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DESCRIPTIVE ETHICS

What does Moral Philosophy Know about Morality?

Nora Hämäläinen

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ISBN 978-1-137-58616-2 ISBN 978-1-137-58617-9 (eBook)
DOI 10.1057/978-1-137-58617-9

Library of Congress Control Number: 2016948822

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Cover illustration: Pattern adapted from an Indian cotton print produced in the 19th century

Printed on acid-free paper

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The registered company is Nature America Inc.
The registered company address is: 1 New York Plaza, New York, NY 10004, U.S.A.

We philosophers need to work with anthropologists, sociologists, sociobiologists, psychologists, to find out what actual morality is; we need to read history to find how it has changed itself, to read novels to see how it might change again.
Annette Baier, *Postures of the Mind: Essays on Mind and Morals.* London: Methuen, 1985, p. 224.

Anyone who now wishes to make a study of moral matters opens up for himself and immense field of work. All kinds of individual passions have to be thought through and pursued through different ages, peoples, and great and small individuals; all their reason and all their evaluations and perspectives on things have to be brought into the light.
Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, translated, with commentary by Walter Kaufmann. New York: Vintage Books, 1974, pp. 81–82.

For Niklas

Preface

Academic writing is, with good reason, governed by an ideal of impersonality. We report the end product, the scholarship and polished reasoning. The authors' struggles are not interesting, and anecdotal framing of a study belongs to the retrospective prefaces written by eminent emeriti to a second or third edition. But sometimes it may be good, for the purpose of easier entrance into the line or reasoning, to let one's readers share bits of the background of a text.

This book was originally part of a larger and rather different work: a philosophical study of the contemporary self-help culture. Looking at contemporary literature of self-improvement as one of the most central places where contemporary people reflect over good personhood, duties, and the good life, I was convinced that what I do was not merely cultural philosophy of some kind, but moral philosophy. It seemed to me that a kind of freely applied cultural philosophy approach was necessary for bringing out some aspects of our moral lives that made moral philosophy an interesting pursuit in the first place. I did not so much want to look behind our contingent forms of morality as I wanted to look *at* them, in their complex, banal, quotidian manifestations. At the same time I had the vague idea that looking at them, as contingent historical phenomena, would help me to deal with the relationship between the historicity of morals and the moral claim to universality. So, in addition to writing bits and pieces about popular self-help and its more highbrow manifestations, I found myself doing meta-philosophy by arguing for two interrelated views. First, I was suggesting a cultural philosophy approach to ethics and second, I was

arguing that such an approach would dissolve the problems surrounding historicity and universality in ethics.

At a certain point I found that these meta-philosophical and methodological concerns were taking up too much space in my writing about self-help, while being mostly uninteresting to those potential readers, in different fields, who have a primary interest in self-help per se. It also seemed to me that self-help became a means to working through methodological issues in philosophy, where it deserved full attention on its own. Thus I eventually separated the explicit methodological material from the larger project and let it grow into the shape of this long essay. I am still here arguing for a cultural philosophy approach to ethics. I am concerned with articulating what such an approach could be, how it differs from the concerns of mainstream Anglophone ethics, and most centrally how it links to some central works in twentieth-century philosophy. The historicity of morals and its relation to claims to universality are of course too large topics for this book, but I will provide some preliminary pointers toward how the relationship between historicity and our deepest moral commitments could be addressed under the auspices of a descriptive ethics.

Acknowledgments

This book was written as part of my work as a fellow of the Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies in 2013–2016. Special thanks go to Niklas Forsberg, Turo-Kimmo Lehtonen, Sari Kivistö, Sami Pihlström, Merja Polvinen, Eva Johanna Holmberg, and the wonderful interdisciplinary research community at the HCAS.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction—or What Does Moral Philosophy Know about Morality?

Abstract Hämäläinen introduces the idea of descriptive ethics as a topic unduly neglected by contemporary philosophers. She argues, first, that philosophical ethics cannot be pursued in meaningful ways without substantial descriptive or comparative work, which often benefits from other sciences as well as the arts. Second, she argues that the main reason why the projects of descriptive ethics are left to others is that there is in today's philosophical ethics too little understanding of the philosophical import of descriptive work and the philosophical hazards involved in such work.

Keyword Descriptive ethics

This book is an investigation into the descriptive task of moral philosophy. By the descriptive task I mean here the challenge of providing rich and accurate pictures of the moral conditions, values, virtues, and norms, under which people live and have lived, along with relevant knowledge about the human animal or human nature. Today this kind of research is often conducted by intellectual historians, social historians, sociologists, anthropologists, or researchers in cultural studies, for example, while philosophers concentrate on normative ethical theory, the conceptual and ontological inquiries of metaethics, or questions of putting theories to work in applied ethics. And indeed, we may think this is as it should be, by definition.

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N. Hämäläinen, *Descriptive Ethics*,
DOI 10.1057/978-1-137-58617-9_1

According to the (current) *Encyclopaedia Britannica* on the web "*Comparative ethics*, also called Descriptive Ethics" is

> the empirical (observational) study of the moral beliefs and practices of different peoples and cultures in various places and times. It aims not only to elaborate such beliefs and practices but also to understand them insofar as they are causally conditioned by social, economic, and geographic circumstances. Comparative ethics, in contrast to normative ethics, is thus the proper subject matter of the social sciences (e.g., anthropology, history, sociology, and psychology). (http://global.britannica.com/topic/comparative-ethics)

The contrasted normative ethics, in its turn, is described as

> that part of moral philosophy, or ethics, concerned with criteria of what is morally right and wrong. It includes the formulation of moral rules that have direct implications for what human actions, institutions, and ways of life should be like. (http://global.britannica.com/topic/normative-ethics)

Metaethics, the constant companion of normative ethics in the field of moral philosophy, is described as follows:

> the subdiscipline of ethics concerned with the nature of ethical theories and moral judgments.... Major metaethical theories include naturalism, non-naturalism (or intuitionism), emotivism, and prescriptivism. (http://global.britannica.com/topic/metaethics)

I cite these entries because they state what is commonplace and yet deeply problematic: first, a habitual and institutional separation of the study of the good and right (and the "nature," i.e., ontology, of good and right) from the study of the ways of life that condition ideas and practices concerning the good and the right. And second, a severing of the study of ways of life from the body of moral philosophy, leaving it to other disciplines or to the obscure and peripheral tracts of philosophical study that sometimes go under the name of cultural philosophy. (The search term "cultural philosophy" leads in the mentioned encyclopedia, inexplicably and only, to the late literary critic, novelist, and semiotician Umberto Eco, from which we are led to assume that this is not a common search word or important topic.) The philosopher, according to the habitual division of labor, has little to do with cultural analysis, with attempts to understand what is contingent and fleeting in his surroundings.

