This book brings together essays from leading scholars who, rather than taking a strictly exegetical approach, attempt to show how discussions in moral philosophy can benefit from Wittgenstein’s later philosophical work. The essays in this volume make the argument that Wittgenstein’s relevance for moral philosophy depends not only on his views about ethics, but also on the methods he introduces, on his views on the nature of philosophy and philosophical problems and on the insights into language developed in his philosophy. They also focus on the “Wittgensteinian tradition” in moral philosophy and its relation to more mainstream analytic moral philosophy, addressing how several prominent philosophers use these ideas and methods in their work. *Ethics in the Wake of Wittgenstein* seeks to answer the following question: can we apply Wittgenstein’s ways of dealing with problems in logic, philosophy of language, epistemology, philosophy of mind and philosophy of mathematics to moral philosophy as well? It will be of interest to Wittgenstein scholars and those working on current debates in moral philosophy, meta-ethics and normative ethics.

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The later Wittgenstein said almost nothing about ethics. But what would a Wittgensteinian moral philosophy look like, if there were one? A plausible answer is that it would take as a model an approach Wittgenstein took in some other areas of philosophy and apply it in moral philosophy. Now there is perhaps no one way in which the later Wittgenstein approaches philosophical problems. But the following well-known passages are indicative of an approach:

What we have to mention in order to explain the significance, I mean the importance, of a concept, are often extremely general facts of nature: such facts as are hardly ever mentioned because of their great generality.

(PI §142)

Let [someone] imagine certain very general facts of nature to be different from what we are used to, and the formation of concepts different from the usual ones will become intelligible to him.

(PI II, 230)

That is, where there’s a problematic concept, Wittgenstein often asks, “What are the general facts of nature which underlie our possession of it?” One example would be the concept “rule” and—turning to the natural fact—untutored convergence in response to certain kinds of teaching. Another would be concepts of bodily sensation, and the natural fact that expressions of sensation and (sometimes) reactions to others’ expressions of sensation are “wring from us” (PI §546). So a Wittgensteinian moral philosophy—though not perhaps the only possible one—would be an investigation of the general facts of nature that underlie our possession of distinctively moral concepts. This investigation would be worthwhile to the extent that these concepts are problematic (and would be less problematic once the investigation had been carried out). It is the outlines of an investigation of this kind that I would like to sketch in this chapter.
1. The Problem of the Supposed Emptiness of the Moral “Ought”

There are some obstacles, however, to be negotiated first. There can be a Wittgensteinian approach to moral concepts only if there are some distinctively moral concepts. But from some recent literature on Wittgenstein and ethics, it may look as if this idea is open to question. As Stephen Mulhall has written, echoing Cora Diamond and others:

[We cannot] demarcate the legitimate subject-matter of moral philosophy by identifying certain obviously moral concepts or words, and examining the ways in which they are used.

(Mulhall 2002, 304)

As an alternative to the claim that moral discourse can be demarcated by the exercise of distinctive concepts or words, Diamond and Mulhall maintain that “what makes a stretch of discourse moral. . . is a matter of use” (Mulhall 2002, 306).

I will get to the discussion of these positions in a moment. But first of all, a prior obstacle needs to be got out of the way. The view that there are no distinctively moral concepts may be thought to harmonize with another view of more or less Wittgensteinian provenance, namely Anscombe’s well-known view that the very idea that there is a concept for the distinctively moral “ought” to express is a kind of philosophical illusion. As Anscombe puts it, “moral” as it occurs in the context “moral obligation” “is a word containing no intelligible thought” (Anscombe 1981a, 26, 30).

But now suppose this is true. If the “moral ‘ought’” is an empty term, then it surely follows that there aren’t any distinctive concepts that that or related words express, since expressing no concept is just what it is for a word to be empty or to “contain no intelligible thought”. (It doesn’t, of course, follow that there are no distinctively moral words—indeed, it might be said that the opposite follows—but as these words don’t express any thought, they can be distinguished only by their shape, sound and so forth, and I take it that that is not what Diamond’s and Mulhall’s philosophical opponents have in mind.) So if moral philosophy has a subject matter at all, surely we had better not try to identify it by “identifying certain obviously moral concepts or words”. However, it also follows that the alternative we’re about to explore—that moral thinking does not consist in the deployment of distinctive concepts or words, but rather in the distinctive use of words—is problematic too. For the empty term “moral” occurs no less in the characterization of the distinctive use of (in themselves undistinctive) words than it does in the characterization of a distinctive vocabulary or set of concepts. Would-be followers of Diamond and Mulhall need some term to circumscribe the discourse such that it can both be thus and so in its character and yet be that way no thanks
to its containing distinctive words or concepts. If the word “moral” in each and every occurrence really is empty, this problem also infects the language in which the interesting rival view—that discourse can be moral without using distinctive moral vocabulary, that if it is moral then it is so in virtue of other facts and so forth—would need to be stated. Nor is this just a point about the theoretician’s reliance on the word “moral”. If Anscombe is right that the term “moral” does not really do anything, then there can be no distinctive use of language that’s left over when we eliminate the word. So interpreted one way, Anscombe’s scepticism about the moral “ought” (and cognate expressions) means we have to call everything off.¹

