Nordic Wittgenstein Review Special Issue 2026| DOI 10.15845/nwr.si2026.3789
(prepublication for open review)

Introduction

Salla Aldrin Salskov and Hugo Strandberg
Åbo Akademi University, Finland

In May 2023, we organised a symposium in celebration of Lars Hertzberg's 80th birthday. This special issue of Nordic Wittgenstein Review does not consist of the presentations at that occasion, but the first thoughts of creating a special issue such as this arose as a result of this celebration. In this introduction, we will not present the individual papers the special issue consists of – here we refer the reader to the abstracts – but try to explain the ideas behind its theme, "Moral understanding", and contextualise it by showing how it connects to moral philosophy done in the tradition after Wittgenstein, especially to the work of Hertzberg.

The influence of philosophers is often seen as an effect of their publications. What is thereby underestimated is the influence a philosopher might have in their capacity as teacher, supervisor, colleague and conversation partner. Such influence is furthermore often less obvious, because it need not consist in the transmission of specific ideas, but just as well in the ability "to stimulate someone to thoughts of his own" (PI: p. 5). The authors of the papers collected here have certainly read papers by Hertzberg in ways that have influenced their writings, just as many have who have never met him or met him only briefly. The reason for their presence in this special issue is however the fact that Hertzberg precisely in conversation and in creating a philosophical environment of conversation has been of importance for their philosophical thought. For this reason, we have not asked the contributors to engage directly with Hertzberg's writings, also because this special issue is not a *Festschrift*; instead, the papers are held together by a common theme, "moral understanding", an expression that at the same time could be said to designate a spirit in which the discussions and investigations in this special issue are hopefully pursued. What does this mean?

Here we have to speak for ourselves – what follows is not a description of a common view, whatever that would mean, held by all the contributors to this special issue or by Hertzberg himself. In part, what follows is implicitly a

reflection of our personal experiences: research periods abroad in other (Wittgenstein-inspired) philosophical environments made visible to us our own philosophical home, the particularities of this philosophical environment, and especially Hertzberg's role in the establishment of it. Some have referred to it as the Åbo school of thought, although most of the philosophers thereby referred to would probably be very critical of the very idea of a "school". A relevant comparison would be with the "Swansea school", a term often used even though defining features are not easily identified. The comparison is relevant also because of the many connections tying the Åbo and Swansea departments together, on all kinds of levels, the particulars of which we do not have the space to go into in this context. Due to these intellectual exchanges, one way of understanding the philosophical environment in Åbo is in continuity with and as a further development of the "Swansea school". One early example of this is Joel Backström and Göran Torrkulla's joint introduction to *Moralfilosofiska essäer* (2001), their edited volume, initiated by Hertzberg, of Swedish translations of papers in this tradition of moral philosophy, collecting papers by Wittgenstein, Rush Rhees, Elizabeth Anscombe, Peter Winch, D. Z. Phillips, Hertzberg, Elizabeth Wolgast, Raimond Gaita, R. F. Holland, and Cora Diamond. Another example of the Swansea connection is its influence in other areas of philosophy, such as the philosophy of the human and social sciences, where philosophers in Åbo, primarily Olli Lagerspetz and Jonas Ahlskog, have continued and further developed the thought of Winch.

In any case, two intimately connected things can perhaps be said to be distinctive of moral philosophy done in Åbo, things that we, in our own way, will try to delineate in what follows: a particular understanding of Wittgenstein's philosophy, and the moral, or existential-ethical, dimension of philosophical questions as such.

In a text describing the Wittgenstein reception in Finland (written more than 20 years ago, but on this specific point still very relevant, as we see it, testifying to decades of discussions regarding these issues in Åbo), Hertzberg (2003–2004: 37; our translation) writes as follows:

> It is no doubt correct to say that the interest in Wittgenstein at Åbo has been marked by three characteristics: a priority to Wittgenstein's later philosophy rather than to the early one, a commitment to application rather than to exegesis, and an emphasis on the existential traits alongside the intellectual ones. This means for

> example that moral philosophy has taken a more important place than in Wittgenstein's own works.

