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Abstract: In this article, I investigate how we may include investigations of actual context in the investigation of moral problems in philosophy. The article has three main parts. The focus of the first is a survey of the dominant view of how to incorporate context into moral philosophy and to exemplify this view, I investigate examples from influential introductions to moral philosophy, identifying what I call *the assumption of abstraction*. In the second part I present three traditions which attribute a more prominent place to context in philosophical work and which therefore offer resources for thinking about context: moral contextualism, particularism and contextualism in political philosophy. Unconvinced that these resources are sufficient for an understanding of how actual context may be of importance in philosophy, I in the third part turn to a systematic investigation of three suggestions for how to incorporate actual context onto philosophy: the application approach, the bottom-up approach and the contextual approach. Furthermore, I argue that the third and most radical approach develops a superior understanding of how to include context in moral philosophy, reflecting the impossibility of making normatively neutral investigations of context in moral philosophy.

Keywords: actual context, assumption of abstraction, moral problems, contextualism in political philosophy, particularism, moral contextualism

1 Introduction

The leading question of this article is how we are to include and investigate *actual contexts* in the investigation of moral problems in philosophy. For example, if we are trying to understand the moral problems related to divorce, how much do the circumstances surrounding a specific divorce matter for what is right and wrong in this case? If we are trying to understand the ethical problems related to the

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increasing use of AI tools in health care, what is the philosophical importance of understanding the organisation of the health-care system in question and the customs surrounding the relationship between patients and health-care professionals here? If we hold that loyalty is important in friendships, how much knowledge do we need to have about the relevant historical and cultural norms surrounding a specific friendship and about the friendship itself to judge when and where considerations of loyalty matter here? And so on.

In this article, I do not intend to investigate the examples just mentioned or others like them. Instead, I will offer an overview of the dominant understanding of context in moral philosophy today and, in light of this, develop a more promising framework for the consideration of actual contexts in moral philosophy. The article thus has three main parts. The first part focuses on reviewing different views of how to talk about and incorporate context in contemporary philosophy. Through an investigation of examples from influential introductions to moral philosophy, I will bring out how moral philosophy today is to a large degree characterised by a neglect of context. Furthermore, I will challenge this neglect by drawing on the thinking of philosophers who criticises the central role ascribed to moral theories in moral philosophy. In the second part, I give a brief review of three traditions, moral contextualism, particularism and contextualism in political philosophy, which attribute a more prominent place to context in philosophical work, and which therefore offer resources for thinking about context.

Unconvinced, however, that the resources developed in these three positions will enable us to investigate how actual context may be of importance in philosophy, I turn to a systematic investigation of three suggestions for how to incorporate actual context into philosophy: the application approach, the bottom-up approach and the contextual approach. In my view, all three suggestions provide us with valuable insights about how to include context in moral philosophy, but I also conclude that the third and most radical suggestion presents the most promising and fruitful understanding of context by arguing that the investigation of context is itself part of the investigation of a moral problem, of figuring out what this problem consists in. In this way, context goes into the very constitution of moral problems. In the final section of the article, I discuss two different views of the relationship between context and normativity, arguing against the possibility of a normatively neutral investigation of context.

Preliminary, I would like to clarify two points about the chosen vocabulary. First, the article takes as its focus *moral problems*, not moral theories or principles, because part of what I am investigating is the relation between theories and principles on the one hand and moral context on the other, as well as the extent to which theories and principles is necessary in the investigation of moral

problems. I would also like to offer two central ideas that will be guiding for my investigations. First, that for most moral problems, it is possible and necessary to specify features of context that are *morally relevant* for this problem – that it is a problem for these particular people, that it is a problem arising within this specific setting, at this specific time and so on. The source of our insight into the relation between a moral problem and its specific context may come from various different sources, from empirical work such as qualitative studies, from fictional work such as literature, films, series, from other disciplines such as sociology, history, health studies and so on. The second idea is that for this type of moral problems, an understanding of the morally relevant context matters for our understanding of the problems in our interest in moral philosophy, which means that the specifications of a problem change when a similar problem arises in a new context.

2 On the Dominant View of Context in Moral Philosophy and Some of its Critics

One of the assumptions motivating this article is that the importance and influence of context has been neglected in moral philosophy traditionally, and that it is still fairly neglected today, even if there is currently an increase in attention to the significance of context especially within some areas of applied ethics and Wittgensteinian ethics. The question is how to make a case for the claim about this neglect of context? One way to provide some anecdotal evidence is to look at how the word 'context' is used in introductions and handbooks to ethics, with the aim of showing that there is, in general, almost no discussion of actual contexts and their influence on the presented positions and theories.[1]

In one very influential introduction, *A Companion to Ethics* (Singer 1991), we find almost no mentions or discussions of context at all, one of the few exception being a short critical discussion of W.D. Ross' neglect of context orchestrated by Jonathan Dancy: 'What Ross supposes, without argument, is that a feature which counts in favour of this action must count in the same way in favour of any action which has it', Dancy notes and argues 'the theory allows too small a role context; it is too atomistic' (Dancy 1991, 228). The frustration with the absence of discussion of the importance of context is part of what drives Dancy's own work in particularism; work which we will return to below. What I want to note here is that in the

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1 Of course I acknowledge that it is possible to discuss context without using the word 'context', and that the word, in this way, only works as an indicator of whether a text deals actually with context. However, after having worked with the two mentioned introductions for years, I can say that, in these specific cases, it is a rather reliable indicator.