But—and not just because it would be spoiling all the fun to say otherwise—that is surely not the way to read Anscombe. She did not mean her strictures against the moral “ought” to be a reason against deploying a word like “just” or “dishonest” or “promise” or “owe” (which she uses often and without embarrassment, Anscombe 1981a), or to imply that when people reason practically to a conclusion such as “I ought to send her a birthday card”, they are only making meaningless noises. Practical thought and what goes into it stands untouched by her arguments: it is just that there isn’t any special kind of obligation called “moral obligation”, no special sub-class of human excellence marked out as we nowadays try to do by the term “moral virtue”, and so on. Now granted that there are all these words like “just”, “dishonest”, “owe” and so on which Anscombe’s strictures against the moral “ought” leave untouched, it might be handy—instead of giving a list every time—to have a word that gathers them up (with appropriately porous borders for unanticipated entrances to and exits from the class) in one go. Perhaps, indeed, the class to which the words “just”, “owe” and so forth all belong could be called the class of “moral” words—used, of course, otherwise than in the (non-) sense Anscombe claimed to identify. That would certainly give philosophers a way to identify the discourse such that the question whether it’s to be demarcated this way rather than that—by distinctive words or concepts, or by a distinctive use or uses of non-distinctive words or concepts—could be raised, without the need to encounter Anscombe head-on. But to raise the question like that appears also to settle it in favour of the former view. In the present context, that would be rather quick, so let me go back now and deal with the first obstacle I mentioned to the version of Wittgensteinian moral philosophy I am envisaging.

2. Distinctively Moral Concepts and “Expansionism”

It might be thought that since I propose to argue that there are at least some concepts—and, indeed, words—which “mark a stretch of discourse as moral”, I shall, therefore, be attacking the view (Diamond 1991, 1996,
2000; Crary 2000, 2007; Nussbaum 1990) which I have elsewhere (Harcourt 2015) labelled “expansionism”,\(^2\) after Alice Crary’s assertion that we need to “expand our inventory of forms of moral thought” (Crary 2007, 1). But I certainly don’t want to attack expansionism. First of all, I think expansionism—as I understand it—is true. Sabina Lovibond has argued, following a passage in Wittgenstein’s lectures on aesthetics, that the operation of a sensibility shaped by the possession of “thick” concepts need be manifested linguistically only by the presence of terms that express “thin” ones: think of the complicated understanding of what makes for a well-cut suit that Wittgenstein shares with his tailor, and compare the poverty of what he says to his tailor, that is, “too loud . . . just right!” (Lovibond 2002, 39ff). But this isn’t all. Long stretches of ordinary speech can be ethically inflected—can manifest the operation of an ethical sensibility—without containing any specialized vocabulary, thick or thin (and I don’t just mean because it can include slang equivalents). Thus, the salience of an act of kindness can be marked linguistically, for example, by no more than the (“factual”) description of what, in context, many an ethically knowledgeable person will be able to recognize as having been kind: “I got on the bus, realized I’d left my bus pass at home, but she paid my fare—and I’d never set eyes on her before!” If this is true of kindness, presumably the same sort of thing can be said for at least some other ethically good-making features. So, if that is what Diamond meant when she said discourse could be moral notwithstanding the non-occurrence in it of distinctive words, we should all agree.

What about the non-occurrence of distinctive concepts? If there is enough slack between words and concepts, perhaps the sensibility whose operation is manifested in my verbally undistinctive mini-narrative about the forgotten bus pass is grasp of a concept. If that is correct, then it would be a mistake to move from the claim that discourse can be moral despite the non-occurrence in it of distinctive words to the parallel claim about distinctive concepts. Diamond, indeed, envisages this possibility (under the heading of “indirection”; see Diamond 1996, 246), but does not explore it further. However, I shan’t be basing my argument for the existence of distinctive moral concepts on the possibility of slack between words and concepts, so I too leave this possibility aside.

