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Contextual Ethics: Taking the Lead from Wittgenstein and Løgstrup on Ethical Meaning and Normativity

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Abstract: A prominent trend in moral philosophy today is the interest in the rich textures of actual human practices and lives. This has prompted engagements with other disciplines, such as anthropology, history, literature, law and empirical science, which have produced various forms of *contextual ethics*. These engagements motivate reflections on why and how context is important ethically, and such metaethical reflection is what this article undertakes. Inspired by the work of the later Wittgenstein and the Danish theologian K.E. Løgstrup, I first describe one of the ways in which context plays a central role with regard to ethical meaning and normativity. I then examine how ‘context’ is to be defined, and finally I discuss some of the questions which arise when giving context prominence in ethics – namely, how to delimit the scope of relevant context, the relevant traits of a particular context and what ‘the ethical’ is.

Keywords: context, contextual ethics, later Wittgenstein, Løgstrup, metaethics, normativity, Wittgensteinian moral philosophy

1 Introduction

The focus is still on ‘evaluations’, ‘judgements’, on explicit moral reasoning to conclusions that something is worthwhile, or a duty, or wrong, or ought to be done; our conception of what are ‘issues’ for moral thought is still ‘x is wrong’ versus ‘x is permissible’; the abortion debate our paradigm of moral utterance. [...] the narrowness of focus has not changed.

(DIAMOND 1996, 380)

Moral philosophy leaves some of its practitioners deeply discontented. For instance, discontent with ‘how it has only interpreted the world’ (Marx 1998, 571), ‘its *law* conception of ethics’ (Anscombe 1958, 5), ‘its narrowness of focus’ and ‘the

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remoteness of moral philosophy from the lives human beings lead' (Walker 2003, xiv). Discontent with the thinking of former philosophers, 'which makes it impossible to hope for any direct light on it [ethics] from them' (Anscombe 1958, 2). It also leaves these discontented philosophers longing for what has not been there, but what they believe ought to be there – such as attempts 'to change' the world (Marx 1998, 571), investigations into 'the concept of "virtue"' (Anscombe 1958, 15), 'new modes of understanding, new moral visions' (Diamond 1996, 380) and to explore 'the complex of dependencies that make up the varied forms of attachment and connection in everyone's everyday life' (Walker 2003, xiv).

One prominent trend in moral philosophy today is an interest in the rich textures of actual human practices and lives. The work of these philosophers is informed by, for instance, anthropology (e.g. Lear 2008), literature (e.g. Cavell 1999; Nussbaum 1992), the empirical sciences (e.g. Appiah 2009; Turner 2010) and history (e.g. Appiah 2011; Guenther 2013; Kitcher 2014). In these and other ways, moral thinkers engage in forms of *contextual ethics*.¹ These engagements motivate reflections on why and how context is important ethically, and such metaethical reflection is what this article undertakes. Unlike Anscombe, I have found the thinking of past philosophers useful in shining a light on my subject. My main inspirations are the later Wittgenstein and the Danish theologian K.E. Løgstrup. In the following, I first describe one way in which context plays a central role with regard to ethical meaning and normativity. I then look into how 'context' is to be defined, and finally I discuss some of the questions which arise when giving context prominence in ethics, namely how to delimit the scope of relevant context, the relevant traits of a particular context and what 'the ethical' is.²

1 Discussions of the role and importance of context and of the different forms of contextualism can also be found in fields such as epistemology and political theory. In political theory, Lægaard thus distinguish between five ways in which thinking can be contextual: (1) *issue contextualism*, which deals with an issue which arises only in certain contexts; (2) *methodological contextualism*, which deems that context is relevant in establishing the kinds of cases one's political theory addresses and is relevant to the formulation, critical testing and modification of one's theory; (3) *applicatory contextualism*, the assertion that contextual facts are necessary to derive implications for general principles (of justice, equality, etc.) for particular cases; (4) *political contextualism*, the idea that political theory is a form of politics and thus the result of political debate, negotiation and choice; and (5) *theoretical contextualism*, wherein context determines the content of and principles used in political theory (Lægaard 2018; see also Carnes 2004; Modood and Thompson 2018, 339).

2 In this article, the terms 'ethics' and 'morals' are used interchangeably. The article is partly based on Eriksen (2003, 115–7, 146–150; 2005, 117; 2006; 2017, 37–68, 187–245; 2020b).