Companion to Ethics, Dancy's plea for the significance of context for an understanding of morality is the minority view.[2]

In *The Oxford Handbook of Ethical Theories* (Copp 2006), the picture is slightly more varied. In many articles, there is still no mention of context, and ethics is described, discussed, and theorised as if it can be understood independently of its contextual actualisations. When the word 'context' does appear,[3] it is used to invoke the general importance of context to a moral principle or judgement, but this is always done without any specification of an actual context – as in this discussion of how utilitarianism 'insists on this equal weighing of everyone's interests not just in special contexts … but of all agents in all contexts' (Brink 2006, 406). What characterises these appeals to context are that they only involve very general features of context such as for example the difference between 'diachronic intrapersonal contexts [and] interpersonal contexts' (Brink 2006, 403).

These invocations of contexts invite an important clarification. My claim that context is generally neglected in contemporary moral philosophy does not entail the claim that context is considered unimportant. My point is rather that context is dealt with in *completely abstract terms* both in theories focused on the development of moral principles and in those relying more on practical judgement. We find an example of the first kind in the introduction to Immanuel Kant's principled form of ethics. Here, Thomas E. Hill makes the point that, even if for Kant, the formulae of the categorical imperative is meant to express objective principles expressive of a form of rationality that is independent of contingent human conditions, these principles cannot 'be applied to particular human situations without some knowledge of that situation and general facts about our world' (Hill 2006, 495). In order to apply Kant's principles, we need to identify and consider the facts relevant to a given judgement, and in this way, context does influence the application of principles. Importantly, however, context does *not* influence the principles themselves. Ethical normativity is in this way exclusively tied to principles and independent of context, and the investigations of what features of context that may have moral relevance is not one that is crucial for the philosophical presentation and investigation of Kant's ethics.

One reason for this is that context is not understood to have normative implications. As Hill writes: 'We need intermediate premises specifying what it is to respect dignity in different contexts, but [Kant] argues that these are empirical and

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2 The only other article which features any significant invocation of context is George Silverbauer's explanation of the function of morality in small-scale societies; a discussion which is anthropological rather than philosophical in nature (Silverbauer 1991).
3 I here set aside trivial instances where the word 'context' is used to point to specific places in text etc. as in 'This idea arises in various contexts in Kant's thought' (Darwall 2006, 289).

hermeneutical premises, not independent moral principles' (Hill 2006, 491). Implicit in Hill's remark is a distinction between moral input in the form of ethical principles on the one hand, and 'empirical and hermeneutical premises' on the other, where the latter provides an understanding of context which is necessary for applying normative principles, but which is also normatively neutral. What is implied in this, is a picture of context as normatively inert and of the details of context as philosophically less important.

In theories more focused on the use of practical wisdom, such as for example Julia Annas' conception of virtue ethics, we do not find the same neat separation between ethical normativity and context. Rather, we are presented with a view according to which moral normativity develops out of context and is – at least initially – dependent on the normative background of the people aspiring to be virtuous. Annas writes:

> Ethical reflection begins from what you have learned in your society; but it requires you to progress from that. Virtue begins from following rules or models in your social and cultural context; but it requires that you develop a disposition to decide and act that involves the kind of understanding that only you can achieve in your own case. (Annas 2006, 518)[4]

In the form of virtue ethics presented by Annas, some character traits come to qualify as virtues because they contribute to 'my living my life as a whole in a way that lives it *well*' (Annas 2006, 520), and even if Annas does not elaborate on this, it is clear she establishes several connections between moral normativity and context. Context provides the background learning out of which we are able to develop the virtues, and it provides the conditions in which our attempt to live successfully will have to unfold. What we do not find in Annas' discussion, is any indication that it is necessary to move beyond abstract appeals to context to develop a proper understanding of virtue ethics.[5] In so far as Annas only makes the point about context's normative contribution in the abstract, she is in line with the few other chapters in *The Oxford Handbook* which even mention context, and with the understanding of the role of context found in most contemporary moral philosophy.

