

Contextual Ethics – Developing Conceptual and Theoretical Approaches

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Editorial

Anne-Marie Søndergaard Christensen and Cecilie Eriksen Contextual Ethics – Developing Conceptual and Theoretical Approaches

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We have got onto slippery ice where there is no friction, and so, in a certain sense, the conditions are ideal, but also, just because of that, we are unable to walk. We want to walk: so we need friction. Back to the rough ground! (Wittgenstein 2009: §107)

Wittgenstein's call has resonated in the philosophical community. In myriads of ways moral philosophers have immersed themselves into the world – into the 'the immanent', 'the empirical', and 'the everyday'. In modern moral philosophy, this development has, for example, materialized itself in the popularity of 'ground-up' approaches to a large range of topics such as hope, justice, human nature, and moral change. Moral philosophers engage history, anthropology, psychology, and empirical research in order to investigate and answer their questions (e.g., Appiah 2008; Kitcher 2011; Lear 2006; MacIntyre 1981, 1999; Nussbaum 2011; Taylor 1989; Walker 2003; Williams 1985, 1993). Approaches such as these give *context* ethical prominence.

The interest in context also grows out of a series of criticisms of the paradigm of moral theory dominant in moral philosophy in the 20th and start of the 21st century. According to this paradigm, the main focus of moral philosophy was on the development of prescriptive, universalist theories such as theories of contractualism, utilitarianism, obligation, rights, and so on, and this work was most often considered to be independent of an understanding of the actual social and ordinary life contexts of human beings. However, virtue ethicists (Elisabeth Anscombe, John McDowell, Bernard Williams), Wittgensteinians (Stanley Cavell, Cora Diamond, Alice Crary), and care ethicists (Joan Tronto, Virginia Held, Carol Gilligan), thinkers from critical theory (Alex Honneth, Amy Allen, Rahel Jaeggi) as well as philosophers who draw on a number of these positions (such as Iris Murdoch) have all helped in providing more context-sensitive approaches to moral

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philosophy. In various ways, these approaches share a fundamental concern that the dominant conception of moral theory, with its implicit division of moral philosophy into three components of meta-ethics, normative ethics and applied ethics, has gradually eroded philosophers' understanding of how knowledge of moral life plays into the ethical and, in turn, into moral philosophy. In contrast, this family of alternative approaches in moral philosophy assert – after a long period of relative neglect – the centrality not only of general considerations, but also of first-hand moral experience together with an understanding of moral relationships and the social, cultural, and historical aspects of ordinary life, securing in effect a new course for moral philosophy.

In the attempt to overcome the fixation with theory in moral philosophy and develop new approaches to the ethical, the investigation of context takes center stage. One driving motivation for this is the aim to find ways in which moral philosophers may assist and improve life, rediscovering itself as one moral practice among others. By creating an opening for new ways of conceptualizing moral philosophy, it also becomes possible to re-think the activity of moral philosophers. The philosophers' task no longer consists solely in presenting arguments for substantive moral positions, but can also be understood as a reflective practice that interrogates existing moral positions and commitments and does so with the aim of providing conceptual clarity, critique, or creative input.

Context has gained further prominence because of the growing interest in the idea that the ethical cannot exhaustively be captured theoretically, because it is inherently open and interwoven with numerous aspects of human life; a point developed in the work of moral philosophers such as K.E. Løgstrup (2020), Cora Diamond (1996), Alice Crary (2007), and Sabina Lovibond (2019). If the ethical does not constitute a separate domain that can be separated from other areas of our lives, then moral philosophers cannot assume that it is possible to delineate 'a moral subject matter', for example via the identification of sentences with moral concepts. Instead, everything that may take on importance for us, may also potentially be of moral relevance, but to know what actually takes on such moral importance, we need to be attentive to context.

Here, the ethical is understood as *sui generis* in this sense of not being reducible to, for example, the legal, the social, or the biological. The legal issue can be settled without the ethical issue being settled with it. A person may adhere to all social rules of a situation and yet do a moral wrong. All my biological needs can be met, yet there can still be a problem of a moral nature in my life. However, the ethical is also *nonautonomous* in the sense of not being independent of, for example, the legal, the social or the biological. In order to understand what is ethically at stake in a certain situation it can be necessary to pay attention to what is legally, socially, or biologically at stake. A political regime responsible for

violating the legal rights of its people or for letting them starve is morally blameworthy for those very reasons.

These are some of the reasons why the concept of ‘context’ has been given a central place in the developing meta-ethical stance that we have coined ‘contextual ethics’. However, despite this increasing interest in investigations of context in moral philosophy, it is still impossible to trace the outline of a new paradigm of ‘Contextual ethics’ in moral philosophy. The heterodox approaches to context show both lines of continuity and differences, and we still lack a deeper understanding of how to describe these new approaches to context, and of whether they can be combined to form such a new paradigm. The aim of this special issue is to formulate why context is ethically important, to discuss how to integrate contextual concerns into moral philosophy and to develop adequate conceptual and theoretical frameworks for contextualized ethics. Its main focus is thus meta-philosophical: It investigates how we are to understand and conceptualize a truly contextual form of moral philosophy.

The questions this issue touches upon include the following: How are we to understand the role of context in moral philosophy? What determines the relevant context and how does the inclusion of context affect philosophical work? What is the role of moral theory? Should we continue to consider theories the main product of the philosopher’s work, or rather should theories be conceived of and used as adaptable tools for furthering understanding and analysis in context-bound discussions? What theoretical and conceptual tools are needed to do contextualized ethics? What kind of knowledge of context may be relevant in moral philosophy? Of course, we do not think that we can fully settle these questions with this special issue. Rather, our hope is to help bring the conversation about context into the open in moral philosophy and to help move it forward. We think this would benefit moral philosophy itself, but we also think this is crucial if moral philosophy is to be able to engage with other disciplines to solve some of the pressing ethical issues of our time.

The idea of putting together this issue surfaced at a workshop on contextual ethics held at University of Southern Denmark in November 2019, which also featured previous versions of a number of the contributions published here. The workshop is part of a series of workshops in the project *Contextual Ethics* (2019–2021) funded by The Joint Committee for Nordic research councils in the Humanities and Social Sciences (NOS-HS).

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