I’m not sure whether my endorsement of expansionism will cause surprise, given where I have said I am heading. Expansionism implies what I’ll call the no-demarcation claim, the claim that we cannot “demarcate the legitimate subject-matter of moral philosophy by identifying certain obviously moral concepts or words, and examining the ways in which they are used” (Mulhall 2002, 304). So if the no-demarcation claim implies that there are no distinctively moral concepts or words, then in order to oppose that latter claim, we must oppose expansionism. Now it is not clear to me who has actually argued that the no-demarcation claim does imply that there are no distinctively moral concepts or words. But
one might think to detect this argument in a well-known passage from Diamond, which it is, therefore, worth taking slowly. She writes:

[A]nything made of the resources of ordinary language may be brought in such a relation to our lives and actions and understanding of the world that we might speak of the thinking involved in that connection as “moral”. There is no limit to the set.

(Diamond 1996, 248)

So far, the passage expresses only the no-demarcation claim. She then goes on:

We cannot... say that these are the words... that can have this character. If a sentence or image or word has this character, it arises not through its content but from its use on a particular occasion.

(ibid.)

The first of these two sentences might be taken to state the no-demarcation claim over again. The second, however, says more: it says that whenever a word (etc.) is moral, that fact is not owed to its belonging to a particular vocabulary (i.e., class of moral words), or to its expressing a concept belonging to a particular class of concepts. Now it might look as if, strictly speaking, those denials are consistent with maintaining that there is a distinctive moral vocabulary and a class of distinctively moral concepts, even though the moral character of discourse, imagery (etc.) owes nothing to its relationship to that vocabulary or those concepts. But that would be a strange combination of views. Consider the occurrence of a word belonging to the supposedly distinctive moral vocabulary. If the denials are true, then the moral character even of that occurrence is not owed to its belonging to the distinctive moral vocabulary. But then what grounds are left for maintaining that there is a distinctive moral vocabulary that it belongs to? Diamond’s second sentence seems best interpreted as denying that there is a distinctive moral vocabulary or a class of distinctively moral concepts.\footnote{But whether or not I have Diamond right here, the no-demarcation claim does not imply that there are no distinctive moral concepts or words. That is because we could not demarcate the subject matter of moral philosophy by reference to distinctive concepts or words even if there are distinctive moral concepts or words, since the subject matter of moral philosophy might include both distinctive concepts or words and other concepts or words; indeed, given the truth of expansionism, that is just what it does include. Reasoning from the no-demarcation claim to the claim that there are no distinctive moral concepts (etc.) is like reasoning from the claim that we can’t demarcate the present population of London by reference to the concept “person born in London” to the...}
conclusion that the present population of London doesn’t include any people born in London—which is a fallacy. Once again: expansionism implies the no-demarcation claim, but the no-demarcation claim doesn’t imply there are no distinctive moral concepts or words, so expansionism sits perfectly well with claim that there are such concepts and such words.

3. Primitive and Less Primitive Levels of Discourse: An Analogy With the Mental

Having extracted would-be expansionists from any commitment to the denial that there are distinctively moral concepts or words, I now want to argue for a stronger conclusion: that expansionism implies that there are distinctively moral concepts (and distinctive words to express them).

As an alternative to the claim that moral discourse can be demarcated by the presence in it of distinctive concepts or words, Diamond and Mulhall maintain that “what makes a stretch of discourse moral... is a matter of use” (Mulhall 2002, 306; cf. Diamond 1996, 248). Let’s suppose that this at least can be so, even if it isn’t always. If it can be, it must surely be possible to characterize the use or uses in question. But doing so is a kind of grouping together of words-in-use and labelling them (or anyway doing something to point out that these words here are being used in the special way that interests us). So doing so will involve our applying to the discourse—as theoreticians—certain concepts, that is, concepts of the kind of use in question, even if there are no words in the relevant stretch of discourse that express those concepts. But, of course, the kind of use in question is—in some appropriately non-Anscombean sense—a distinctively moral use. Thus, theoreticians about a discourse can deploy distinctively moral concepts and words to characterize the distinctive use of non-moral concepts and words in that discourse. But we can, of course, theorize about ourselves—otherwise put, theoreticians about a discourse can be participants in it too. So there is an easy story to tell as to how a discourse which, in some imagined primitive phase, is as expansionism says it may be (and as Diamond and Mulhall say it actually is)—no distinctively moral concepts or words—can come to contain distinctively moral concepts and words. That, I suggest, is the condition of our own discourse as we now find it.