I think there are several aspects to the neglect of context, but what I have shown above is that the most pertinent is what I will call *the assumption of abstraction*. This assumption has two parts, first that what is philosophically

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4 Kant would, to a large degree, agree that morality must be based on what we learn in our society, but he sees this as something to be surpassed for the ideal expressed in the categorical imperative. Furthermore, in contemporary introductions to Kant's ethics, his work on the societal context of ethics often plays a minor role or no role at all.

5 Even if there are a few discussions in Annas' work that involves specifications particular contexts.

interesting about context can be treated in the abstract, and second, that any questions concerning the actual context of a moral problem can be postponed to and settled in the application of the ethical position, taking place outside of moral philosophy. In contrast to this assumption, I want to develop a view according to which many problems in moral philosophy *cannot be understood* if they are investigated in isolation from a substantial understanding of the context in which they arise and unfold; a view which challenges both parts of the assumption of abstraction. According to my view, the problem is not just that lack of attention to context will make moral philosophers overlook important moral problems, but that some problems will be misunderstood and distorted by neglecting context. This means that if philosophers are to discuss these moral problems, it is necessary to have, not just an abstract, but a concrete and comprehensible understanding of their context.

The critique of the tendency towards abstraction and context-independence in moral philosophy is not new. For decades, the dominant view of moral philosophy as primarily concerned with the development of moral theory has been criticised for indulging in a theoretical drive away from particularities and context towards generality and abstraction. We find a form of this critique in Bernard Williams' point that even if a move towards abstraction may be appropriate in many sciences, it is not appropriate in moral philosophy because moral philosophy deals with a form of thought with the aim 'to help us to construct a world that will be our world, one in which we have a social, cultural and personal life' (Williams 1985, 111). And humans do not live their lives in the abstract, as already Søren Kierkegaard objected against G.W.F. Hegel (see Kierkegaard 1843).[6] The critique of the move from concrete to abstract understandings of context also relates back to Anette Baier's attack on the widespread understanding that the main task of philosophy is to develop moral theory in the form of 'a fairly tightly systematic account of a fairly large area of morality, with a key stone supporting all the rest' (Baier 1985, 55); an idea that Baier analyses as a 'retreat of the theorist from moral problems in the real world to the construction of private fantasy moral worlds' (Baier 1989, 37) where moral thought may be subjected to demands for explicitness and coercive justification.

Williams' and Baier's main target of critique is the abstraction involved in theory-building, and this theme is further developed by a contemporary

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6 As Anthony Rudd notes, Kierkegaard's pseudonym Climacus, author of *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments* (1846), 'does not advance any interesting new theory to the effect that religious and ethical teaching should be understood subjectively; he reminds us of the contexts within which ethical and religious concepts do have their meaning. And – rightly or wrongly (I think rightly) – he claims that these contexts are essentially personal ones' (2000, p. 124).

theory-critic, Sophie Grace Chappell. Chappell argues that one of the main reasons why contemporary moral philosophy plays a very limited role in most people's practical lives today is because of philosophy's fascination with the idea of systematic moral theory, that is, 'an approach to thinking about what to do which derives conclusions about what to do in particular cases from the most general possible principles about what to do in any case whatsoever' (2014, 1).[7] According to Chappell, there are at least two reasons why this ideal of systematic moral theory makes moral philosophers generally inattentive to context. The first is that the construction of theories often lead philosophers to offer what Chappell calls 'detail in the wrong place' for example by explaining something that is intuitively obvious by reference to something that is morally doubtful. The second is that philosophers strive for abstractness in theories because they think this necessary in order to live up to an ideal of rationality in the form of detachment and dispassionateness.[8] Chappell sees both these reasons as expressions of 'the failure of systematic theory to fit the contours of ethical experience, or real life' (ibid. 2), the first by conflicting with some of our most basic intuitions, and the second by conflicting with a sounder view of moral rationality that does not depend on detachment from our ordinary moral experiences, and on the idea of an exclusive dichotomy between emotions and rationality, thereby allowing for an ideal for moral philosophy of rational and attentive love.

What theory-critics such as Williams, Baier and Chappell bring out is how the attempt to develop general, 'one-size fits all' moral theories and the drive towards abstraction make moral philosophers inattentive and even dismissive of concrete contexts of the moral problems they are trying to solve.[9] A special virtue of Chappell's discussion of the drive towards abstraction in moral philosophy is her critique of the often unlikely, unrealistic and decidedly odd features of the context of problems and examples discussed in moral philosophy. One such feature is that the context of many philosophical examples somehow presents us with a fixed set of options amongst which we have to choose such as for example in the many trolley cases. This idea of a fixed set of options is what provides the necessary background for advise such as: 'Given a set of options … decision theory

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7 Walker makes a similar point in the introduction to her (2003).

8 One of Chappell's overall aims is that of showing that the change leading to contemporary analytical moral philosophy, consisting in the 'dropping of qualifications, *caveats*, and contextualizing factors is the opposite of progress. It is not a theoretical or practical advance in our thinking, but a decline' (2014, 14). See also Chappell (2009).