2 Context is King: Ethical Meaning and Normativity

Debates on meaning and normativity – e.g. on what makes an ink spot on a page like this have a particular *meaning* and on where the ethical *demandingness* of a human in need stems from – hold a central place in philosophy. Up against different ‘essentialist’ theories on meaning, which argue that meaning and normativity stem from, for example, a rule for the use of the word, a quality in the sign itself, a mental image or intention or an object the word refers to, Wittgenstein’s later work demonstrates a line of contextual thinking. It does so by pointing to *use* when we seek to understand meaning and normativity, that is to the roles e.g. sounds, ink spots and sentences play in our lives: ‘Every sign *by itself* seems dead. *What gives it life?* – In use it *lives*’ (Wittgenstein 2009, §432). His response to the question ‘How does it come about that this arrow \rightarrow *points*?’ is that ‘the arrow points only in the application that a living creature makes of it’ (Ibid §454).³ Such an application is not to be understood as an atomic action, but as a move in the wider context of what Wittgenstein calls ‘a language-game’. He uses the term language-games to refer to, among other things, ‘the *whole*, consisting of language and the activities into which it is woven’ (Wittgenstein 2009, §7, my italics). Among other things, language is part of practices, and ‘*practice* gives the words their sense’ (Wittgenstein 2006, 97). However, the context we must consider does not always stop at practices, because they are phenomena which exist only as parts of *a form of life* (Wittgenstein 2009, §§23, 325). Thus, ‘to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life’ (Ibid., §19) and ‘only in the stream of thought and life do words have meaning’ (Wittgenstein 2004, §173).⁴ In seeking to understand the meaning and normativity of a singular sign, we have moved from considering the sign in itself and the sentence it appears in, over the situation and practice it is used in, to the form of life it is part of – that is, we have progressed to ever wider contexts.

Wittgenstein considered not only the meaning of signs and words, but also the meaning and significance of, for instance, acts, music, practices, ideas, art works, images and cultures. He investigated not only linguistic meaning, but also what can be termed forms of existential, cultural and ethical meaning.⁵ When it comes to existential, cultural and ethical meaning, context also plays a decisive role:

³ See also Wittgenstein 2009, §§10, 116, 122, 156, 486; 2016, §61.

⁴ See also Wittgenstein 2016, §105; 2004, §533.

⁵ This distinction is in some ways artificial, as will become clear below. Existential meaning is the meaning(s) of an individual life (e.g. when Kierkegaard describes the life and worldview of an aesthetic person); cultural meaning can be the telos of a human form of life (as when Lear described the meaning of the Native American Crow tribe around 1800 as ‘being about hunting and

I see a picture which represents a smiling face. What do I do if I take the smile now as a *kind* one, now as *malicious*? Don't I often imagine it with a spatial and temporal context of kindness or malice? Thus I might, when looking at the picture, imagine it to be of a smiler smiling down on a child at play, or again on the suffering of an enemy.

This is in no way altered by the fact that I can also take the apparently genial situation and interpret it differently by putting it into a wider context. [...]

What is happening now has significance – in these surroundings. The surroundings give it its importance. And the word 'hope' refers to a phenomenon of human life. (A smiling mouth *smiles* only in a human face.) (Wittgenstein 2009, §§539, 583)

In trying to understand the meaning of the movement of a certain part of the human body, Wittgenstein directs our attention away from the curved mouth in isolation to the context it exists in and through.⁶ A curved human mouth only *smiles*, and only smiles *sarcastically, nervously, warmly, crookedly, shyly* or *in embarrassment*, as part of particular contexts – that is, in the face of a person in a particular situation, which is born out of a certain past and pregnant with a range of possible futures. Wittgenstein thus notes that:

My own thinking about art [and] values is far more disillusioned, than would have been *possible* for people 100 years ago. However that does not mean that it is more correct on that account. It only means that there are examples of decline in the forefront of my mind, which were not in the *forefront* for those people then. (Wittgenstein 2006, 91)

One reason why disillusion and examples of decline were in the forefront of Wittgenstein's thinking and in much of the art and literature of his time was the all-encompassing and devastating experiences of World Wars I and II.

Wittgenstein did think and write about existential, cultural and ethical meaning and normativity (see e.g. Wittgenstein 1993, 1997, 2004, 2006), but not as extensively as about linguistic meaning and normativity. The Danish theologian and moral philosopher K.E. Løgstrup, however, did, and I believe he can help us further elaborate on aspects of the role context plays with regard to ethical meaning and normativity.

In his works, Løgstrup is often writing 'up against' several moral philosophical theories. For instance, he reacts to the thinking of moral philosophers who, like Sartre, claim that the world as such is meaningless and that it is individuals who create the meaning and value of their actions and life (i.e. that ethical

war'), and ethical meaning can be the ethical significance of a certain act, poem, film or utterance (as when Wittgenstein in the quote below describes a certain way of smiling as either kind or malicious).