Here a comparison with mental vocabulary may help. In Zettel, Wittgenstein compares the application, by us, of the words “thinking” and “understanding” to the activity of creatures “whose rhythm of work, play of expression etc. [is] like our own” (Z §102). What I think he has in mind can be brought out by two ways of telling the (in a sense) same story. Contrast

Smith entered the living room but a burglar was there, and he fled.
Smith decided to enter the living room and did so, but when he noticed someone there whose intention he understood to be to burglar the house, he decided to flee, and did.

The first narrative, unlike the second, contains no mental vocabulary. Of course, the first narrative—apart from the word “burglar”, which implicitly ascribes an intention but doesn’t apply to Smith—could be the description of someone sleepwalking or under hypnosis; “Smith” could be the name of a cat or a robot; Smith might not have noticed the burglar and have fled coincidentally because he remembered he had left his headlights on, and so on. But unless these things were explicitly stated, the first narrative would be taken (and in all but these odd cases correctly taken) as a description of a minded creature’s intelligent behaviour. We don’t need the mental vocabulary of the second narrative in order to grasp this: we grasp it, roughly, thanks to the patterning of Smith’s behaviour in its context (compare Wittgenstein’s “rhythm of work, play of expression etc.”), plus the absence of any reason to think something out of the ordinary is going on. So, provisionally, we can say that it is not the case that what makes a stretch of discourse “mental in its subject-matter”—that is, what makes its subject matter the intelligent behaviour of minded creatures—is the occurrence in it of distinctive mental concepts or words like “understand”, “notice”, “intend” and so on.

A different way of making the same point would be with reference to the attack, made by both Bernard Williams (Williams 1993, 21ff) and, earlier, by K. V. Wilkes (Wilkes 1988, 129–130, 205), on Bruno Snell’s discussion of Homer in Snell (1982). Williams and Wilkes take Snell to be arguing that Homeric man did not think of himself as having an intellect or mind on the grounds that there are no words in Homer which translate our words “intellect”, “mind” and so on, and indeed there is a well-known mish-mash of terms in Homer (e.g., for the “seat of feeling”—now “stomach”, now “entrails” and so on) in the place where we might nowadays expect to find a word for “mind” or “intellect”. (The word psuche in Homer means the soul only after it has left the body.) Williams’s and Wilkes’s objection is that it is obvious to any reader of Homer that, notwithstanding the absence of these words, his protagonists’ actions are organized by precisely the kinds of concerns that organize the intelligent behaviour of minded creatures—as reflected not only in the patterning of third-person narratives of their doings but also of the first-person questions they pose to themselves (e.g., “steal more armour or kill more Thracians”, Homer 1992, 293). In short, so what that Homer doesn’t use distinctively “mental” words? The mental subject matter of his narrative consists in his use of other words, which it
is pointless to try to circumscribe by means of a list. (If “armour” can get on the list, anything can.)

Now there’s a limited *ad hominem* defence which might be made of Snell at this point which arises partly out of a lack of clarity in his own view. Snell writes:

If. . . Homer’s men had as yet no knowledge of the intellect, or therefore of many other things, we do not thereby mean that his characters were not capable of joy, or reflection, and so forth. We merely want to stress that they did not conceive of these matters as actions of the intellect or soul.

(Snell 1982, ix)

This makes it sound as if Williams and Wilkes have just misrepresented Snell when they have him as claiming that Homeric characters “don’t have minds”, for does he not say that they are capable of joy, reflection and so forth, and are these not states that only minded creatures can be in? On the other hand, Snell also says that “the existence of the intellect and the soul are dependent upon man’s awareness of himself” (1982, ix, my italics), this “awareness” being manifested precisely in his application to himself of distinctive mental concepts. Since Snell himself seems committed to the inference “no concepts of mind, so no minds”, Williams and Wilkes don’t seem to be misrepresenting him after all.