9 For an overview of theory-critique in contemporary moral philosophy, see also Christensen (2018 and forthcoming 2020, chapter 2).

recommends an option that maximises utility' (Weirich 2013, quoted from Chappell 2014, 10). However, in real life we are very rarely confronted with a fixed set of options.[10] As Chappell notes, 'the world does not just *present* us with option ranges, already written into the nature of things. Rather, it is already a crucial act of moral priming, one might say of moral perception, to frame the situation as presenting us with just the following options – and no others' (ibid.). What this priming does is to hide the fact that achieving a clear understanding of our options is in itself a form of moral work, just as finding out and settling that something is indeed a moral option for us is also a form of moral work. Despite this, discussions in moral philosophy often proceed as if there is no work involved in coming to know what our options consist in and no insecurities and no opaqueness arising from a moral problem's relation to context.

Chappell also brings out the oddness of philosophical invocations of context in an investigation of the popular ticking bomb scenarios made up to establish a situation where we have to choose either to torture a terrorist so that he will tell us where the ticking bomb is hidden or stand idly by while 1000s of innocent people are killed. Her point is that it seems highly unlikely in any actual situation that this would be our only two options. What about looking for the bomb? Evacuating the city? And even if we accept this part of the context of the example, that it offers only two options for action, how do we come to know what we seem to know in the example? As Chappell points out, how do we know that the terrorist definitely knows where the bomb is? How do we know that torture will make him tell us the truth about where the bomb is? How do we know that he will tell us in time? How do we know that there is no other way of making him talk? And on and on (ibid. 30–35). In discussing a scenario where the context is so removed from and unlike what we meet in moral life, it is unclear what is done if we settle on whether to torture that man or not. If we move beyond the special context established in the confines of example this seems completely unclear.

What Chappell brings out, is that examples are rarely used in moral philosophy in a way that help us understand the role that context plays in moral problems. Rather the opposite, as these examples often draw on an implicit understanding of

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10 Of course, we can think up examples where context do present us with a given option set for example if my child is drowning and my only two chances of saving her are immediately to jump in the sea or to alert a boat nearby then other option may seem completely irrelevant. However, a case like this is the exception and rare in ordinary life. Furthermore, with regard to many of the moral problems that philosophers treat as having a given option set – for example as whether to allocate health-care resources using age criteria or not to do so – it is possible to ask for the background reasoning or process that made this criterion look like the only relevant one. If we make an investigation of the actual context in which this question arises, it is more than likely that other relevant criteria for allocating health-care resources will present themselves.

context that is decidedly at odds with anything recognisable from real-life moral problems. The question is whether there are other domains of moral philosophy where we can find resources for an understanding of how to do philosophy in a way that is truly attentive to actual context. To this question, we now turn.

3 Three Contemporary Forms of Contextualism

Above, I argue that many moral philosophers yield to the temptations of the drive towards abstraction and thereby fail to notice and appreciate the importance of actual context for the problems they are interested in. In contrast to this, I am developing the claim that moral philosophers need to investigate how actual context may be of importance for moral thinking and judgement. The motivating assumption is that, in many cases, if we want to think philosophically about moral problems, we need to think about them in relation to the specific context in which they arise. The question is where we can find resources for such an investigation, and three positions look like promising approaches to context in moral philosophy, namely moral contextualism, moral particularism and contextualism in political philosophy. However, when we look closer, at least two of these three positions do not rise to the task that I describe above, that of engaging in investigations of *actual contexts* of moral problems.

In the case of *moral contextualism*, the interest in investigations of specific examples of moral contexts is rather limited. Moral contextualism is a position that is inspired by epistemic contextualism and the idea that the truth conditions of utterances are context sensitive (see e.g. Rysiew 2016). In moral contextualism this is transformed into the idea that the truth of moral statements is relative to implicit standards or ends that differ from context to context, which means that 'the same moral judgement of the form 'Agent A's conduct C is morally acceptable' may have different truth values in different conversational contexts' (Montminy 2007, 1). For my purposes, moral contextualism looks promising because it allows that context plays a crucial role when we are trying to establish whether a moral judgement is true. However, when moral contextualists argue for and develop their specific versions of the idea of the context-dependence of moral statements, they proceed – much like contextualists in epistemology – by discussing different variations of made-up examples. In order to show that the truth value of a moral judgement can vary with context, it is important that the judgement included in the examples is comparable over different contexts, and both the judgement and the context of the examples are chosen for this purpose (see e.g. Björnsson and Finlay 2010; Brogaard 2008; Evers 2014; Montminy 2007). This means that even if moral contextualism provides one compelling reason for

the moral importance of context and one approach to the study of context, it does not help us that much when we are trying to understand how to incorporate investigations of actual contexts in moral philosophy.