⁶ See also Wittgenstein 2009, §§116, 525, 584, II §75; 2006, 90; 1997, 53–59.

normativity stems from the choices of an individual or a group) (Løgstrup 1972, 45–63). Løgstrup also opposes the thinking of moral philosophers like Hare who claim that, in order to be moral, a moral judgement must be deducible from a universal moral principle (i.e. that ethical normativity stems from the principle) (Ibid., 36–41). Løgstrup expresses his own views on ethical meaning and normativity in the following ways:

But it is not I who gives my action its meaning; it gets it from the world, wherein it unfolds. [...] We cannot ourselves place a meaning in our action, our action gets its meaning from the world we live in. [...] Then the question arises, does there exist [...] a world that places an ethical meaning in our actions? The answer to that is yes, there does, and that world consists of our basic conditions, one of which is that one human being has another human being in its power. (Ibid., 55–58; my translation)

Ethical meaning and ethical normativity arise from ‘the world’ (or, to use a different term, ‘life’) – not from the individual or the collective, and not from a principle, rule or law. What is demanded stems from what goes on in the concrete situation at hand. The ‘normative authority’ belongs to the situation – not to the laws, not to me and what I ask for, not to an ethical principle, not to the wise person advising me or to a holy scripture, etc. (Ibid., 36–39).

Before the demands are the demands of the [moral] principles, they are the special and actual situation’s demand to act in an ethically descriptive way, to be brave, patient, bold, tolerant, etc.; not least are they demands for an ethically descriptive communication-possibility, a sovereign expression of life, to be trustful, to be helpful, to speak the truth, etc. (Ibid. 39; my translation)

According to Løgstrup, meaning and normativity arise in the concrete situations we are in, and as part of that out of certain given basic conditions and possibilities of human life (cf. Ibid. 63).⁷ One prominent example of these basic conditions of human life is that one human cannot interact with another without surrendering a small or significant part of his/her life into the hands of that other, thereby giving the other power over that part of his/hers life (Løgstrup 2020, 5–6, 46; 1972, 117). This power can reach from setting off a fleeting mood to deciding whether or not a person will flourish (Løgstrup 2020, 6). The joyful bus driver can lighten the mood of his passengers during their ride, and the drunk, reckless

⁷ In Løgstrup scholarship, there is no unified agreement regarding what Løgstrup defines as ‘the source of normativity’. One interpretation (reflected in the above passage) reads Løgstrup’s moral philosophy secularly based on the Introduction to *The Ethical Demand* (Løgstrup 2020, 3). Another interpretation is that Løgstrup identifies the Christian God as the source of normativity (see for example Rabjerg 2016, 205; Løgstrup 2020, 106, 147–148).

driver can cause an accident that will cripple his passengers for the rest of their lives.

What and how much of another person's life is trusted to our care depends on and varies with our relation to that person and the situation at hand. What life demands of us ethically thus also varies from context to context (Løgstrup 2020, 49; 2014, 14; 1972, 21–22).⁸ As an answer to a person worrying how someone should conduct themselves in order to convey to other persons that they are forgiven, Løgstrup remarks: 'There is no general answer to this question. There is a whole range of possibilities; it all depends on the circumstances' (Løgstrup 2020, 183). A similar response would often be appropriate when moral philosophers ask what love, freedom, care, justice or equality is.

According to Løgstrup, we are therefore much closer to 'the actual ethical phenomenon' when we 'make the concrete ethical situation explicit' than we are when entering an argument which seeks to generalise or universalise the ethical – for instance, by devising and using an ethical principle one ought to adhere to in this and any similar situation (Løgstrup 1972, 37). To illustrate this he uses an example from Stephen Toulmin's work, where a man debates with another person whether or not he ought to give John his book back, as he had promised, and if he ought to, what would justify that. Toulmin concludes that the action a particular situation prompts us to do gets its 'ethical weight' (that is, its ethical demandingness and legitimacy) from being in accord with a general principle: 'Anyone who promises anything should keep the promise' (Ibid. 37). Løgstrup argues that proceeding through 'an explication of the moral experience or an interpretation of the moral situation, and this is characterised by staying with the concrete' (Ibid. 36, my translation) is a better road to understanding what is ethically at stake and demanded of us. If someone questions whether I really ought to give John his book back before lunch, as I promised, Løgstrup suggests we stay with and pay attention to the concrete situation instead of generalising, for example by answering 'but John needs the book'. If this is further questioned with the remark that John could read something else, I could answer 'but John planned to read it this afternoon'. If this is questioned yet again ('you show John way too much consideration!'), one could still choose to stay with the concrete situation