Obviously some projects of descriptive ethics are left to others because philosophers lack the appropriate means to conduct various kinds of study that may add to our knowledge about human life. Experimental psychology can systematically get at empirical aspects of people's moral responses that cannot be accessed by philosophical reason alone. Work in moral history requires sustained archival work of a kind that philosophers may be poorly trained to conduct and temperamentally disinclined to learn. Sociological research can bring out how people make sense of their moral choices, but the use of interviews is not part of the philosopher's toolbox.

In contrast to any easy division of intellectual labor, however, I argue two things. First, that philosophical ethics cannot be pursued in meaningful ways without substantial descriptive or comparative work, which often benefits from other sciences as well as the arts. Second, that the main reason why the projects of descriptive ethics are left to others is that there is in today's philosophical ethics too little appreciation of the philosophical import of descriptive work and the philosophical hazards involved in such work. 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. Much of the polemics about initial description of our moral situations is muffled by the philosophers' eagerness to proceed to argument and theorization. Pictures and perspectives are taken for granted, and not submitted to careful scrutiny, because making pictures and perspectives does not match the philosophers' idea of the work of reason. Work on descriptive starting points is far from nonexistent in philosophy but it is continuously placed in the margins of philosophical ethics.

My target here is moral philosophy as pursued in the analytic tradition broadly conceived, including ethics after Wittgenstein, neo-pragmatism, and some boundary crossing work, but excluding work done within the continental traditions: phenomenology, critical theory, and existentialism. Some of the points raised here, concerning philosophy and empirical research, may be applicable to discussions in these traditions too, but to sort this out will be beyond the scope of this small book. Traditionally the continental traditions have much more lively connections to literature, social research, anthropology, and social criticism, which protects them to a certain extent from the intellectual isolation and technicalization that often besets analytic moral philosophy. Indeed, a reconnection to substantial descriptive work in moral philosophy may involve the activation of

not only resources that are already there within the analytic tradition (Wittgenstein and pragmatism), but also resources that are most likely to be seen as external, like the work of Foucault. My aim, however, is not to hold up any other modern tradition as a model for analytic moral philosophy: It is rather to look for ways in which analytic moral philosophy can become more alive to real-life morality.

Thus let us begin with setting the stage. Any philosophical project on morals is dependent on a broad variety of actual or potential insights that are not received through philosophical reasoning alone. As Iris Murdoch puts it, in moral philosophy "the examination should be realistic. Human nature, as opposed to the natures of other hypothetical spiritual beings, has certain discoverable attributes, and these should be suitably considered in any discussion of morality" (Murdoch 1997, pp. 363–364).

Realism here does not indicate a metaphysical position, but the very ordinary idea that our account should not be fanciful, biased, simplified, or shaped by untenable idealizations. The crucial question is how the "discoverable attributes" of human beings and their surroundings and situations are expected (1) to be recorded and (2) to influence work in moral philosophy. Many philosophers seem to be content with reliance on a rather humdrum philosophical commonsense, upon which ethical theories and metaethics are built. In this view, a reasonable understanding of human affairs to ground moral theory is relatively easy to achieve and does not require much empirical or descriptive efforts.

The call for a realistic consideration of human attributes can also be understood as a call to extend the philosophers' knowledge about moral life in rather specific and circumscribed ways. An example of this could be the increasing reliance on experimental psychology in moral philosophy.

But the call to "realism," in Murdoch's sense, can also, further, be understood as a call to consider the factual, empirical, and historical world of human morals as *a source of sustained wonder and continuous inquiry.* This is the starting point of a descriptive philosophical ethics: the idea 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. As Annette Baier puts it, "We philosophers need to work with anthropologists, sociologists, sociobiologists, psychologists, to find out what actual morality is; we need to read history to find how it has changed itself, to read novels to see how it might change again" (Baier 1985, p. 224).

Baier's call to "find out what actual morality is" should be read in the context of the late-twentieth-century "anti-theory" debate where a number of philosophers, including Baier, Bernard Williams, Peter Winch, Cora Diamond, and Charles Taylor, challenged the then current (though fairly young) paradigm of normative ethical theory, on the one hand, and metaethics, on the other. This debate was received mainly as a negative intervention, a repudiation of normative theorizing in ethics. But this is only one part of the story. The other, neglected but more important part is the call for a different kind of inquiry in ethics: one which seeks to know all kinds of things about actual moralities instead of constructing an abstract theoretical edifice. The confrontational antitheoretical posture has by now lost much of its appeal, but the descriptive and empirical appetites are thriving in various places: in the post-Wittgensteinian call for a return to "the ordinary" (Forsberg 2013), in the broad ethical interest in literature and film, in moral psychology, in experimental philosophy and pragmatist ethics.

Although modern moral philosophy, arguably, has focused its energies on other things than describing, uncovering, and inquiring into moral frameworks and practices, a present-day philosopher, inclined in this direction, finds resources for a more descriptive or empirical philosophy in the work of some of the most central philosophers of the twentieth century. I will in Chaps. 6–9 discuss how the descriptive ideal of ethics is instantiated, in different ways, by John Dewey, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Michel Foucault, and Charles Taylor, and by thinkers inspired by them. This selection of four philosophers, in addition to providing central sources today for a descriptive philosophical ethics, has also the benefit of bringing different themes for a contemporary descriptive project into view: Dewey's scientific and empirical emphases, Wittgenstein's low-key descriptions of everyday (linguistic) practices, and Foucault's and Taylor's different genealogies of modern personhood and modern frameworks of value.

I will investigate how the ideas of these philosophers and their followers in four very different ways feed into the project of a contemporary "descriptive" and yet philosophical ethics. I will highlight how the descriptive projects are put forward by these thinkers: as paths to various knowledge about morality and also as paths to intellectual and moral self-knowledge. But before turning to these philosophers, I will in Chaps. 2–5 discuss the state of moral philosophy today: its theoretical emphases, aims, and internal mode of organization. Where mainstream analytic moral theory seeks to go

"below the surface" of everyday morality by providing rational grounds and procedures for moral thought and action, the contending philosophers of the "descriptive" project seek to do the same by investigating the frameworks of value that are ours, that are at work in our supposedly most universal moral precepts, and that we nonetheless often fail to understand and account for. But when read in terms of the current division of labor in ethical study, as exemplified by the *Britannica*, the efforts of the latter tend to be misunderstood, either as not addressing questions of moral philosophy or as trying to do so in a way which is lacking in critical penetration.

Thus, the first part of the book describes how the field of moral philosophy today is formed: its central concerns as well as major dissenting voices. The second part, Chap. 6 onward, proceeds to reassemble the philosophical study of morality around descriptive (rather than normative and theoretical) efforts, leaning on ideas derived from four major twentieth-century philosophical figures.