Still, I think there might be a more charitable way with Snell available here, which brings me back to the point about the concepts that we—as theoreticians or reflective participants—might introduce. Let’s keep life simple for ourselves by restricting the examples of the intelligent behaviour of minded creatures to that exemplified by the two “burglar” narratives—though I think we could make the same point more complicatedly with reference to “joy, reflection and so forth” as well. (Compare what Wittgenstein says about grief—that it “describes a pattern which recurs, with different variations, in the weave of our life”, PI II, 174.) Hopelessly wrong as it may be to say that Homeric characters are not represented as minded on the grounds that Homer’s representations of them don’t contain equivalents of our words “mind”, “intellect” and so on, there is on the face of it some difference between a discourse which contains these words and a discourse which doesn’t, and I would like to think there is a way of marking that difference without saying, as Snell does, that it’s lacking until it catches up with the dualism that makes possible contemporary philosophical puzzles about mind and body. (Homeric Greek doesn’t contain a word corresponding to our “body” either, Wilkes 1988, 129.)

So what’s the difference? According to Snell, the difference is that the long-winded “burglar” narrative deploys mental concepts, whereas its shorter counterpart does not. He would like to conclude that what’s
described in the latter is not the intelligent behaviour of minded creatures. But that conclusion requires an assumption analogous to the one Diamond and Mulhall reject—that is, that if a stretch of discourse is to be about x, then it must deploy concepts of x. I don’t want to quarrel with their rejection of that assumption.

One might, alternatively, say that although the long-winded narrative contains new words, users of the short narrative are already deploying mental concepts, displaying their mastery of these concepts by their confident patterning of the words that express them. That would give us what is surely the right answer about the shorter narrative—that what’s described is the intelligent behaviour of minded creatures—without even rejecting the earlier assumption. This alternative is analogous to the theoretical option I agreed not to explore in the previous section, based on slack between words and concepts.

A third and—slightly but importantly—different alternative says that the short narrative is about the intelligent behaviour of minded creatures, but does not deploy any distinctively mental concepts (or, obviously, words). Still, as on the second alternative, all the long-winded version adds is words. It’s worth comparing this third alternative with the *Tractatus* treatment of, for example, the identity-sign:

> Identity of object I express by identity of sign, and not by using a sign for identity. Difference of objects I express by difference of signs. . . .
> The identity sign is . . . not an essential constituent of conceptual notation.

*(TLP §5.53, §5.533)*

There is nothing distinctive, on this view, about the means by which identity of object is conveyed in a language that lacks the identity-sign—it is, after all, conveyed by any and every use of a name. Moreover, since everything that is expressed by a language containing the sign would also be conveyed by a language without it, the sign can be eliminated without loss. Nor should it be thought that because a language containing the sign is equivalent to one which does not contain it, we have a concept of identity without a special word: though Wittgenstein does not put it this way, the fact that no sign of identity occurs in a “conceptual notation” might be said to be a reason precisely for denying that. This, it seems to me, is analogous to the position Diamond and Mulhall take with respect to discourse about the moral—that is, their view is such that it’s as if distinctively moral words had already been eliminated from our language. But if that alternative is espoused, it calls into question the status of their own theoretical utterances about moral discourse, which involve deploying at least the word “moral” (and no doubt other words too), for the sake (for example) of asserting that discourse can be moral thanks to its
use rather than thanks to its distinctive vocabulary—in exactly the way that the status of Wittgenstein’s utterances about identity in the *Tractatus* are called into question insofar as they try to tell us what it is that the redundant identity-sign doesn’t express (i.e., that two names stand for the same thing). Unlike the Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus*, however, Diamond and Mulhall seem to feel no awkwardness in deploying the concept “moral” to identify what a certain discourse accomplishes (according to them) without moral concepts or words, so I think they should be warier of this third alternative than they, in fact, are.

But, surely, the three I’ve listed are not the only alternatives. We are familiar with the general idea that some uses of language are basic relative to others. This might be exemplified by two different uses of the same word, as at PI II, 216. Or it might be exemplified by uses of different words, as in the present case. The difference between the two “burglar” narratives makes the point that mindedness resides fundamentally at the level of intelligible patterns of behaviour, rather than in a particular vocabulary or set of concepts. (That point is needed in order to avert the temptation to see mental vocabulary, where it arises, as describing the state of hidden entities.) However, the introduction of a word like “understand” or “intend” isn’t just decoration, because there are things we can do once we’ve introduced it that we could not do before. For example, we can make comparisons between people (“A’s understanding of the situation differed from B’s”), frame laws that distinguish between people’s degrees of culpability in terms of their intentions, raise general psychological questions such as whether it is more common for people to run away when they are frightened by burglars or to try to stop them and so on. That suggests that what the long-winded narrative adds is not just new words, but new concepts.

