain purity of the attention to the world" might affect what one says about moral issues and forms of life that one finds repulsive, and how "conceptual justice" can be achieved in such cases. Burley argues that whilst Phillipsian purity of attention (reminiscent of Simone Weil's purification of personal desires) is required when contemplating forms of

life that are at odds with one's own, this does not exclude the personal from moral philosophy, e.g. emotive reactions towards what one encounters. Rather, such emotive reactions are themselves to be taken as an object of contemplation, and in this capacity, they may reveal something important about the object of study. Hence, although one must resist the possibility that one's personal preferences, emotional reactions, and moral judgments "contaminate" contemplation, neutrality does not require the purification of everything personal. Although Burley does not highlight this connection, the Phillipsian strategy, as Burley interprets it, reminded me of Martha Nussbaum's and Alice Crary's views on the role and significance of emotive reactions in the context of their accounts of the relevance of literature for moral philosophy. On this account emotive reactions can be understood as constituting modes of moral understanding of situations or aspects thereof that are not neutrally available. Something similar seems to hold of Phillips' contemplative approach, as interpreted by Burley.

The next chapter by Richard Amesbury discusses the critique of liberalism by Schmittian political theology. The problem here relates to the issue of how the authority of law, given that law cannot apply itself, must seemingly depend on something that is not the law, i.e. the will of a sovereign or decisions on how and where the law applies. But if the authority of law depends on will or decisions in this sense, what then is the role and significance of law? Does its indeterminacy and dependence on decisions make law itself otiose? Here Amesbury helpfully appeals to Wittgenstein's rule-following considerations in the context of which a parallel question arises. As in the case of rule-following, it is not true that law, even though it may sometimes require interpretation and decisions as to how to apply it, is indeterminate. The two options that we are presented with – of law applying itself or losing its authority to whoever decides about its application – are not the only possibilities. There is a third possibility of seeing law as a cultural practice, whereby its application may be guided by various contextual considerations and principles. This reveals the Schmittian appeal to decisions or the will to be quick and simplistic. On the Wittgensteinian view as articulated by Amesbury, there is no general problem about the indeterminacy of law or the ubiquitousness of decisions. Schmittian voluntarism is therefore problematic, even though it may helpfully capture something about the self-understanding of individualist politics.

The final chapter of the volume is Crary's discussion of critical theory in light of Wittgenstein. More specifically, she discusses the issue of whether Wittgenstein could help to address the problem of how a social critique can be rationally authoritative when it is based on experiences that are not universally available (or rely on "particular routes of feeling"), such as the experiences of the representatives of certain minorities. As Crary out-

lines the background for this problem, it has been discussed earlier in the context of the Frankfurt School as the question about the relation between a critique immanent to certain social practices and a critique that transcends such contexts, with Adorno and Horkheimer articulating Hegelian solutions. Further, the problem is accentuated by post-structuralism consequent to its view that there are no value-free perspectives which is then taken to imply the impossibility of any claims to universality. Problematically, this makes universal critiques appear elitist or ethnocentric (or "colonial" as is fashionable to say). Crary's proposed solution, which also draws on Peter Winch, rests on the notion of a wider sense of rationality and/or objectivity (originally introduced in her monograph *Beyond Moral Judgment* (2007) and further discussed in *Inside Ethics* (2016)). The key point is that, contrary to the narrower conception of rationality and objectivity according to which what is objectively there must be graspable independently of the development of peculiarly human sensitivities, rationality and objectivity are not compromised by their dependence on the development of such specific sensitivities. Rather, the development of such sensitivities may be a requirement for being able to access what is objectively there. (For example, learning natural numbers is a prerequisite for accessing the objective fact that there are 57 chairs in a room.) Accordingly, if we allow that our comprehension of certain objective qualities may be ethically charged, we can allow that ethical sensibilities may contribute to an objective understanding of the world – and to rationally authoritative critiques of social practices. Wittgenstein can thus help us do critical theory by helping to solve the problem of rationally authoritative social critique.

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University of East Anglia
o.kuusela(at)uea.ac.uk