8 In his moral philosophy, Løgstrup often focuses on what goes on ethically in meetings between two people, but he does not imply that this is the only kind of situation humans face in cases where something of ethical importance is at stake (see for example Løgstrup 2020, 136–138; 1995, 115; 1972, 160–279; 1983, 11–188; Fink 2017, 76–77). He does, however, argue that this kind of meeting plays a *special* role in human life, and that it is the ethically *primary* or most *basic* situation (Løgstrup 2020, 17; Fink 2017, 54–55). I am not convinced this latter idea is either necessary or fruitful to accept for future forms of contextual ethics.

and specific relation by answering, for instance, ‘John trusts me, and I do not want to risk losing his trust’. Here, Løgstrup explains, we argue with ‘the realisations of John’s and my own existence, which unfolds in and through our communication or interdependence’ (Ibid. 37, my translation). Løgstrup points out that by arguing for the return of a book by appealing to a general principle instead of the realisation of John’s existence, Toulmin manages to present to us ‘a dreadful man [...] utterly indifferent to John, only concerned that he himself keeps his promises so that society can survive’ (Ibid. 37, my translation). Staying with the actual situation and context at hand opens up space for relationships and particularities in one’s ethical considerations, which most types of moral theory try to iron out.⁹ To conclude, the role of context in ethical meaning and normativity is that it is only *in* the varying concrete situations of life that a gesture, a smile or an act have meaning ethically, and it is only by paying attention to the situations and contexts we are placed in that we can understand what is ethically demanded of us. It is from the situation and context that ethical meaning and normativity arise.

If we accept that context is central to ethical meaning and normativity, philosophers will be prone to ask for a definition of the word ‘context’ to clarify what is included in the context of, say, an action. In the next sections, I will therefore look into such definitions and the question of how to delimit the ethically relevant context.

3 What is ‘Context’? A Loose and Lazy Word!

Dictionaries define ‘context’ along the following lines: ‘the text or speech that comes immediately before and after a particular phrase or piece of text and helps to explain its meaning’, ‘the circumstances that form the setting for an event, statement, or idea, and in terms of which it can be fully understood’ and ‘the situation within which something exists or happens, and that can help explain it’.¹⁰ Initiating her demarcation of the concept, Margaret Urban Walker, author of the book *Moral Contexts*, remarks that “‘context’ can be a loose and lazy word” (2003, xi) and reminds her readers of some of the different ways the word is used in everyday life:

⁹ I thank Patrick McKearney for this latter formulation.

¹⁰ <https://www.coursehero.com/file/p5cfpfha/The-text-or-speech-that-comes-immediately-before-and-after-a-particular-phrase/>; <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/context> (accessed 4.5.2020).

The ‘context’ can mean the history of an episode, how it developed or what led up to it. It can invoke the specific nature of relationships and understandings among people involved in a situation; without knowing these one doesn’t grasp how a situation appears to those in it. ‘Context’ sometimes refers to a particular environment or set of circumstances that determine whether something is acceptable or makes sense – ‘But this was in a *classroom*’ – or invokes a shared understanding of the expectations that are in play in common social encounters. Depending on the context, in this sense, certain topics of discussion or styles of address are suitable, surprising, or just plainly out of bounds. ‘The context’ can also mean something as large and complex as a culture’s symbolism and its interpretation of particular human behaviours or modes of expression. Sometimes, though, ‘I’d need to understand the context’ simply means: I don’t know any details, in other words, I don’t know what happened at all. ‘Context’ is in fact an indispensable, even if a free-floating, placeholder for information crucial to understanding what we or others are doing. (Walker 2003, xi)

Context is also a placeholder for information crucial to understanding what we or others *ought* to be doing. To invoke the term ‘context’ in moral thinking is thus to pay attention to the surroundings of the phenomenon we wish to understand. If understanding the context of a phenomenon and situation is crucial for understanding what is at stake ethically, then depending on what we seek to understand, moral philosophers are helped in their work by being well-informed historically, economically, psychologically, anthropologically, politically, culturally, sociologically, religiously, etc. (cf. Hämäläinen 2016, 1).

However, bringing ‘context’ into focus raises certain challenges, as Lægaard points out: ‘If context plays an important role in political theory, there will always be an issue of delimiting the context, since it seems crucial to invoke the “right” or “relevant” contextual facts’ (Lægaard 2018, 261). I believe Walker calls ‘context’ a ‘loose and lazy’ word despite stressing its indispensability in moral thinking first because it is not possible to define the term in a way that captures all the uses, which can be relevant for moral thinking, and second because it is tempting for a moral philosopher just to mention the word ‘context’ instead of doing the more time-consuming and ethically risky work of describing the relevant context and traits of the situation in question. The issue of how to delimit what the ethically relevant context and traits of a situation are will therefore be the topic of the next section.