Moreover, however hard the patternings of human behaviour that go with particular concepts may be to describe in any detail, we can learn the concepts expressed by “understand”, “decide”, “intend” and so on. These concepts are not fundamental relative to the patterns of behaviour (including verbal behaviour) that explain the possibility of their introduction. But not just any old pattern of behaviour makes their introduction possible (otherwise, we wouldn’t have concepts here, and presumably wouldn’t be able to learn them). So though a stretch of discourse can be mental in its subject matter thanks not to the occurrence in it of distinctive mental concepts or words but rather to their uses—the expansionist thought as applied to the mental—it does not follow that there are no such distinctive concepts or words. On the contrary, what seems to follow from the expansionist thought is that a slightly more complex version of that same discourse is possible in which distinctive mental concepts and words do occur. (Indeed, its actuality is the norm now, though was not in Homer’s day.) In short, the “use theory” as opposed to the “vocabulary theory” of what makes the subject matter of a stretch of discourse mental
implies the possibility of a distinctive mental vocabulary and of mental concepts—a possibility which nowadays is also actual.

Is there a reason why the very same point cannot be applied to expansionism and the no-demarcation claim about moral discourse? The analogue would be that just because moral subject matter isn’t demarcated by distinctive concepts or words, not only does it not follow that there aren’t any such words, but also that we can introduce them (and, indeed, if one looks around, have already done so). I suspect there isn’t a reason, as long as the way we handle the expression “moral subject matter” is kept analogous to the way we have handled “mental subject matter”. As theoreticians or as reflective participants, of course, we do want to keep track of what (say) the bus-pass episode had in common with some other episode of helping out—so we are able to introduce words like “kind”, and then say that what enabled the stranger on the bus to see why my having forgotten my bus pass was an occasion to pay my fare was her kindness. I don’t have to know that word to have been impressed by the stranger’s behaviour. But once I’ve got the word, I can then use it to praise her and others, to teach others to be like her, to comment on the behaviour of indefinitely many others and make comparisons among them, and so on. Virtue-words—whether for actions or for persons—aren’t the fundamentals of our practice here, and at that primitive level, one can say there really is no distinctively moral vocabulary or set of concepts. But just because at that level, word uses are patterned—and patterned because they reflect standing human interests—we can easily introduce some (and have).

Thus, my discussion of the bus-pass episode serves three theoretical purposes. It is, of course, a story, so I am agreeing with Diamond when she says that we can imagine a people who do not have the words “kind”, “generous” and so on, still less “virtue”, and whose moral appraisals, teaching and so on consist entirely of story-telling (Diamond 1996, 243). That is part of my acknowledgement of the truth of expansionism. Nonetheless—and this is point two—we are not such a people, and the claim that we do have a distinctive moral vocabulary, I think, goes through. Finally, the fact that its possibility—in our case, an actuality—follows from the patterned character of the story-telling, the possibility of using it to teach and so on, illustrates the more abstract point I made at the very start about what a Wittgensteinian moral philosophy might look like. I said it would look like the description of a relationship between a more primitive practice and a more complex one, where the latter involves some puzzling word(s) but where the puzzle they pose lessens when we see the relation to the former. The bus-pass example—no special vocabulary involved—exemplifies the more primitive level, and the fact that the use of “kind” can be so easily built on it (and the word “virtue” built, in turn, on it) shows how unpuzzled we should be by this—what else are we supposed to call it?—distinctively moral vocabulary.
4. Further Steps Towards a Wittgensteinian Moral Philosophy

Of course, to say what a Wittgensteinian moral philosophy would do is scarcely to provide one. In this last section, I will briefly discuss some other words and concepts which, I think, relate to practices that are primitive relative to them in a way similar to the way “kind” relates to the moral concept-free bus-pass story, in order to fill in my so far very minimal outline. But I do not wish to imply that we will ever get to a point of saying all the moral concepts have been dealt with.

Things are somewhat different with some virtues other than kindness. Bernard Williams (2006) pointed out a contrast between, for example, fidelity to promises: while there’s no neatly circumscribed set of considerations such that kindness consists in sensitivity to them, just the opposite is the case with fidelity to promises, where the only kind of reason such that sensitivity to it marks one out as possessing the virtue (or, in the second- or third-person case, at least as possessing the concept of the virtue) is one that deploys the concept “promise”. (This is not to say that promises need use the word “promise”.) Obviously the topic of a promise can be any old thing, and in that sense, the concepts deployed could be anything from “do the washing up” to “avenge the Treaty of Versailles”. But the promise-keeper’s characteristic reason for action is “I promised”. On pain of denying that making and keeping promises, what constitutes a proper occasion for doing so (and so on) is an example of “moral subject matter”, then, there is a different kind of counterexample to the claim that moral discourse is not characterized in part by the occurrence in it of specific concepts: different, because if we think of the bus-pass case and of some common or garden case of a promise being made and kept as both lying at one level below the level at which the concept of a specific virtue is introduced (and two levels below the introduction of “virtue” itself), this level in the promising case contains (indeed, has to contain) a moral concept, whereas in the bus-pass case, it does not.