My primary concern in this book is to make a place for descriptive efforts at the heart of moral philosophy, drawing on resources both internal and external to the philosophical tradition. The aim is to make moral philosophy richer and more responsive to lived morality and extra-philosophical insights about moral life. For this purpose, we need a clearer understanding of the philosophical thrust of descriptive accounts of the moral life, moral practices, and moral change, and we need to reconnect to a tradition within the tradition of moral philosophy where this work is considered essential.

But philosophy, philosophical thought, and the philosophical traditions also make an irreducible contribution to the projects of descriptive ethics. Descriptive ethics is never just descriptive: It involves, rather, a complex element of normative or evaluative struggle, as well as complex conceptual work, in which philosophers are at home and which they thus may be particularly well prepared to deal with. Moral philosophers are not just in need of descriptive efforts: They can also contribute to these efforts in distinctive ways, especially when it comes to mediating between our (sociological, anthropological, historical) observations of moral forms of life and the judgments we make in our practical moral lives. This is what philosophy could be at its best. But this role of a mediator and practical thinker cannot be credibly shouldered by academics who are ignorant and careless about existing moralities and their constitution.

CHAPTER 2

Moral Philosophy Today

Abstract Hämäläinen presents a methodological problem in contemporary moral philosophy: the problem of implicit methodological rules and boundaries that make it difficult to include, into moral philosophy, a rich account of our moral present. She develops the notion of a "moral present": a communal framework of action and valuations, which not only sets the standard for our individual judgments, but is also responsive to the constant ongoing negotiation of practices and norms in human societies. She suggests that this moral present should be a central concern for moral philosophers.

Keyword Moral present

What do we do when we do moral philosophy? Philosophy does not have a clear methodology, or even plural distinct methodologies. This is not exactly the kind of thing that we are taught in Philosophy 101, but quite soon, when comparing our curricula with students of other subjects, we learn that there is something that other fields have and philosophy has not. Philosophy demands a number of skills that are trained and exercised in philosophy studies, in teaching, and in research, but these skills do not constitute a body of methods that can be applied to a range of given subjects. Philosophy is done in a tradition (or a number of traditions), but such a tradition does not provide one with a specific set of methods

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N. Hämäläinen, *Descriptive Ethics*,
DOI 10.1057/978-1-137-58617-9_2

that one can simply go on using on new objects of inquiry or teach to a student who then can go on using them. A familiar problem for philosophers who have tried to write a research proposal according to a common format used for all fields of research is that the "theory and method" section, or its equivalent, ends up sounding empty or repeating things already stated elsewhere. A research project in philosophy most often does not use a "method" quite in the same sense as most other fields of research do. What we learn is perhaps better described as a craft, a practical capacity of carrying on with philosophical discussions, to go on doing whatever we think Aristotle or Descartes or Kant or Wittgenstein or Rawls were doing. And mostly what we do ends up being very different from the work of our heroes.

Yet, this lack of a given methodology or set of methodologies does not mean that philosophy would not have what we could call methodological problems. Such problems, though often passed by in silence, are encountered in situations where a philosopher wants to pursue an inquiry in a direction where there are no given conventions for how to go on, or where the local conventions within one's philosophical subfield seem to exclude the kind of inquiry one wants to undertake. Or when a philosopher finds interesting insights in neighboring fields but finds it hard to bring them home to her own philosophical debates. Interdisciplinary work is often encouraged in theory but discouraged in practice, not least because it is difficult.

Thus, what is at stake here is a kind of methodological problem. I am concerned with the limits of analytic moral philosophy and its thin relation to what I, in the absence of a better label, call the moral present. I will suggest that this thin relation has far-reaching consequences for at least two issues that are of central importance for the practice of moral philosophy.

First, it hampers the philosopher's capacity to attend, professionally, to a variety of moral phenomena in our present, placing moral philosophy at a disadvantage, when talking about morally interesting issues, as compared to scholars and researchers in a variety of other fields. Sociologists (like journalists) are traditionally quick on the uptake when it comes to recognizing and naming pertinent aspects of social development: often aspects that are of fundamentally moral significance. Examples that easily come to mind are the sociological attention to consumer practices, the emergence of a psychological framework of understanding the human (Rieff 2006), the human cost of service work (Hoschchild 2012),[1] and the present-day American punitive system (Goffman 2014). Cultural

studies and media studies more or less by definition grasp the present and emerging moral aspects of people's seemingly humdrum realities: the moral charge of the relationship between face-to-face encounters and social media, for example. Anthropology too, especially when practiced in settings close to home, can exhibit this kind of immediacy. Research in these and bordering disciplines often not only addresses morally interesting issues, but also takes reflective moral stances and, most importantly, shapes the terms by which we collectively come to think about these matters.

Philosophers are in no way barred from such exchanges, but are rarely, for reasons that I will discuss more carefully below, at the forefront of such discussions, nor are they often fundamentally affected, in their own thinking, by attention to such discussions. Philosophers stay aloof and at a distance, producing technical advances in rather academic debates, for each other and for those who care to listen. Relying on rather Weberian idea of science as vocation (Weber 1946), they contribute preferably in local, limited, and technical ways to a collective body of philosophical knowledge, and keep clear of the dilettantism and eclecticism that is frequently required when addressing the pressing questions of daily life. Most likely to get their hands dirty are philosophers who in addition to philosophy have a second home in some other discipline or who work in inherently interdisciplinary fields like gender studies.

The specialization and compartmentalization in philosophy is a natural consequence of the growth of academic research in the past 50 years. It is often impossible to be both competent and creatively productive in many fields at once, to the effect that knowledge between fields of study or even between specific discussions travels in haphazard ways or not at all. Exchange between different discussions is also hampered by very different premises and presuppositions. The most competent and distinctive contributions, not only in analytic philosophy, but also in other fields of study, tend to be those that are made rather deep within the given tradition. Analytic philosophy, with its identity closely aligned to science, has generally (Wittgensteinians and pragmatists excluded) welcomed technicalization as advance. But the scientific ethos of analytic philosophy has the melancholy consequence of leaving the philosopher's work in the margins of contemporary moral thought. To the detriment of philosophers as well as to the detriment of the things philosophers specifically could contribute to making sense of our moral present, analytic philosophy is not a field people in other fields or in society at large would turn to in search for illumination on morally interesting questions.

Second, and more importantly, philosophy's thin relation to the moral present not only makes analytic philosophers potentially awkward in debates that set the tone for how moral phenomena are talked about and made sense of among a wider intellectual public. It is also bound to limit their self-understanding, by which I mean their capacity to understand the relationship between their philosophical ideas and their underlying contingent cultural frameworks. This is more important because it condemns moral philosophy not only to the relative obscurity of a specialized discipline, but also to a state of inherent lack of transparency, when the deep cultural biases of its idea of morality are left unacknowledged and unprocessed.