There is some similarity between the fundamental idea of moral contextualism and the idea expressed by Jonathan Dancy above that we should question whether a feature which counts in favour of an action in one context must count in the same way in all other contexts. Dancy has developed this idea in his work on *moral particularism*, claiming that all moral reasons are particular and context-sensitive, rather than general. Central to this understanding of particularism is an argument for the holism of reasons which, according to Dancy, entails the claim that what serves as a reason for acting in a certain way in one case may not serve as reason for acting in the same way in another case (this claim is central in Dancy 1993, 2017). In addition to this, Dancy's work on particularism also resembles the discussions found in moral contextualism in so far as he in a similar way develops his position mainly by discussing made-up cases and developing general arguments. As David McNaughton and Piers Rawling note, the discussion of particularism often revolves around 'the particularist's *general claim* […] that any nonnormative feature varies in valence according to context' (McNaughton and Rawling 2006, 433; my italics). Just like moral contextualism, Dancy's particularism does important work to establishing a general point about the importance of context, but it is of rather limited help when we are trying to understand how best to include knowledge of actual context of moral problems into moral philosophy.

More promising is contextualism in political philosophy, a group of thinkers who highlight the importance of moral pluralism, and more concretely, the importance of cultural, communal and ethno-religious differences for political philosophy, for example the need to take these differences into account in theories of immigration and diversity.[11] At the most general level, political contextualism can be defined as 'a family of views holding that factual claims about the context of a case are part of the justification of normative political judgements about this case' (Lægaard 2019, 954), but the members of this rather large family differ depending on their view of role of context in moral philosophy as vital to the methodology, the development of theory or the development of the outputs of political philosophy (ibid. 956).[12] In an overview of some of the positions within

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[11] Contextualism in political philosophy is sometimes confusingly and imprecisely termed 'contextualist moral philosophy'. For an example, see van der Stoep (2004).

[12] For each of these three forms of political contextualism, Lægaard specifies three different normative roles for context, as a source of norms and principles, as a factor determining the formulation of such norms and principles or as relevant to the application of them (2019, 955). Lægaard is quite critical of the possibility of doing normative philosophy with the involvement of general principles. In contrast, I endorse this possibility, see below.

contextualism, Bader and Saharso note that 'three main reasons generally inspire more contextual approaches in political philosophy: (i) moral pluralism, (ii) under-determinacy of principles, (iii) the complexity of practical reason and judgement' (Bader and Saharso 2004, 107). These reasons are very similar to the reasons motivating Dancy's turn to particularism in moral philosophy, but in contrast to the two previously mentioned positions, political contextualism often involves discussions of actual cases of political problems or policies as well as the national or local, the historical or social contexts that give rise to these problems or motivate the policies in question. Moreover, these investigations of context are not just used as a means to support a general point about the importance of context; contextualists 'not only use cases to check their own theories as well as those of others but also to enrich theoretical thinking and stimulate institutional and policy imagination' (ibid. 112). This means that contextualism helps us enormously in understanding the variety of problems connected to the existence of widespread pluralism in liberal societies today, and how these problems arise in different contexts. Furthermore, these insights are following by growing bulk of methodological work reflecting on how to integrate empirical knowledge of actual contexts into philosophical philosophy (see e.g. Herzog and Zacka 2019) that may help illuminate the integration of context in moral philosophy and further similar methodological developments here.

In my view, contextualism in political philosophy can serve as an inspiration for the attempt to develop a substantial understanding of how to include and discuss actual contexts in moral philosophy. However, even if contextualism represents the right form of attention to context in philosophy, there are still limitations to how far this inspiration will bring us in moral philosophy for at least two reasons. First, the aspects of contexts that have moral relevance are much, much wider than factors relating to political pluralism.[13] And second, because of this, moral philosophers need a wider set of sources of insight of morally relevant contexts and of methods by which to integrate these insights into moral philosophy than those found in political contextualism. It is impossible for me to provide a full overview of how context may be of potential moral relevance and of the ways understanding of context may be integrated into moral philosophy, but in Section 4, I provide a small contribution to such an overview by reviewing three suggestions of how to integrate actual contexts in moral philosophy already implicitly or explicitly at play in philosophical work today.

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13 It may, of course, also be the case that the aspects of contexts that may be relevant to political philosophy are wider than factors relating to political pluralism. I do not take a stand on this issue.

4 Three Ways of Integrating Actual Context into Moral Philosophy

In this section, I describe and review three possible suggestions of the significance of context to moral philosophy that may help moral philosophers resist the drive towards abstraction and the development of 'private fantasy moral worlds'; three suggestions that I will term the application approach, the bottom-up approach, and the contextual approach. As I see it, the difference among the three is one of emphasis rather than a categorical difference, but even so, I will argue that the third and last suggestion provides us with the most important and promising understanding of the way that context matters in moral philosophy.