4 Cascading Contexts? The Issue of Delimiting Ethically Relevant Context

Jesus of Nazareth is often hailed as a great moral reformer for expanding our understanding of the ethically relevant range of context to be considered in our

life. We should love not only God, ourselves, our kin and friends, but also *our enemies!* Today, due to the massive influence humans have on the environment, we can make sense of saying that not only friends, kin and enemies, but also people we will never meet, animals, plants and future generations have an ethical claim on us. When it comes to *how broad* a context is ethically relevant, it seems that there is no end to it. It looks like we must conclude that the demarcation task, as highlighted by Lægaard, is not only a difficult, but impossible task, if we can never in an ethically legitimate way allow ourselves to draw a line in the sand and claim that the territory beyond is not ethically relevant for us to consider or be responsible for.. But to take everything into consideration is impossible, and the attempt will end up paralyzing us. We seem stuck.

In the following, I will discuss the issue of delimitation by distinguishing conceptually between four different kinds of situations, which will suggest ways out of the paralyzing maze that the above considerations led us into.¹¹

1. Firstly, in some situations, it is *obvious* what the relevant context is, what the relevant traits of the situation are, what is ethically at stake and what is ethically demanded of us. There is no open question regarding any of these things. A toddler in your care chases a ball out on the street and does not notice an approaching car. You, on the other hand, stand on the sidewalk and notice the flying ball, the running child and the fast-approaching car. So you grab the child, or you freeze in terror and fail to grab the child. Either way, the demand of the situation was to protect the child. In this and many similar situations, the question of how to delimit the ethically relevant context, the relevant traits and what is at stake does not arise. ‘Just try – in a real case – to doubt someone else’s fear or pain!’ (Wittgenstein 2009, §303). Everyday life is full of situations where the question of what the scope of the relevant context is does not arise, as it goes without saying (Løgstrup 2020, 38).

2. Secondly, we encounter countless situations in both our ordinary everyday life and in periods of crisis, where what is ethically at stake and what we ought to do or not to do is *not* obvious. Here we ponder, discuss and investigate further what the relevant context and courses of action are before the questions are settled. It is also not unusual for some of such questions to never be fully settled, particularly whether we saw things in the right context and whether what we did or not did – yesterday or a long time ago – was the right choice. This is illustrated poignantly in the novel *Home* (Robinson 2008), where we meet the middle-aged protagonist Glory Boughton, who has moved back to her childhood home in the small town of Gilead in order to take care of her elderly father, Reverend Boughton. Also returning after 20 years is Jack, Glory’s beloved scoundrel brother and Reverend

¹¹ For another approach to similar worries, see Løgstrup 2020, 41–46.

Boughton's prodigal son. Jack has always been at odds with his surroundings, and a sorrow-bringing mystery to his family and to himself. Through Glory's eyes, we follow the life of the family during the last months of the Reverend's life. At one point, the family is gathered in the kitchen while dinner is being cooked, and this brings forth memories:

His father said, 'Yes, the pleasures of family life are very real.'

'So I understand.'

'Well, you would remember them yourself, Jack. Your mother was always baking something. Ten of us in the house, and there were people dropping by all the time in those days. She felt she had to have something nice to offer them. The girls would be out here helping her, making cakes and cookies. All the talking and laughing. And a little fussing and scuffling now and then, too. Yes. But you were always off somewhere.'

'Not always.'

'No, not always. That's just how it seemed to me.'

'Sorry.'

'Well, we missed you. That's all.' (Robinson 2008: 183)

Jack has returned to Gilead to seek refuge, to make peace with the past, and to nourish the frail, translucent wish to perhaps be able to create the conditions for a future family life in Gilead with the wife and son he had to leave behind. Perhaps he can sober up and find a job here despite his well-known thieving past; perhaps his traditionalist family and the people of Gilead will be able to accept his marriage to a woman of colour. The novel slowly paints the complicated, multi-layered weave of a family's life, its countless threads and colour nuances – obligations, shared lives and memories, the different worldviews and values of older and younger generations, familiarity and awkwardness, belonging and estrangement, vulnerability and strength, acceptance and condemnation, seeing and blindness. Of trying, succeeding, failing, forgiving and trying again.