I am not addressing these issues as the problems of individuals. They are not simple products of neglect or laziness. Keeping up with the latest developments in even one subdiscipline of contemporary academic ethics is hard work in its own right, which means that we all need to prioritize. Neither should the problem be attributed to a nerdy narrow professional outlook. Many analytic philosophers are knowledgeable in fields of research far beyond their primary research topics, within and outside philosophy. Many have a parallel life as public intellectuals, writing essays and book reviews on a variety of topics. What concerns me here is the shape and direction of a busy, competent professional practice that for underlying, vaguely historical and methodological reasons shoulders out much of what looks like the very substance of its subject matter.

2.1 Everyday Normativity and the Moral Present

So what could be meant here by the moral present? I use this phrase as a makeshift label for talking about a historically contingent, evolving, multilayered situation of things, values, and forms of life. As always, human beings are today shaping their life world by engaging in various kinds of talk and behavior: at the faculty meeting, by the sandbox, in the sandbox, in the hospital ward, at school, over a cup of coffee. Much of our talk and behavior is often not conceived as normative, it is just chatting, passing the time, exchanging news, exchanging glances, doing one's work. Yet it shapes us and makes us part of the whole, in ways that are quite necessary for the workings of a human society. The normative aspect of many of our everyday doings is often most clearly felt at points of transition, when one enters a new context, with a new set of norms and values. A girl, for example, goes to high school and is plunged into a confusing new world of teenage life.

Of course this world is new for most of her peers too, which gives rise to a period of heightened (though often implicit) normative negotiation and fervent reading of magazines, fashion blogs, or whatever the current windows to the teenage and adult worlds may be. No one actually has the power to set the norm; it is somehow done together, or by no one—although different individuals may have different roles in instating and upholding it.

Some years later, the girl has her first child and encounters the local parenting culture, in play groups, at the playground, or wherever she comes into contact with other people's ways of dealing with their parallel situations. Since most new parents find it of utmost importance to do things right in relation to their children, this is for many a period of unforeseen immersion in normative suggestions, many of which are starkly incompatible. Nursing 24/7? Is milk-based formula bad? Of course the baby must be used to bottle feeding from the start? Surely ecological cotton is better for the child? Cloth diapers! How soon and how frequently can or should the child be left to other caretakers? Of course the mom should be back in shape in a couple of weeks? Or is it perhaps part of being a mother that one does not pay too much attention to one's figure or one's career?

This bundle of concerns exhibits a striking mixture of questions concerning our fundamental duties to self and others, on the one hand, and rather superficial group habits and fashions, on the other. For some people, in some situations—indeed, perhaps, for most of us, in most situations—engaging actively in these kinds of social negotiations comes naturally. For others these negotiations are just a faint background noise, like rush hour traffic on a distant highway; they may participate, but do so, mostly, without knowing they do. Others, still, are from time to time inclined to experience chock and alienation, perhaps because they have difficulties adapting and difficulties picking up novel implicit norms, because they feel inadequate or happen to disapprove of aspects of a certain new culture they are immersed in: the cruelty of the teenage world, the materialism and self-importance of contemporary Western middle-class parenting, the stupidity of the leading normative voices of their social circle, the single-minded pursuit of profit at the work place. Normativity is often most keenly perceived when it is not fully shared.

Many changes in normative expectations and frameworks occur without notice, as our life circumstances change. Others are brought about

through political activity, such as consciousness raising. Some of the normative changes we perceive over time in our social environments are perhaps best described as aesthetic (fashion, "interesting" food, how to groom one's bodily hair). Other changes are easily perceived as fundamentally moral (attitudes to physical punishment of children, treatment of ethnic minorities and immigrants, etc.). Many changes in our normative attitudes seem to involve a mixture, indeed a negotiation, of ethical and aesthetic issues: How to live in style without too large an ecological footprint (a great source of middle-class self-deception)? Others involve a negotiation between issues of propriety, civility, and normality, on the one hand, and deeply held issues of conscience, on the other (How to be a vegan without offending one's grandmother and causing fuss?). One of the great puzzles of twentieth-century moral history is the social negotiation in 1930s Germany that made the Holocaust possible. How indeed? Some would say that it was because "normality" took a twisted turn, because what we like to think of as deeply held ideals of moral equality, of the inviolability of human life and dignity were given up for the fascist new "normal." Nothing utterly strange about this, perhaps, considering how we too put up with or ignore things we consider bad—sweat shop labor, permanent refugee camps with permanent inhabitants, military interventions abroad, and mechanisms of utter social exclusion (homelessness, long-term unemployment)—to sustain the kind of life we think of as normal.

We talk, write, and do things in terms of good, bad, and OK. While going about our businesses, we build a world of things, places, practices, and institutions that reinforce our valuations or cause them to change. There is often no simple way of a priori separating "the really deep issues" of good and evil that interest moral philosophy from this constant movement. The deep issues are a part of the general movement: part of our successively changing lives and equally changing understanding of what it means to be good, what is good enough, what is worthy, what is normal, admirable, beautiful, and so on. "Deep" and "superficial" intermingle in complex ways.

Although much of this normative negotiation is implicit, there is also an incessant stream of it which is verbally transmitted and easily accessible in a variety of forms in our everyday lives: in conversations, in newspapers and journals, in social media. Analyzing the variety of normative talk and writing in one's own society forces one to reflect on how one is complexly implicated in (or excluded from) various normative practices. One quickly

comes to see how many of our purportedly neutral descriptions of life and society are deeply normative and incline us to see and value in certain ways. This is one of the great insights of Iris Murdoch, still insufficiently appreciated in her native context of Anglophone moral philosophy. Murdoch persistently strove to show how our very cognition of the world, and our seemingly most factual and most trivial beliefs about it, are soaked in evaluation and indeed morality. As she notes: "The moral life is not intermittent or specialized, it is not a peculiar separate area of our existence. … ('But are you saying that every single second has a moral tag?' Yes, roughly)" (Murdoch 1992, p. 495). Just think of the frequency of the root metaphors of war or survival of the fittest in descriptions of inherently peaceful economic interactions; the victory of social competence over "moral goodness" in contemporary, casual, Western rhetoric of child rearing; or the focus on unnatural physical perfection in women's magazines. Or, to take a more positive example, think of the status of the individual person (i.e., any individual person) as the locus of unquestionable moral entitlement, which one can rhetorically get around, but not go against in contemporary public debates. These are historically contingent details of our contemporary moral world, which consists both of things we can perceive and criticize and of things that merge with the background of our everyday existence, invisible to us, though perhaps already striking and odd to our grandchildren.

Contemporary social sciences deal essentially with contingency and change, and thus think of human beings as unwittingly active and in some sense constitutive participants in forms of life that are historically formed, have a basis in our material conditions and power structures, and set the limits of what we can see and think and believe and conceive as good. These perspectives give access to a broad range of materials for a descriptive ethics.