The end of the text (41) could be understood as an explanation of what this might mean:

> Whatever happens, I believe that one thing is certain: it is only by being connected to the existential depth of Wittgenstein's thought that his philosophy can retain its intellectual saltiness (cf. Mt 5.13). Wittgenstein himself comments his work in the following way: "Is what I am doing in any way worth the effort? Well only, if it receives a light from above. […] If the light from above is *lacking*, then I can in any case be no more than clever." This could serve as a reminder for all philosophers.[1]

Wittgenstein's importance does then not lie in specific theoretical ideas, which it is the business of people inspired by him to use their intellectual capacities to present in a clearer way than he himself was able to. Instead, the inspiration from Wittgenstein may be at its deepest when he is not even mentioned, when the phenomenon or question under scrutiny is instead held firmly in view; the inspiration from Wittgenstein may be at its deepest when these phenomena or questions are discussed because of their importance to the one inspired, not discussed just because other philosophers, for example Wittgenstein, tend to discuss them. One way in which this way of doing philosophy might show itself is in the working with examples, which grounds the philosophical discussion outside philosophy and its theoretical vocabulary. (Hertzberg has emphasised the importance of examples in many of his writings – see for example 2022b: 2. In this special issue, see Aldrin Salskov & Strammer, Cordner, Kronqvist, Strandberg, and Torrkulla.) Such a way of doing philosophy is certainly no guarantee against philosophical confusion, and one important form of philosophical criticism is to show that a philosopher in her discussion of a specific example does not stay true to it or has misunderstood central features of it. (A valid criticism of this introduction will therefore be that it, being an introduction and not a substantial philosophical discussion in its own right, will inevitably be too abstract.) In any case, working with examples is one way of trying to liberate oneself – and each other – from specific intellectual fixations, as Wittgenstein wrote: "Work on philosophy […] is really more work on oneself. On one's own conception. On how one sees things" (CV: 24).

[1] The quote within the quote is CV: 66.

In the above quotation, Hertzberg mentions moral philosophy specifically – why? What is thereby referred to is not the conception constituting one of its mainstream forms, where action is taken to be central to morality and the task of moral philosophy to provide rationally grounded guidance for action, by determining what is the right thing to do, generally or in a specific situation. By contrast, moral philosophy in the environment Hertzberg is referring to is understood as an investigation of the moral dimensions of life. (The term "moral understanding" is chosen as the title of this special issue specifically as a contrast to such normative approaches.) Understood in this way, moral philosophy is not one area of philosophical studies among others but is closely connected to central elements in Wittgenstein's later philosophy. Questions important to ask as part of a philosophical discussion of, say, a theoretical claim – "[W]hom are we telling this? And on what occasion?" (PI: § 296) – points us to the dynamics of human relations, to what goes on between us in the conversational contexts in which the claim has a home. Similarly, Wittgenstein's reference to use – for example: "if we had to name anything which is the life of the sign, we should have to say that it was its *use*" (BBB: p. 4) – means that an understanding of, say, a sign, is not to be had independently of an understanding of what goes on between people when using it in their conversations (in this special issue, see Cockburn and Toivakainen). Consequently, moral philosophy is not one area of philosophical studies among others, but a kind of inquiry that in some form or other belongs to the discussion of any philosophical question. (One might here compare ideas in other philosophical traditions, such as the Levinasian understanding of ethics as first philosophy.)

When it comes to moral philosophy in the restricted sense of the word, Hertzberg has often emphasised that moral questions are personal in nature (see e.g 1997; 2022a; 2022b: ch. 9). This could be understood as taking issue with both an objectivist and a subjectivist take on moral discourse. Objectivism abstracts from the concrete situation of use, as if a "moral proposition" would have a distinct meaning independently of any context. The objectivist philosopher sees this distance to the concrete situation as a positive thing, for by investigating the moral problem in question from a position supposedly free from all the risks inherent to any real situation, such as the temptations of "moral blindness, corruption, selfishness, insensitivity, oversensitivity, hypocrisy, phariseanism, squeamishness, bias, sentimentality, etc." (1997: 153), the problem and the answer to it are supposedly seen more clearly. However,

the extent to which such risks are absent is the extent to which the objectivist philosopher's statements lack moral sense, as she does not face up to the constituents of the real problem. Subjectivism, on the other hand, means that one could never face the criticism of yielding to the above-mentioned temptations, since nothing the subject would utter on moral matters could then conflict with a reality outside of it. To expand on the above Wittgenstein quotation: the objectivist does not mind the fact that *I* am telling someone something, and the subjectivist does not mind that I am telling *someone* something.