At some point, it is revealed that when Jack as a child 'always was off somewhere', as his father puts it, Jack was in fact often very close by the house, hiding and hoping to be found, but he never was. This information creates a new context for the dialogue above, changing the meaning and ethical significance of his father's words. Now the reader can start to question the family narrative about Jack and for instance wonder 'if his father and the rest of the family really missed him that much, surely, they could have located the child?' As we learn more, it becomes clear that Jack is partly hidden from his father, even when he stands right in front of

him and tries to tell him about his life, about his longing for ‘the pleasures of family life’ which he, his wife and child are denied due to the racism of their society.

There can be certainty that what unfolded in this or that situation was care or cruelty. However, questions as to what is and what was the ethically salient context and characteristics of a situation often do arise, and what was ethically at stake also often remains unsettled. One of the strengths of *Home* is that it, like life, leaves us with questions in search of an answer.

3. Thirdly, we have the kind of situations where questions regarding how to delimit the ethically relevant context, the important facts, the meaning of events, etc., not only do not arise (as a general, empirical trait of human life), but where raising them would also *lack a clear sense*. ‘There are cases where doubt is reasonable’, Wittgenstein reminds us. He continues: ‘but *others* where it seems *logically impossible*’ (Wittgenstein 2016, §454, my italics). Such situations can be seen as a sub-group of the type mentioned above under 1).

If my neighbour clearly saw the incident with the ball, child and car from his window and had realised that the child would have been run over if had I not acted, yet still came over to me afterwards to question whether my task was to save the child and declared I ought to have left her to her own devices and come to his place for a cup of coffee instead – then what? Then his remarks would be uncannily unintelligible to me (‘what do you mean, have left her to ...?’). To question that the demand of this situation was to save the child not only lacks sense, but would also make it difficult to figure out how to respond to the neighbour: Has he gone temporarily mad? Is he making an inappropriate joke in a failed attempt to make me relax again? Is he a psychopath? Is he dangerous? (see for example Pleasants 2008).

I know that a sick man is lying here? Nonsense! I am sitting at his bedside, I am looking into his face. – So I don’t know, then, that there is a sick man lying here? *Neither* the question *nor* the assertion makes sense. (Wittgenstein 2016, §10, my italics)

For a question or an assertion to make sense, it requires the right kind of context (Wittgenstein 2009, §141–142; 2016, §271). The question and assertion in the quote make no sense because the context for them is wrong if the situation is that I am sitting in a hospital next to my friend dying from cancer.

To suggest that people can ‘decide’ what methods to use in supporting a moral judgement is to suggest that people can decide what a moral judgement is, can decide whether an issue is a moral one. You may of course decide to *make* a moral issue out of a conflict, but you cannot decide what will be making it a moral issue, what kinds of reasons, entered in what way, to what effect, will be moral reasons. (Cavell 1999, 289)

The third kind of case relevant to the question of how to delimit the ethically relevant context and traits of the situation is the situation where these questions not only do not arise, but where they cannot be raised in a way that makes clear sense or is not absurd, revolting or grotesque. We can here talk of having hit moral bedrock.¹²

4. However, if we now return to Wittgenstein's words above and write the full quote, it goes like this: 'There are cases where doubt is reasonable, but others where it seems logically impossible. *And there seems to be no clear boundary between them*' (Wittgenstein 2016, §454, my italics). That there is no clear boundary between cases where doubt 'is reasonable' (where we thus, for instance, meaningfully can raise question about how to delimit the relevant context of this situation) and cases where doubt seems 'logically impossible' (and raising such questions lacks any clear sense), brings us to the final kind of situation I want to discuss in this section – one which reflects the possibility of radical moral change and moral revolution.

In some cases, we find that even though questions of the ethically relevant context and the relevant characteristics of this context do not arise (or are only raised by deviants), and it makes no sense to raise them (hence those who do are considered deviants), we can later come to realise that these questions *ought* to have arisen and that the people we considered moral deviants were actually moral pioneers (Eriksen 2017, 187–246; Baker 2019, 1–114). Helen Macdonald details one such situation in her memoir *H is for Hawk*:

I close my copy of Bert's *Treatise of Hawks and Hawking* with a snap, and as the cover falls my hawk makes a curious, bewitching movement. She twitches her head to one side then turns it upside down and continues to regard me with the tip of her beak pointing at the ceiling. I am astonished. I've seen this head-turning before. Baby falcons do it when they play. But goshawks? *Really?* [...] Her eyes are narrowed in bird-laughter. I am laughing too. I roll a magazine into a tube and peer at her through it as if it were a telescope. She ducks her head to look at me through the hole. She pushes her beak into it as far as it will go, biting the empty air inside. Putting my mouth to my side of the paper telescope I boom into it: 'Hello, Mabel.' She pulls her beak free. All the feathers on her forehead are raised. She shakes her tail rapidly from side to side and shivers with happiness. An obscure shame grips me. I had a fixed idea of what a goshawk was, just as those Victorian falconers had, and it was not big enough to hold what goshawks are. No one had ever told me goshawks played. It was not in the books. I had