Most analytic moral philosophy, in contrast, takes little interest in the contents and forms of these ongoing negotiations of values and norms, and enquiries in analytic moral philosophy shed little light on them. To be more exact, moral theorists do often attempt to shed light on contemporary negotiations of the good and right, but do so through interventions that seek to replace the ongoing muddle with clear principles for normative thought. This can of course involve insightful considerations on challenging topics. But to get a rich and complex view of our practical and evaluative frameworks, and the constitutive activity that goes on within them, is not seen as a central part of the analytic moral

philosopher's professional task. This is not to say that our actual moral present, in a thick descriptive sense, has no presence in moral philosophy. It is rather the case that descriptive insights enter philosophy in a piecemeal manner and are accommodated to the academic habits of moral philosophers, rather than challenging them to a richer engagement with understanding our present.

Note

1. Rieff's and Hochschild's classic books on these topics were published in 1966 and 1983, respectively.

CHAPTER 3

Morality as Known by Moral Philosophers

Abstract This chapter presents five different ways in which contemporary moral philosophers reach for descriptive knowledge about morality, values, and conceptions of the good. These include intuition, narrative literature/film, moral histories, experimental and empirical work, and contemporary "hard cases." What is interesting about these entrances for knowledge about contingent moralities into philosophy is how they all, in different ways, both open and close the door to a richly descriptive take on ethics.

Keywords Intuition · Ethics and narrative · Moral histories · Experimental ethics

To get a clearer view of the nature of the descriptive limitations of contemporary moral philosophy, I will turn briefly to discuss five different ways in which real-life moral understanding *does* enter philosophy. These are the philosophical uses of (1) intuition and common knowledge, (2) narrative literature, (3) moral histories, (4) empirical research on morality, and (5) the use of "contemporary" examples. What is interesting about these entrances for knowledge about contingent moralities into philosophy is how they all both open and close the door to a richly descriptive take on ethics.

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N. Hämäläinen, *Descriptive Ethics*,
DOI 10.1057/978-1-137-58617-9_3

3.1 Intuition

There is a widespread, though not universally accepted, principle in analytic ethics that the moral "intuitions" of a normal, "morally competent" person are a relevant check on the correctness of philosophical theories and ideas. Most philosophers consider themselves to be such persons and are thus reasonably confident in using their own intuitions as the relevant frame of judgment. If a conclusion generated by one's new theory is revolting, then there might be something wrong with the theory. Many of the typical, somewhat strained, philosophers' examples in ethics, for example, trolley cases, are designed to test our intuitions concerning the acceptability of the practical implications of philosophical theories. It is perhaps no exaggeration to say that analytic moral philosophers, mostly, are strongly inclined to remodel their theories if they go against strong, widespread intuitions.

Yet, not everyone accepts this veto of intuition. Intuitions, as we know, are notoriously variant, conflicting, and thus…unreliable? A curious example of flouting intuitions is David Benatar's book *Better Never to Have Been: The Harm of Coming into Existence* (2006), where the author argues that it would be better not to be born, since life necessarily causes us to experience various evils that would have been avoided had we not existed. Most people's intuition would be that this cannot be right, that there must be something seriously wrong with the theory, if it is to be seen as a theory meant to elucidate human morality. One way of disentangling this sense of wrongness would be to argue that Benatar's scenario is not about morality at all, since morality, the good, is an aspect of human existence, life, society, not a force of the universe. We may apply the idea of "better not to have been" to people who are born to nothing but severe pain and suffering, but we do so with a certain kind of unease and are prompted by quite specific and local considerations. An approach from nowhere in this quite radical manner is likely to elicit the reaction that this at least is not the kind of objectivity we are engaged in when talking about morality. Benatar quite purposively challenges the role of intuitions in moral philosophy, to the benefit of a kind of theoretical consistency. But his case may actually be used to illustrate the centrality of intuition in moral philosophy. It tests the limits of how far philosophers are willing to disregard intuition, and the answer, in most cases, is: not very far. Indeed if we are removed too far from common moral

assumptions or intuitions, we are inclined to start questioning the relevance of the theory for morality in the first place. In which sense is Benatar's view a moral one, relevant for human morality?[1]

In a different register, the moral philosopher's reference to intuition has been questioned on the basis that it is really quite unclear what these intuitions consist of.[2] They are kinds of judgments about rightness and wrongness that rest on culturally specific, historically contingent, unanalyzed and often even unanalyzable material, mixed with (semi-biological) gut reactions. The very concept of "intuition" may be seen as a problematic category for the casual real-life checking that goes on in philosophical discussions, because it seems to bracket out the complex constitution of our nonreflective responses, suggesting that we are consulting something rather distinctive, simple, and stable.

Stripped of these assumptions of simplicity and stability, reference to intuition is a central way in which our everyday moral world, our historically contingent moral present, enters into moral philosophy. Our everyday moral world is consulted for guidance in the form of "intuitive" moral response, in order to keep the theory under construction or reconstruction close enough to ordinary morality and keep it from straying too far, as Benatar's does. In this role, the armchair reaction of "this cannot be right" has an overwhelmingly strong foothold in philosophical ethics. But precisely by packaging the sought real-life input as "intuition," this procedure closes the door on a potential serious inquiry into what these reactions are made of—an approach that would open up to a broad descriptive inquiry.

3.2 Narrative Literature, Film

From the 1980s on, a number of more or less analytic philosophers, most influentially Martha Nussbaum (1986, 1990), Stanley Cavell (2003), and Cora Diamond (1991), have argued for the benefits of considering narrative literature in a context of moral philosophy. Cavell (1979) and Stephen Mulhall (2001) are among those who have made a parallel case concerning film. Narrative art provides us with images to think with; it engages the imagination and teases out a variety of perspectives, reactions, and trains of thought which are not easily brought out by means of philosophical texts alone. This does not mean that philosophers would seek direct guidance from literary texts or films, but rather that fictional people and situations—and the artistic and intellectual work of literary authors and

filmmakers—are used as sounding boards for eliciting a more complex and nuanced reflection on the part of the philosopher.

This inclusion of literature and film into analytic moral philosophy has brought about an important widening of the "real-life" input in moral philosophy, not necessarily because literary works would give *an accurate picture* of lived morality or moral reality, but rather because literary works give *various pictures* of reality which we must relate to, asses, reflect upon. Narrative works of art are, in a variety of ways, about reality, and this "aboutness" is what makes them helpful in eliciting more nuanced moral reflections on the part of the philosopher, complicating her picture of the issues involved in a given ethical problem.

The moral philosophers' turn to literature has been a central means for real, contingent, historical morality to enter philosophy, both in the sense that attention to a literary work prompts the philosopher to think about the life world of the characters as well as his or her own world, and in the sense that it has provided a way to verbalize what is particular, contingent, and concrete. But it has mainly, in the analytic discussion, been used in ways which do not primarily point in a direction of a descriptive take on ethics. Nussbaum consistently uses literary works to argue a specific normative point of view which she terms Aristotelian. This point of view includes the moral importance of perceptiveness and the imagination, attention to the situatedness and the practical possibilities for thought and action of human individuals, and the importance of liberal arts education for the making of a just society. A lively engagement with real-life moralities is here distinctively a means to articulate an ideal. In Nussbaum's case, the result is a body of work in normative ethics and political philosophy, not in descriptive ethics. It can thus be easily organized under the large umbrella of academic moral philosophy, emphasizing the normative points and downplaying the descriptive contributions. It does not prompt to further inquiry into what we are or what we have become, but rather to corrective action.