The first suggestion, the application approach, is probably the one of the three suggestions that is presently most influential in mainstream moral philosophy. Working top-down, it takes as its starting point the dominant understanding of moral philosophy as offering general principles and abstract theories, but it also attempts to take seriously the main problem facing this way of doing philosophy, that theories and principles are significantly – maybe severely – limited with regard to their actual applicability. The suggestion is that we need ways of making moral philosophy more context-sensitive, adapting theories and principles to specific moral problems in their specific settings. Importantly, this suggestion acknowledges that the problem of applicability cannot be pushed outside of philosophy and left to individual moral thinkers or moral communities.

According to this approach, the task of moral philosophers is not that just of formulating abstract and general principles, but also that of specifying 'intermediate premises' for particular contexts (to use Hill's terminology as introduced above). In order to lift this task, philosophers need to engage with empirical knowledge of the field relevant for the moral problem in their interest; because moral problems arise in specific, particular and complex contexts, a proper understanding of the relevant context is vital to how a moral issue should be addressed. This means that there is a need for philosophical work at the interface between philosophical thinking and context; in fact, the core idea of the application approach is that philosophical work is crucial, not just in the development of theories and principles, but to the further work of developing them in ways that ensures their adaptability to specific problems. This approach is widespread in applied ethics, and a prominent example is Dieter Birnbacher (1999) who emphasises that the process of adjusting moral principles requires knowledge from sociology and psychology that the philosopher can

use to develop specifications of moral principles; a process which results in what Birnbacher terms 'practise rules.'[14]

The second suggestion, the bottom-up approach, grows up of dissatisfaction with the top-down direction of the application approach which is seen as giving rise to two problems. The first problem is that the application approach is unable to detect problems that arise in particular contexts, and the second, that on this approach context only influence the *use* of theories and principles, not the theories and principles themselves. A way to counter these problems and allow for a wider importance for context is to engage in *bottom-up work* in moral philosophy. This approach acknowledges that moral philosophy must be substantially informed by knowledge about context, and that such knowledge is part of what shapes the normative suggestions developed in moral philosophy. Philosophical work on context is needed, not just to ensure the applicability of already developed moral principles and theories, but to develop forms of moral thinking that are relevant to problems in the context in which they arise. Philosophical work must begin with attention to moral life and develop from there, for example by working to see whether patterns emerge that can constitute the basis of normative recommendations which may take the form of theories and principles, but also that of ethical descriptions and analysis.[15]

In line with this and arguing for a descriptive approach to ethics in moral philosophy, Nora Hämäläinen notes 'that moral philosophers need to put a great deal of effort into the description of moral life and into the (broadly) empirical acquisition of different kinds of knowledge about morality, values, and human beings' (Hämäläine 2016, 4).[16] We find many representatives of the bottom-up approach in bioethics. One example is Albert W. Musschenga, who argues that problems in bioethics are best addressed by empirical ethics, combining empirical research and philosophical investigations, because this provides the ethical analyses with the necessary context-sensitivity, and because investigations of context are part of what determine the right normative response to a moral problem. Context is 'not only as a field for applying ethics, but also as a source of morality' which means that '[d]escription and analysis of context covers much of the empirical research held to be relevant for ethical reflection' (2005, 468 and 470).

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14 Beauchamp and Childress's development of the four principles of biomedical ethics are an early example of the application approach, even if the relevant context is the very wide one of health care (see Beauchamp and Childress 1979).

15 The later approach resembles the one central to Wittgenstein's later philosophy, where philosophy develops descriptions and 'this description gets its light – that is to say, its purpose – from the philosophical problems' (1953, §109).

16 It is should be noted that the position of Hämäläinen in *Descriptive Ethics* (2016) is closer to that of the contextual approach than the bottom-up approach (see also below).

Musschenga gives an example from medical anthropology where Robert Pool, doing fieldwork on the practise of euthanasia in a Dutch hospital, discovered a significant divergence between the way decision-making was described in the literature on euthanasia in medical ethics, and the decision practises observable in the hospital. Musschenga sums up: 'Medical ethicists seem to think that such decisions are taken by an individual actor at a specific point in time. In reality, decisions on euthanasia are processes in which several actors play a role: patients, their families, doctors and nurses' (ibid. 471). Importantly, if philosophical work on euthanasia is to be relevant in practise, to the people facing overwhelmingly difficult decisions, it is not enough to adapt principles of individual decision-making, instead, philosophers have to contribute by developing and qualifying the moral framework of the practises already in place in the context in question.

The bottom-up approach is now used in many different ways and in relation to many different problems in moral philosophy. In some of these cases, though definitely not in all, bottom-up work involves an assumption also integral to the application approach that it is possible to uphold a clear and decisive distinction between context and the moral problem to be solved, thus accepting a picture according to which moral problems can be identified and understood independently of the philosophical analysis of context, and where the investigation of context contributes, not to the conception of the moral problem, but only to its solution. This assumption is challenged by the third and final suggestion.