¹² One way of discussing this aspect of human life is through the notion of 'basic moral certainty', which is inspired by Wittgenstein's work in *On Certainty* (see for example Eriksen 2020a, in press; Hermann 2015; O'Hara 2018; Pleasants 2008). It also raises important questions relating to, for instance, discussions of 'conservatism' and 'relativism', but these require more space to elaborate on properly than this article allows for.

not imagined it was possible. I wondered if it was because no one had ever played with them. The thought made me terribly sad. (Macdonald 2014, 113–114)

A too firm or narrow idea of what animals, children, women, men, good, bad and reality are have often kept us from hearing, seeing and understanding what we ethically ought to have heard, seen and understood. A host of other things have done so too, such as lack of empathy, the belief that something is just the order of nature, lack of imagination, that the gods have commanded it to be so, or an evil spirit had possessed us. We have situations where it turns out that our moral certainty was in fact blinding us. Therefore is the border between cases, where it makes sense to raise questions about what is ethically at stake and cases where it makes no sense to do so, inherently fuzzy and restless.¹³

Where do the above-described four different types of situation leave us with regard to Lægaard's initial concerns for contextual thinking, namely the issue of delimiting the context and the relevant facts of a situation? I distinguished conceptually between situations where (1) the questions do not arise, because the case is obvious; (2) questions do arise and are often answered, but the matter can also often not be finally settled; (3) raising the questions would make no sense; and (4) they are not raised and makes no sense to raise them, but where it turns out they ought to have been raised. Given this background, I believe it should be concluded that we cannot work out a generally reliable rule or universal criterion we can apply in all or most cases in order to ensure that we will delimit a context correctly and take notice of the truly relevant facts of a situation.

However, we do have rules of thumb, paradigm cases, ordinary language criteria, laws, the advice of wise people, methods of investigation relative to particular practices, general experiences, sayings, myths and religious texts and a host of other tools which under normal circumstances are helpful in teaching and guiding us when questions of the relevant context for an issue or problem are raised. What we can do is to seek out experience and knowledge and we can discuss and critically reflect on typical and atypical existential issues, situations and contexts. The latter kind of reflection is part of what moral philosophy can help us with. Through all of this we can work to refine our individual and collective practical wisdom and what Diamond has called 'the point of view from which we see and attend with warmth and sympathy to the complex reality of human life' (1997, 246).

¹³ The term 'restless' is borrowed from Waldenfelds (2011, 8).

5 Moral Philosophers, Unite!

Contextual ethics is not a uniform movement, but rather a family of approaches. A great many of them are characterised by forms of ‘bottom-up approaches’ and ‘descriptive approaches’ (some of which stay at ‘the bottom’ and do not aim to generalise or theorise). However, as in most families, there are also significant disagreements and quarrels, e.g. what ‘theory’ and ‘general or universal principles’ amount to and what role (if any) they play, how ‘the empirical’ can and cannot inform philosophy and how ‘the ethical’ should be defined, if at all. Despite these disagreements, most thinkers relying on a contextual approach find this approach helpful as a way of minimising certain mistakes and missteps they believe are more prone to appear in ‘top-down approaches’, such as moralising, oversimplifying matters, ignoring important moral changes or the need for them, overgeneralising, becoming so abstract that one’s thinking loses touch with actual moral problems, falling for narrowmindedness and prejudices, being led to believe there is one and only one solution to an ethical problem, and other ways of misrepresenting and distorting the ethical phenomena we seek to understand.

If we focus on the forms of contextual ethics inspired by the work of the later Wittgenstein, which this article also represents, it is set apart from most forms of traditional analytical moral philosophy in how it understands the nature of ‘the ethical’. What seems to have characterised a great deal of moral thinking is that philosophers have worked on delimiting ‘the essence’ of the ethical, such as the formulation of a moral law, a certain motive, certain forms of consequences, obligations or actions, the result of a certain procedure, certain forms of language-games, a certain group of concepts, etc. The following quote by Løgstrup gives us a first clue as to how to think differently about ‘the ethical’:

As a shortcut one could call art an area of our life, because there are in fact people who are artists and others who are not; there are things that are artworks and things that are not. Ethics, on the other hand, does not give rise to separating one kind of people from another kind of people, one kind of thing from another kind of thing. *Ethics*, compared to art, is *everywhere and nowhere*, so we stop too early in making our distinction when we systematically turn art and ethics into two regions. If we complete our distinction, it turns out that at least ethics is not regionally delimited. (Løgstrup 1995, 7–8; my translation and italics)