3.3 Moral Histories

The vast majority of contemporary analytic moral philosophers are involved in what could be characterized as an ahistorical project: that of revealing what they take to be the fundamental structure or nature of morality or moral language. Yet a handful of the frontline figures in late twentieth century and contemporary analytic philosophy, like

Charles Taylor (1989), Alasdair McIntyre (1967, 1981), Bernard Williams (1993), and Ian Hacking (1995), have engaged in a kind of moral history which places the philosophical illumination of morality in a context of historically contingent moral understandings. I am probably not the only one to remember my early encounters with McIntyre's *A Short History of Ethics* and *After Virtue* as significant experiences. He displayed such variety, not only in theories of morality, but in what morality has been for people at different times. Are his narratives correct? I did not know. The details were surely less important for late-twentieth-century ethics than the insight that variety in human morals is not merely variety in opinions or beliefs, but variety in the very concepts by which people organize their thinking in terms of good and bad or good and evil. (This insight was not an obvious part of the roughly analytic curriculum in moral philosophy.)

In contemporary ethics the interest in historical variety has three notable sources: neo-Hegelianism (as represented by Taylor, Robert Pippin), the influence of Foucault (Hacking, Nikolas Rose), and the discrepancy between ancient and modern conceptions of ethics rediscovered with the broad return of Aristotelian ethics (Elizabeth Anscombe, Philippa Foot, MacIntyre, Nussbaum, etc.). Furthermore, history of ideas, mental history, and conceptual history are thriving intellectual endeavors today and great sources for reflection about morality, although not within philosophy departments. There are innumerable ways in which this work can matter for both normative ethics and metaethics. Most of the philosophers involved in moral history of these kinds have indeed had both normative and metaethical interests and aims beyond their purely historical ones, and use the historical insights to gain perspective on the variety of historically contingent beliefs and concepts that have formed their own ideas of morality.

Thus we see in this late-twentieth-century interest in moral history an important site for the development of a philosophical and yet descriptive take on ethics, which I will return to later when discussing Foucault and Taylor. This strand of philosophy does not in itself close the door on a richly descriptive ethics, but attempts rather to open it. But the philosophical career of this historicist strand in analytic philosophy has been arrested by the unbridged and apparently unbridgeable gap between universalist moral theory and historically oriented writings in this tradition. Historical sensibility, and the awareness that we are, in some sense, radically situated in time and contingency, is bracketed out from the pursuits

of metaethics and moral theory, which are developed in a universalist and objectivist spirit. Moral history and historicist moral philosophy are contained and rendered harmless by an accelerating academic specialization, which makes it easy for moral theorists to ignore insights derived from historically oriented discussions.

3.4 Experimental and Empirical Ethics

A curious, contested, and often utterly puzzling source of knowledge about morals is the empirical research conducted in various fields to figure out things about people's moral beliefs and reactions. Empirical research into morals comes in many varieties. Some of these are gathered under the umbrella term of "experimental philosophy" or "x-phi," which is a currently growing field of studies utilizing methods of cognitive psychology and the social sciences (questionnaires, brain scans, etc.) to elicit information about people's moral behavior, moral intuitions, and intuitions concerning the use of morally charged terms. These kinds of inquiries may give quite surprising results and be helpful for questioning the validity of philosophical armchair assumptions concerning human behavior.

A slightly different type of research utilizes the methods of the social sciences to elicit knowledge about moral behavior. Take for example a study that purports to show that well-off people are more prone to behavior that is considered immoral in their societies (theft, drunk driving, tax fraud) than people who are socioeconomically less well off (Piff et al. 2012). This can be seen as politically funny because it so starkly goes against the association of good social standing with moral superiority that is such an important though often tacit part of contemporary neoliberal rhetoric. (We are rich because we are excellent and hardworking; you are poor because you are bad and lazy.) It is also interesting because it may reveal aspects of the interconnection between morality and relative power, at least in the investigated social setting.

There is room for a certain worry that the relatively high status of empirical research today, as compared to the philosophers' armchair work, may produce the impression, in some quarters, that these kinds of empirical "results" can yield moral philosophical insight without the involvement of actual moral philosophy (whether this "philosophy" is done by philosophers or others). This, of course, can be a problem. There is little point in doing complex empirical research into moral

reactions or behavior if we use it to jump to crude normative conclusions. "Translating" empirical work to normative or metaethical conclusions is moral philosophy in its own right, and the difficulty of this task should not be underestimated.

But there should be no reason for moral philosophers to ignore empirical research, on the pretext, for example, that philosophy is a conceptual endeavor or that philosophers are looking for universal principles rather than contingent facts. Kwame Anthony Appiah (2008) defends experiments in ethics by noting that "'Experimental philosophy,' rather than being something new, is as old as the term 'philosophy.' The commonplace I want to challenge is that philosophy, in having relinquished those inquiries that now belong to the physical and social sciences, has somehow become purely itself" (2008, p. 2). Appiah argues that experimental and empirical methods have been excluded from moral philosophy proper through a revisionist historiography, which projects the current idea of moral philosophy (as a conceptual/theoretical endeavor) onto a past where it did not exist as such, but was rather one aspect of the "moral sciences." Thus x-phi and empirical research into ethics is not external to philosophy and the apparent radicalism of x-phi is merely due to a very short memory and very recent habits of philosophizing.

Since x-phi is currently the most active contender to the mainstream paradigm of analytic ethics, I will look more closely at it in Chap. 5. Although I am sympathetic to the use of experimental and empirical methods, I argue that the framework of x-phi is too close to some basic assumptions of analytic ethics to offer a radical alternative to current moral theory or to produce a satisfactory, empirically sensitive approach to our moral forms of life.

3.5 Contemporary Examples and Cases

Last, a kind of real-life input to moral philosophy can be seen in the selection of "hard cases" for moral theory that are discussed in contemporary philosophical debates. Stem-cell research, global warming, a globalized economy, and so on produce a plethora of moral issues that need to be incorporated into the framework of any moral theory. In these discussions some of the problems presented are genuinely new, in the sense that the phenomena involved have not existed before. Others are brought to the philosopher's attention through new or intensified social and political worries. But the focus in these discussions is not on the evolving sensibilities and concepts

that guide and form our responses to new issues, but rather on the incorporation of novel and evolving phenomena into theoretical frameworks that aspire to universality. This kind of inquiry into hard cases can be thoroughly ahistorical and thus, in a deeper sense, unconcerned with the nature of our moral present. Unlike philosophical attention to literature, moral history, or moral psychology, it does not strive to find out things about ourselves or our time, but rather seeks solutions to new ethical problems in the inherently ahistorical resources of moral theory and applied ethics.