According to the third suggestion for how to understand the role of context in moral philosophy, the contextual approach, there is no general distinction to be drawn between a moral problem and its context. Central to the contextual approach is the idea that to do moral philosophy is to do work on specific problems that we have in specific contexts. Moreover, the very process of describing a moral problem is also a process of discovering and identifying the relevant features of the context and *vice versa*. In Hämäläinen's words: 'Normative ethics is never just normative, but is based on an interpretation of our moral situation. And conversely any articulation of our situation involves covert normative emphases and implications that should awaken a philosopher's critical instincts' (2016, 3). The understanding of a moral issue and of the context develops together. In this way, the idea of a pre-established distinction between these elements – the problem, the philosophical analysis and the context – is problematized and replaced by a picture according to which the three develops together.

We find a number of arguments for this approach in Lars Hertzberg's 'Moral Escapism and Applied Ethics' (Hertzberg 2002). One of Hertzberg's central points is that there is something odd about the way that we are presented with problems in moral philosophy, as if these were not problems for anyone in particular, as if they were simply *there*, to be studied, and as if they could be given a general solution.

Hertzberg is trying to imagine what such a case would look like; a case where a person would be motivated by genuinely curiosity about the right thing to do. Hertzberg notes: 'What could this mean? He says he is eager to do what is morally right, but he is completely open-minded as to what that might involve in a particular case' (2002, 257). However, Hertzberg continues, 'this case would be radically different from what the situation is normally like when we are faced with a moral dilemma' (ibid.). Normally, we do not have moral problems because we are ignorant about what it would be right or good to do or be; in this respect, the problems do not arise out of a lack of knowledge.

To take an example: If a teacher worries about a girl in her class who often shows up in school with unexplained bruises, and who beneath her quiet exterior seems deeply, deeply unhappy, the teacher will not be curious about what it is right to do, because in a certain sense, she knows this already: she has to help the child. In this way she is not at all open-minded, and she would reject any suggestions that did not involve giving some form of help. What is difficult for the teacher is to work out how *best* to help the child, and this problem can only be settled by using all her knowledge of the good and the right in a careful investigation of the context that will in turn help specify whether the challenges in offering help is related to the risk of betraying the girl's trust or that of causing her to have even greater problems or something else entirely.

Like the teacher, we can say that we (at least to a very large degree) already *know* that we should do what is right and good and generous and respectful and helpful (and so on) and avoid what is wrong and bad and cruel and disrespectful and unhelpful (and so on). Lack of this sort of knowledge is normally not the cause of our moral problems. They rather arise because we cannot figure out what is most important or relevant *in this specific situation*, how we *here* best realise our various commitments to what it is right or good to do or be. The contextual approach is motivated by the insight that moral problems often arise when we cannot figure out how to realise our moral concerns in a specific context, and that we thus have to investigate the context in order to understand the nature of the moral problems we are facing. If we call the moral problem the focal point of investigations in moral philosophy, we can say that 'there is a mutually constitutive relationship between focal object and context. The context both determines and is determined by the object' (Dohn, Hansen, and Klausen 2018, 4).[17] This means that the attempts to gain an

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[17] Dohn, Hansen and Klausen continues with the following qualification: 'This is so, at least partially and potentially. As we go on to argue in the following section, it is an open question how far the context determines the object in any particular case; and we argue that there must be limits to how far contexts can determine objects, since some objects at least are independently identifiable' (2018). I agree in principle, but this leaves open whether I would in practice place the limits of the constitutive role of context in the same ways as these authors.

overview of a moral problem and of its specific context are in fact two sides of the same coin, and that these attempts constitute a form of activity that is very different from that of developing moral theories or general moral principles.

Many of the moral philosophers who take this approach and develop richly contextualised investigations in their writings, such as for example Cora Diamond, Stanley Cavell and Alice Crary, find their inspiration in Ludwig Wittgenstein's view of philosophical method.[18] These thinkers hold that we cannot understand and seek to solve moral problems in isolation from concrete contexts, and that no one philosophical theory is able to unify the diversity of moral contexts.

In my view, all of the three above approaches bring to light valuable perspectives on context. Rather than choosing between the three, I think we should see them as mutually supplementing, offering three approaches that may all be relevant and constructive in relations to different types of moral problems. However, it is important to see that some of the cases that are analysed within an application or a bottom-up approach, where a moral problem seems to present itself independently of a substantial understanding of context, are in fact *exceptions*. They are 'lucky' cases where the problem and its relation to context are easily surveyable, and where we for this reason can move directly on to the question of how to solve the problem – either by application of moral theories or by bottom-up analyses. We must remember and acknowledge the special status of these cases as exceptions in order to stay alert to the fact that we can never be completely certain that we fully understand the problem in our interest. It is always a possibility that in our attempt to analyse it, we will have to return to broader investigation of its relation to context. In this way, I think that the assumption guiding the contextual approach, that our understanding of a moral problem is itself dependent on an understanding of how it arises in a specific context, is fundamentally correct.