This point will get lost when it is confused with a very different conception of the importance of context: the endeavour to historicise moral meaning, tying it to specific collective frameworks (by, say, describing the genealogy of a specific concept or comparing the social norms of different cultures). However fruitful such an approach is when trying to gain a better understanding of a culture, in the context of moral understanding the result would still just be another, less ambitious, form of objectivism, that is an attempt at denying the personal nature of the questions. The fact that social norms exist and that I have grown up in a specific culture and hence am affected by them in various ways does not in any way determine how I should relate to them – in fact, the personally experienced moral charge is often at its strongest in a situation where one sees a problem with a particular norm and thereby also the need for protest. (See Hertzberg 2022a, and Cook 1999 for more extensive discussions, and in this special issue Aldrin Salskov & Strammer, Backström, and Strandberg.) An important task for moral philosophy is to try to come to an understanding of such protests, of what it is that conflicts with social norms – this is one thing that moral understanding articulates, and which we touch briefly upon towards the end of this introduction. Furthermore, entangled in a specific situation, part of the trouble consists in the difficulty of seeing the stakes clearly (and yielding to collective sentiments may here be one of the temptations; in this special issue, see Nykänen for a discussion), but a better understanding will not be had by moving to a meta-level, as if clarity about what is at stake could be had from a position where these things are not at stake. Or, in other words, moral understanding is not a matter of mastering theoretical complexities.

However, speaking of moral philosophy in the restricted sense of the word might be part of the very problem, as if moral philosophy could be

distinguished from other parts of philosophy in any clear way. To define it with reference to specific "moral words", such as right, wrong, good, evil, just, cruel, etc., will not do. For in addition to the point we have already made above – concerning the importance of focusing on the dynamics of human relations, on what goes on between us in the conversational context in which words, also words such as these, are used – it should be noticed that moral understanding comes to expression also, perhaps primarily, when such words are not used (a characteristic of many of the examples discussed by Hertzberg, see e.g. 2012: sec. 6).

In other words, moral understanding is not the understanding of morality, whatever that might mean; the word "moral" highlights a dimension in human life which is not to be left out beforehand in any case of philosophical investigation. When accounting for the meaning of some concept, abstracting from the predicament of someone actually meaning something in a concrete interpersonal context gives rise to similar problems as an impersonal approach to moral questions, dangers that are not to be avoided by focusing on some specific subject matter; (lack of) moral understanding comes to expression in one's treatment of a philosophical question, no matter whether it is explicitly taken up for discussion or not.

Furthermore, questioning the very idea of a meta-perspective on morality and meaning means realising that any criticism that at the surface may seem to be only directed at others must primarily be read as a form of self-criticism. As a writer one does not stand above the problems examined but is in various ways implicated in them, coming to a deeper moral understanding in dialogue with, say, the text discussed. (In this special issue, there are texts critically discussing Winch and especially Gaita, philosophers of formative importance for this tradition of moral philosophy – hence the importance of thinking with but also beyond them. See Aldrin Salskov & Strammer, Backström, Cordner, Nykänen, and Strandberg.) The same of course goes for the reader of the text, who has to approach the text in the same spirit – moralism, say, is a temptation for the both of them, a confused conception on what moral understanding means. (As an example of the difficulties addressed in this paragraph, consider the question of what it takes to criticise someone for being moralistic without oneself succumbing to the same fault.)

At this point, additional light can be shed on the importance of working with examples and what this involves. For an example can be understood as

just another object to theorise, and the discussion of them can therefore be just as abstract as the theorising working with examples is supposed to be the remedy for. Working with examples will only make a real difference if one sees them from the inside, in doing so bringing them to life. Instead of approaching the example from the perspective of the omniscient narrator, it must hence be seen from the perspectives of the people involved in it, including as one possibility the perspective of a bystander capable of interfering (see Strandberg 2020). In the context of moral understanding, my understanding and what my understanding concerns are therefore not externally related: how the example unfolds will depend on how I understand the situation, and, more fundamentally, the nature of my relations to the other people in the example will be dependent, for good and for bad, on how I understand my relations to them. In this regard, "moral understanding" must hence also designate the spirit in which a philosophical investigation is hopefully pursued.