According to this conception, the ethical can be all over the place, and ‘moral thought [...] can in theory range over any subject matter’ (Crary 2007, 313).¹⁴ This is why, as Fink has noted, it is not necessary – and not necessarily helpful – to use

¹⁴ This is one reason why distinguishing between ‘linguistic meaning and normativity’ and ‘ethical meaning and normativity’ can be misleading.

certain morally charged words in order to speak about or show what is ethically salient in a situation: ‘the ethically and morally important can often best be said without talking about ethics and morals’ (Fink 2012, 18, my translation). Or, in Diamond’s words, ‘there is no idea here of a “moral point of view” *set over against* other sorts of attention to the human soul’ (1997, 246).

This does not entail that we cannot say anything about what ‘an ethical issue’ is or give examples of situations where something of ethical importance is at stake. Moral philosophy of all kinds as well as literature, films, everyday conversations, anthropology, psychology, theatre, art is full of insights into exactly that. However, it does entail that ‘the ethical’ has no essence. To say that ‘the ethical’ has no essence means that we cannot *exhaustively* define or codify what the ethical is and demands from us now and in the future (see e.g. Christensen 2011, 806; Fink 2007; Lovibond 2019, 86–89). This can be articulated as there is an intrinsic openness or longing to the ethical: It can transcend ‘where’ and ‘what’ it has formerly been.

Neither do these remarks imply that everything is or will become morally important – for instance, what colour shirt I wear today or how I hold my pencil when editing are not morally important. The point is that, *given the right context*, they could be so. The line between the moral and the non-moral is thus also restless.

We said before that no moral theory can be built on the one-sided [ethical] demand, and for this reason it cannot be used to control our existence. Nevertheless, we do try to clarify the content and the nature both of the [ethical] demand and its understanding of life, and to formulate what we believe we have learned in this manner. But all knowledge, regardless of what it is that it knows, and every formulation, regardless of what it is that it formulates, can very easily suggest that we have thereby got on top of the thing in question. [...] Consequently, there is a tension between the knowledge and formulation on the one hand, and the [ethical] demand and its understanding of life on the other hand, as long as we try to know and formulate the [ethical] demand and its understanding of life. (Løgstrup 2020, 103)

One consequence of the impossibility of exhaustively capturing and delimiting ‘the ethical’ is that context gains prominence in our attempts to understand what is ethically at stake in life.

Giving ‘context’ prominence in ethical thinking and using a metaethical frame like that presented in rough outline here also gives us reasons to, if not end ‘the philosophy war’, then at least enter a respectful ceasefire. The proposed metaethical framework offers us an explanation as to why the war among competing moral theories – e.g. ‘deontology’, ‘consequentialism’, ‘virtue ethics’, ‘care ethics’ – is both perceptually ongoing and impossible to win. It is perceptually ongoing because all the participants in the war are onto something which often is ethically indispensable in the context of human life, generally speaking. The issue

of a virtuous character, a conception of the good life as a whole, the consequences of our actions, our interdependence and the motive for an action can be and often are morally salient issues. Instead of the image of an essence, which leads us into perceptual war, Wittgenstein gives moral philosophers a way out by offering an alternative image:

It could be said that the use of the word ‘good’ (in an ethical sense) is a combination of a very large number of interrelated games, each of them, as it were ‘a facet of the use’. (Wittgenstein in Kuusela 2008, 12).

‘The ethical’ could be conceptualised as a concept with several irreducible facets (see also Wittgenstein 2009, §77).¹⁵ Adopting Wittgenstein’s image of ‘a very large number of interrelated language-games’ seems promising for future moral philosophy, because it respects and makes room for all the traditional candidates competing for the crown of ethics without crowning any of them.¹⁶ ‘The ethical’ can thus be described, defined and codified, but never exhaustively so, and attempts to finally encapsulate the essence of the ethical into a theory, a conceptual frame, or a tight definition are doomed to fail. Therefore, the moral philosophy war cannot be won.

Moral philosophers are as condemned to continue the rebellion against moral philosophy, past and present, as they are destined to dream up future forms of vibrant moral philosophy.¹⁷

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¹⁵ An image borrowed from Hyman’s work on agency (Hyman 2015, iv).

¹⁶ This idea is also explored in Eriksen (2017, 54–56; in press, 2020a) and Christensen (2018; in press, 2020).

¹⁷ I would like to thank Patrick McKearney and the anonymous reviewer for their helpful comments and critiques.

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