A context where philosophers encounter real-life hard cases is formed by the plethora of multi-professional ethics panels hosted by hospitals, research institutes, and government bodies that deal with ethically charged decision making. The work of such organs can never be plainly the application of intricate moral theory to practice, but is rather constituted by a complex negotiation of experiential, empirical, clinical, theoretical, and moral concerns. For the professional moral philosopher these offer practical sites for cultural negotiation and for the confrontation of the philosopher's toolkit with a complex, imperfect, and changing practical world. For individual philosophers participation in such contexts may be of crucial intellectual importance, also concerning how they see their own more theoretical endeavors. But this kind of practical service does not at least currently (or not yet) seem to have far-reaching consequences for how the theoretical pursuits of moral philosophers develop.

3.6 The Texture of Our Moral Lives

It may seem like this list of ways in which real life enters philosophy would undermine my initial claim that the channels between real life and moral philosophy are too narrow. Have I not just given examples of widespread practices and growing discussions that can be tapped for the use of moral philosophy?

My suggestion is no. In order to make full use of the intellectual resources at our disposal, moral philosophers should give even more prominence to the old empiricist virtue of "taking a look." This can be done in innumerable ways. Although Anglophone, broadly analytic moral philosophers have in the past few decades become increasingly curious about history, literature, and empirical research, they still have a strong propensity to listen above all to each other. The trajectory of moral philosophy, in the analytic perspective, follows the achievements of

individual philosophers from Plato through Kant to Moore and, say, Anscombe, extended with the achievements of some particularly worthy novelists. This is the kind of thinking that is bound to hide from us the reality of moral thought in our time and thus also deprive us of a thorough understanding of the driving forces, pressures, and often surprising origins of the very best and most worthy manifestations of contemporary moral thinking and practice. A sustained and original attention to things like these is one of Foucault's central contributions to contemporary thought. As Ian Hacking formulates it: "systems of thought are both anonymous and autonomous. They are not to be studied by reading the final reports of the heroes of science, but rather by surveying a vast terrain of discourse that includes tentative starts, wordy prolegomena, brief flysheets, and occasional journalism" (Hacking 2004, p. 90). Along these lines, the "system" of modern moral thought is not best studied by attending to what we take to be its philosophical high points, but by looking at the whole framework, society, where these high points present themselves.

Moral intuitions are undoubtedly important, but they give as such little clue about the various things that cooperate to produce them: nature, nurture, and all the things we may call culture. Narrative art is a central source for understanding the moral pressures and negotiations of a given time (the bourgeois novel of the nineteenth century, the witness literature of the twentieth century, etc.) but it is just one such source among many others. Moral history is likely to teach us quite a bit about our own time, but it does not focalize the processes and negotiations that form our present, nor does it give a clear idea of how to work on the present. Empirical research gives bits and pieces of "information" about the present, but does not as such give an understanding of the moral forces and pressures at work in our everyday doings and sayings.

All of these are important but insufficient for the kind of reflective self-scrutiny and understanding of the present that is necessary for a moral philosophy worth the name. We need ways of talking about and analyzing the everyday making of our moral frameworks through quotidian doings and sayings, and how these doings and sayings change. These are issues that are constantly left out of contemporary analytic moral philosophy, although they are central in contemporary sociology, anthropology, social history, cultural studies, literary criticism and theory, and so on. Rather than working in the direction of increasing academic compartmentalization we need to learn from neighboring

fields and traditions and use that learning in philosophically productive ways. If not, professional moral philosophy has little chance of being the most acute moral thought of our time. Morally and socially curious students are advised to turn elsewhere to feed their understanding.

So what am I suggesting? Not a specific methodological extension to current philosophical practice, but rather an engagement on the behalf of moral philosophers in the ongoing discovery of the moral present: its varieties of dominant and subsidiary norms, values, practices, and concepts. Only in this way can we learn to know ourselves and the evaluative frameworks that covertly form our work in moral philosophy.

One way of doing this is by attending to texts where our evaluations and moral beliefs are negotiated. Moral discourse (an aspect of moral practice that can easily be tapped for the use of philosophers) is everywhere, but it is to be found in some places more poignantly than in others. We can begin with texts that often strike us (or some of us) as nauseatingly normative: commercials, women's magazines, self-help literature, the APA manual, parenting guides, relationship guides, and popular film. "Texts" of these kinds exhibit our normative hierarchies and our conceptual frameworks in ways that we in our everyday lives are already culturally habituated to analyzing and criticizing. A contemporary 7-year-old can produce a competent criticism of a tooth paste commercial; an 11-year-old can analyze the normative implications of a science fiction movie. Most grown-up academic philosophers have the same basic critical skills and use them with discernment in their private and social contexts—when discussing movies or politicians—but they are not used to exercising them within the framework of professional moral philosophy. What we need is to activate our capacity of cultural criticism in moral philosophy, by attending to a broader range of cultural materials. When attempting to approach various kinds of normative texts the moral philosophers need not start from scratch, since there is a lot written about such texts in other disciplines. What we philosophers need to do, though, is to figure out how such texts—and the knowledge about ourselves and our societies they open up—matter, in different cases, for the more specific pursuits of moral philosophy. Since the philosophers' questions and concerns are different from the sociologists, for example, it should be likely that the outcomes of their inquiries are different too. But I will not here attempt to pin down what philosophers should or could do in this respect, because philosophers are quite

different from each other and have quite different concerns that they bring to bear on their use of these materials.

The considerations I raise in this book aim at negotiating a place for these kinds of studies in contemporary moral philosophy. What I endeavor here is thus not quite the hands-on study of cultural artefacts that is called for, but rather something more preliminary and traditionally philosophical: to trace in twentieth-century philosophy a parallel tradition of ethical thought, which provides some points of orientation for the philosophers' work in descriptive ethics, a tradition in which description (in many forms) takes precedence over normativity, theory, and systematization.

Notes

1. For discussions of Benatar's book, see Pihlström (2011) and Forsberg (2013).
2. See, for example, Avner Baz (2012); to remind us that this is not a new discussion, see also Dewey and Tufts (1932).

CHAPTER 4

The Foundational Project of Ethics and a Different Way of Going Below the Surface

Abstract Modern moral philosophy has generally organized its inquiries around two core subjects: 1) normative ethics or ethical theory, concerned with the good and the right, and 2) metaethics, concerned with the meaning, role and status of moral language and moral judgements. These are the central nodes to which other approaches to ethics and other areas of moral inquiry are appended, but they constitute only a part of moral philosophy. To rethink this mode of organizing the field Hämäläinen identifies two distinct strands in modern moral philosophy. First, there is a main stream which follows the division of labor between metaethics and normative ethics, and which generally holds that the former should provide ideas concerning the nature and status of morals and the latter should provide rational grounding of morals along with action guidance. Second, there is a strand of moral philosophy which gives priority to the description of our moral lives, moral practices, historically contingent norms, ideas and habits.