A further point also follows from this. For there to be even the possibility of a virtue of fidelity to promises, there also have to be promises, and the specific obligations they give rise to. That is, our language has to include this very specific linguistic instrument. (I hope this is obvious. In the days when “virtue ethics” had been around for less long than it has now, it was thought that somehow focusing on the virtues might allow one to deny altogether the existence of obligations, an observation made—in order to object to it—by O’Neill 1998, 78. The case of fidelity to promises shows that is not so.) The reason I draw attention to that is that the preconceptual underpinnings of promising are different from those of our discourse about virtue (including but not confined to the virtue of fidelity itself), and go back to the primitive language-games Anscombe draws attention to in her discussion of “stopping modals”
Thus, promises are underlain by a quite specific sort of relatively primitive language-game, which in its turn is underlain by a natural fact—the “part of human intelligence” (Anscombe 1981b, 101) which, in appropriate contexts, makes stopping in response to a “no!” or a “don’t!” an unthinking “reaction”. 8

Beyond the variety of virtue-concepts, I also want to mention the notions of “reason” and “good”, perhaps the word of all words which moral philosophers have puzzled over. 9

The word “good” is unnecessary to Diomedes when he poses the question to himself, “Shall I steal more armour or kill more Thracians?”. It’s also unnecessary to a slightly different Diomedes who suggests stealing more armour, gets in reply a “why?” from his companion Odysseus, and answers—well, you can fill in the answer: “We could melt it down for jewellery to give to people as presents”, “The Trojans will be so furious when they wake up”. Now Diomedes and Odysseus could simply go through options—“Steal more armour?” “No”. “Kill more Thracians?” “Maybe”, and so forth. Or they could give highly specific answers to the questions, as in “The Trojans would be so furious”. But in a vocabulary expanded as it were by just one notch, the two comrades could invoke comparative considerations such as “nearer”, “easier”, “safer”, “more fun”—and as Williams enjoys reminding us—“most awful” (Williams 1993, 30), as they would have to do if the “why?”-questions were to go an extra round, specifying what it is about one option rather than the other which recommends it. In so doing, though they may not call it this, what they are doing is specifying goods. Expand their vocabulary by another notch—that is, in the direction of greater abstraction—and they will arrive at a way of saying what they’re doing when they use “easier”, “safer” and so on, namely specifying respects in which options are good, or some better than others. (Still more advanced players can then try to sort these different goods, which we can now refer to as such, into moral, prudential, aesthetic and so on, though it is surely an open question how far we are really doing anything when we try to do this.)

What they are doing at the relatively primitive level before they bring in “easier” (etc.), let alone “good”, is offering reasons—in the examples I’ve given—for action. Though you may very well do this without possessing the concept of a reason, really or apparently good is just what you’ve said your action is when—as Diomedes does to Odysseus in our imagined mini-dialogue—you respond to a request to specify its purpose, that is, answer a “why?”-question about it (Anscombe 1957, 24). Once we are able to identify a common pattern to transactions of this kind (“why?”-question, specification of real or apparent good), we can introduce the related concept “reason” alongside “good”. Moreover, given that offerings of reasons are specifications of real or apparent goods, it is presumably no accident that “good” is the word we use as the generic term of approbation or encouragement even to little children, who are not yet up to reason-giving.
For even then we—though not they—are answerable to the question what was good about what they did. (“Why did you say that?”, as they might ask; clever children will readily challenge baseless over-praising.) The child pauses before crossing a road, or climbs especially high; the implied goods here will be the ones they later give in explanation of their own actions (“Why did you stop?” “There was traffic coming”; “Why did you climb up?” “To see the view”, “To see if I could”), and our use of “good” to praise them early on teaches them that what we did in answer to these “why?” questions was to specify goods.