To all this can be added the theme of love, often present, implicitly or explicitly, in the papers in this special issue, a theme the accentuation and articulation of which are furthermore one of the central ways in which many of these writers, here and in the past, have extended the discussions they engage in. Similarly to the way in which the attention to the interpersonal context is indispensable for coming to a better understanding of the meaning of a concept, attention to my being touched by the other herself is indispensable for coming to a better of understanding of how moral questions arise (cf. Beehler 1978: ch. 1, and Strandberg and Toivakainen in this special issue). Describing this being touched in terms of love (compare expression such as "love of neighbour") has the benefit of bringing to light the charge and challenge involved, that another aspect of how moral questions arise is as an attempt at staving off the full nature of that love. In other words, to understand much of what goes on in moral life, also in moral philosophy, one needs to pay attention to this unstable conflict and its constituents (in this special issue, see Westerlund in particular). (Words sometimes used to describe the constituents of this conflict are, among others, repression of conscience and the dynamics of openness and closedness between people, of trust and mistrust; in this special issue, see Backström and Nykänen.) Coming closer to such an understanding, however, requires disentangling oneself from the confusions created by this conflict, which means that moral understanding will ultimately be the understanding of love, an understanding in attention to the other. This,

in other words, is one key aspect of the personal nature of moral questions; the difficulties concern my relation to you, not anyone's relation to anyone.

At this point, however, we have left introductory comments far behind and are already deep into substantial discussions, and it is therefore high time to end this introduction and leave space for the real papers.

*

At the end of this introduction, we would like to express our gratitude to all who have acted as reviewers concerning the papers that follow. For obvious reasons, we will not mention the reviewers by name, but without your work, it would not have been possible to finalise this special issue.

References

Backström, J., and Torrkulla, G., 2001. "Inledning". In: J. Backström and G. Torrkulla, ed., *Moralfilosofiska essäer*. Stockholm: Thales, 7–20.

Beehler, R., 1978. *Moral Life*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

Cook, J., 1999. *Morality and Cultural Differences*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hertzberg, L., 1997. "Was Wittgenstein a Moral Philosopher?". *Studia Theologica* 51, 144–155.

Hertzberg, L., 2003–2004. "La reception de Wittgenstein en Finlande: Regards obliques sur les autres pays d'Europe du Nord". *Nordiques*, no. 3, 27–43.

Hertzberg, L., 2012, "Rhees on the Unity of Language". *Philosophical Investigations* 35, 224–237.

Hertzberg, L., 2022a. "Absolutely Personal: A Countercurrent in Moral Philosophy". In: S. Aldrin Salskov et al., ed., *Ethical Inquiries after Wittgenstein*. Cham: Springer, 105–120.

Hertzberg, L., 2022b. *Wittgenstein and the Life We Live with Language*. London: Anthem Press.

Strandberg, H., 2020, "In Search of the Context of a Question". *Sats* 21, 199–213.

Wittgenstein, L., 1969. *The Blue and Brown Books*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

Wittgenstein, L., 1998. *Culture and Value*. Rev. ed. Oxford: Blackwell.

Wittgenstein, L., 2009. *Philosophical Investigations*. 4th ed. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell.

Biographical notes

Salla Aldrin Salskov holds a PhD in philosophy from Åbo Akademi University (2022). Her dissertation discussed the relevance of Wittgenstein's philosophy for feminist philosophy and queer studies. Her research focuses on Wittgensteinian philosophy, ethics, feminist and queer studies, critical studies of whiteness and racism, dialogical philosophy, and the challenges of polarization. She is co-editor of *Ethical Inquiries After Wittgenstein* (Springer 2022), and work has been published in *Social Epistemology: A Journal of Knowledge*, *Culture and Policy*, *Sexualities*, *NORA – Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research*, *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*, *Policy Futures in Education,* and other places. Salla holds the title of docent in gender studies at Åbo Akademi University, where she is a postdoctoral researcher in minority studies.

Hugo Strandberg is associate professor of philosophy at Åbo Akademi University, Finland. His latest monographs are *Forgiveness and Moral Understanding* (Palgrave, 2021) and *Self-Knowledge and Self-Deception* (Palgrave, 2015).