5 Context and Normativity

A question not addressed above is what kind of knowledge of context may be relevant to a philosophical investigation of moral problems. Here my view is in line with that of Hämäläinen, quoted above, that philosophy needs 'the (broadly) empirical acquisition of different kinds of knowledge about morality, values, and human beings' (2016, 4), at least if 'empirical' is understood very broadly indeed. I

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18 See e.g. Diamond (1991, 1997, 2009), Cavell (1979), and Crary (2007, 2016).

think relevant knowledge may come from qualitative or quantitative studies of a specific problem,[19] or it may be the result of other forms of empirical enquiry for example from psychology, sociology or anthropology, providing us with a better understanding of human beings, their societies, and communities. It may however also be knowledge acquired from reading literature,[20] from recorded life experiences, from descriptions of single cases etc., dependent on the nature of the moral problem.[21] There seems to be no reason to place restrictions on what forms of knowledge of context we may include in moral philosophy; the criteria must rather be that the knowledge chosen help to give shape to the problem in question.

In closing, I instead want to engage in a different discussion about two different views of the relationship between context and normativity, strongly arguing for the second view. Built into the application approach seems to be an assumption of a clear division of labour where context constitutes the factual background of a moral problem, while moral theories and principles supply the normative recommendations. This assumption is, I take it, one reason why philosophers think they can acknowledge the serious challenges involved in application of theories and principles and still think that it is possible to present their favoured theories without attempting to address these challenges and engage in actual descriptions of context. I find this view exemplified in Hill's distinction between 'independent moral principles' and 'empirical and hermeneutical premises' (Hill 2006, 491) which connects the distinction between moral principles and context to a distinction between the moral and the factual; assigning philosophy a role only in the normative, not in the descriptive work.

I think this view, together with the drive towards abstraction, is what fuels what I above called contemporary moral philosophy's neglect of context, and I therefore think it imperative to challenge the picture of a division between philosophy-normativity-morality versus context-descriptivity-factuality for example by attending to another idea central to the bottom-up approach that context is not simply factual, rather, the description of context is itself a source of normativity. That is, to work with context in moral philosophy, it is important to reject any division between the factual and descriptive on one hand and the moral and normative on the other that places context on the one side of the

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19 The is the form of knowledge that is favoured in Musschenga's (2005) view of empirical ethics.
20 Nussbaum (1990) was a ground-breaking work with regard to this use of literature in moral philosophy. For an explication of the idea of literature as a source of knowledge, see also Carroll (2000), who terms this 'knowledge by acquaintance'. See also Christensen (forthcoming, 2020, chapter 7).
21 Hoffmaster (2017) gives a vivid presentation of the many different aspects of context that may matter in moral philosophy by ordering these in aspects tied to personal, situational, institutional and background context.

division and philosophy on the other. There are no ways to describe or understand context in a non-normative way, and investigations of context in philosophy are themselves normative investigations. Musschenga present one version of this idea that context is not merely a field of application, but itself a source of moral beliefs. He recommends that moral philosophers engage with empirical studies investigating the moral opinions and reasoning patterns of those involved in a moral problem, both because the moral reasoning reflected in the actions, discussions, and choices of the participants in a moral issue is itself a moral resource, and because this type of research can help uncover the source of the participants' moral concerns and convictions. In this way, Musschenga argues that 'the ethicist should play the role of a well-informed, philosophically trained participant in the interpretation and further elaboration of a practice's given morality' (ibid. 484).

I wholeheartedly endorse the idea that to engage in the description of context is to engage in an investigation with normative and moral implications, but I also think we need to take a wider view of this engagement. First, philosophers not only play a part in the interpretation and development of a practice's morality and in this way contribute to how we are to address and maybe even solve moral problems. Often, philosophical analysis is crucial at a much earlier stage, if we are to give shape to these problems, that is, philosophical work is needed to make out what these moral difficulties are. Second, as I made clear above, I do not think moral philosophers should limit their investigations of context to empirical (qualitative or quantitative) studies of the participants in a moral issue, as suggested by Musschenga. Instead, I take a much boarder view of what knowledge can be relevant for an understanding of context. What is important is not the type of knowledge invoked, but rather whether it helps us understand aspects of context that are of relevance to the moral problem in question. To know whether this is the case, the moral philosopher will have to consider, in any actual investigation of context, whether she to the necessary degree uses the critical and normative tools provided by moral philosophy. It is only the combination of moral philosophy and investigations of context that together will provide us with an understanding of moral problems and their frameworks.

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