Thus—as with the bus-pass case, “kind”, and “virtue”—we again tell a story that relates three increasing levels of sophistication in concept-use, containing, progressively “The Trojans would be furious”, the latter plus “easier” (etc.), and both the latter plus “better”. The method exemplifies the Wittgensteinian method of relating problematic moral concepts to underlying facts—with the concepts getting progressively less puzzling as one relates the concept to progressively more basic concepts and (if we really try hard) to preconceptual activities. Insofar as it’s true that the further down we get in this kind of conceptual genealogy, the more the explanantia are descriptions of features of our common human natures, this method can also be seen as one species of naturalism in ethics, a naturalism which aims not to reduce the moral to the natural but to demonstrate the continuity between the moral and the non-moral—a species of naturalism which figures not only in a Wittgensteinian context (Williams 2000).

These rudimentary stories about “good”, “kind” and so on are not, of course, a Wittgensteinian moral philosophy in their own right, but merely indications of what, in my view, a Wittgensteinian moral philosophy would look like if it were to be more fully worked out. Nor do I think, if they show—as I suppose they do—that Diamond (and perhaps Mulhall) has mistaken the point that moral uses of words don’t need distinctive moral words or concepts for the point that there aren’t distinctive moral words or concepts, which risks spoiling a good “expansionist” insight by pushing it further than it needs to go, that all there is to expansionism is the acknowledgement as moral of the primitive transactions of Odysseus and Diomedes (which do without distinctive vocabulary or concepts) alongside our more sophisticated practices (which don’t). It may well be that the question—as it might be—whether the mind is the brain is one of the most pressing moral questions of our day, and if it is, this fact is not readily captured in terms of the machinery of progressively sophisticated levels which have been the stock in trade of this chapter.

Notes

1. “No intelligible thought” is a narrower idea than “no meaning” or “no function in language”: there is, of course, a school of philosophers—the emotivists and their successors—who familiarly maintain that moral words express no truth-evaluable content (or Fregean “thought”), but that is because (in their view) anyone looking for such a content mistakes the function in language of words of
that sort. They are, rather, something like linguistic ways of throwing stones or jeering (and whatever the positive contraries are of these things). So if emotivism is true, the move from “no intelligible thought” to the claim that moral words are redundant is invalid. Anscombe, however, wants to argue that “moral” is altogether redundant and this, stronger, conclusion requires the falsity of emotivism and its successors—something I can’t seek to establish here. I, therefore, also assume that one thing a Wittgensteinian investigation into the natural facts that underpin moral discourse won’t do is to establish that the natural facts are such that only an emotivist theory of moral discourse could come out true. But at this point in the investigation, that should remain an open question.

2. The characterization of expansionism in the main text is a simplification of the view I present in Harcourt (2015), but I am just taking the bits of it I need for the purposes of this chapter.

3. Cf. Diamond (2000, 153): “We may . . . think that there is thought and talk that has as its subject matter what the good life is for human beings, or what principles of action we should accept . . . But you do not have to think that, and Wittgenstein rejects that conception of ethics. . . . [J]ust as logic is not, for Wittgenstein, a particular subject, with its own body of truths, but penetrates all thought, so ethics has no particular subject matter. . . . The contrast I want is that between ethics conceived as a sphere of discourse among others with ethics tied to everything there is or can be”. This passage too seems to say both that discourse about anything can be ethical (the weaker of the two claims in view, i.e., the no-demarcation claim) and that no discourse can be distinctively ethical (the stronger claim, that there are no distinctive ethical concepts or words).

4. “[O]ne might speak of a ‘primary’ and ‘secondary’ sense of a word. It is only if the word has the primary sense for you that you use it in the secondary one. Only if you have learnt to calculate—on paper or out loud—can you be made to grasp, by means of this concept, what calculating in the head is”.

5. Compare, of course, the familiar anti-Tractatus observations about “identical”, “exists” and “true”.

6. If there are compelling reasons to concede (as on the second alternative earlier) that distinctive psychological concepts are being deployed even in the simpler narrative, then the new words add a new articulation to these same concepts (as when, e.g., we become able to speak about our physical sensations in the past tense, an articulation relative to which “avowals” of sensation are primitive).

7. It is not essential to this method of doing moral philosophy that the relatively primitive level involves any use of concepts, since the method might explain the use of very simple concepts by appeal to aspects of our natures that are prior to our use of concepts. (“Being sure that someone is in pain, doubting whether he is, and so on, are so many natural, instinctive, kinds of behaviour towards other human beings, and our language is merely an auxiliary to, and further extension of, this relation. Our language-game is an extension of primitive behaviour”, Z §545.)

8. “What is the primitive reaction with which the language game begins?” (PI II, 218).

9. I am indebted in the rest of this section to essays in Hanfling (2008).

Bibliography

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