Keyword Normative ethics · Metaethics

It can now be argued that the apparent patchiness of the moral philosopher's access to moral life is produced here through a highly tendentious and rather perverse coup. Only by looking at moral philosophy from a perspective quite foreign to its own practices, that is, from a

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N. Hämäläinen, *Descriptive Ethics*,
DOI 10.1057/978-1-137-58617-9_4

cultural/historical/sociological/descriptive point of view, do we arrive at the impression of patchiness in its command of the moral life.

Moral philosophy is of course assembled in a completely different way: The principles according to which it is put together are not those of a cartographic or culturally explorative study. Modern moral philosophy, especially in the Anglophone setting, has generally, as we know, organized its inquiries around two core subjects: (1) normative ethics or ethical theory, concerned with the good and the right, and (2) metaethics, concerned with the meaning, role, and status of moral language and moral judgments. These are the central nodes to which other approaches to ethics and other areas of moral inquiry are appended, and this mode of organization affects how we conceptualize these philosophical others. Thus, applied ethics is the application of theory to life; narrative literature is a companion to moral theory, helping us to formulate theories that are more sensitive to real life; the history of ethics is a series of past "theories" in the modern sense; x-phi is a means for formulating moral or metaethical theories that better match our real moral psychology; and so on.

But the crucial point here is precisely that the way in which moral philosophy is composed, around normativity and ontology, is not a self-evident reflection of what morality is like. It is rather a historically formed constellation that might become an obstacle to many kinds of fruitful research and vital insight. The obstacle to knowing things about morality lies in the things moral philosophers do seek to figure out and in the ways their emphases shape the field. What we have here is a special case of a perennial problem, which could be formulated as follows: Even the most useful theory, intellectual framework, and vocabulary comes at a cost—the temporal loss of other ways of looking offered by other theories, intellectual frameworks, and vocabularies.

There are always specific kinds of sophistication to be won through fidelity to a theory or framework. But in order to *know one's subject matter* thoroughly (at least in philosophy and the human and social sciences), one often needs to move outside one's habitual theoretical framework and look at it critically. Indeed, it often is the case that one has to move outside one's framework in order to *know the framework* itself: its strengths as well as its limitations. What does the framework do to us and for us? Are the gains worth the losses?

A. J. Ayer thought, in the spirit of early analytic philosophy, that theorizing about good and evil would not have a place in a modern

philosophy. "A strictly philosophical treatise on ethics should . . . make no ethical pronouncements. But it should, by giving an analysis of ethical terms, show what is the category to which all such pronouncements belong" (Ayer 1952, pp. 103–104). But this opinion, relegating the role of ethics in philosophy to a question of the nature of ethical language, was, though influential in its time, a fairly brief vogue. Normative ethics has, in its own way, been thriving in late twentieth century and contemporary philosophy and constitutes today the body of moral philosophy, with metaethics as an ancillary discipline where a certain conceptual groundwork is done. Thus I will here be concerned with how normative ethics assembles the field of moral philosophy, because this is the assemblage that sets the tacit methodological framework that most moral philosophers today have to work within.

Let us look more closely at two central characteristics of modern moral theory or normative ethics. These are (1) modern moral philosophy's distinctive ambition to provide rational grounds for moral reasoning and action, and (2) the conjoined idea that the discovery of rational grounds will have normative implications, that is, be properly and duly action guiding. Although these two ideas do not define what a philosophical ethics can be in the analytic tradition, they cause moral philosophy to gravitate in a direction where the various descriptive projects appear incomprehensible or subsidiary. If we seek for rational grounds and a constitutive normative account in this manner, then the various real-life moralities are bound to look like imperfect (or mistaken) attempts to realize an ideal universal order. This mode of thinking is a central part of the Western philosophical tradition from Plato, and it has a tremendous capacity to mutate to fit local conditions. Most analytic philosophers today would have trouble accepting the idea of the real, true, or good as being something above and beyond the reality of our lives together, but they nevertheless (and inadvertently) accept a low-key variety of the Platonic move, in the conviction that the rationality of moral thought must be secured by an explanatory, sufficiently simple, normative theoretical account.

The search for *rational grounds* does not necessarily imply *foundationalism*, that is, the bringing back of moral rationality to some singular founding principle. It can in fact appear in a large variety of forms, many of which present themselves as anti-foundationalist. As Nussbaum formulates the ambition of moral theory:

> The ethical theorist claims that an ethical theory gives important guidelines for ethical practice and a set of guidelines for the proper use of rules, by sorting out the material of conduct in a more explicit and perspicuous way, giving the point and purpose of maxims of various types, and providing an account of human psychology that will both direct programmes of moral education and show when basically appropriate conduct is or is not fully virtuous. (Nussbaum 2000, p. 241)

Nussbaum quite explicitly does not seek a singular foundation of morals, but rather a kind of Rawlsian reflective equilibrium. Defining of the idea of reflective equilibrium is the balancing of various concerns to elicit the best theoretical account, all things considered. This balanced account then takes the place of a foundation for a rational morality and provides the basis for extensive normative programs in different areas of life. As a result, Nussbaum's account is heavily theoretical: not in the sense that it would provide many new theoretical concepts or tools, but rather in the sense that all aspects of the moral life and moral philosophy are articulated in relation to her neo-Aristotelian and liberal theoretical core. Theory, furthermore, is not just a way of looking, but a way of securing.

Nick Fotion (2014), in his book on the nature of moral theory, describes the moral philosopher's search for grounding in terms of taking moral reflection to a "critical level of thinking." We should dwell here for a moment on what this means. He leans here on R. M. Hare's (1981) distinction between intuitive moral judgments and moral judgments that have been tried (for their coherence, consistency, etc.) in philosophy: a distinction which, he notes, has a long history. As Fotion puts it: "it is the contrast between critical and non-critical thinking that is important. The former involves assessment of the ethics of a situation, the latter its acceptance" (2014, p. 30). By "the ethics of the situation," Fotion means something like the habitual, immediate, or intuitive ethical judgment in a concrete case. Critical thinking thus means a reflective assessment of moral judgment, for example, assessment of the criteria by which one makes moral judgments in a given situation or an assessment of the applicability of a moral concept to a situation. Obviously we do not constantly assess our criteria for judgment, but rely on habit as well as previous reflective assessments. Drawing on Hare, Fotion suggests that the special task of philosophy in relation to ethics is to transport our moral judgments to the "critical level." This could in principle be done by means of moral theory or in some other way: "for now, critical thinking will be treated as an open

concept. I am assuming that we could engage in critical thinking using utilitarian theory, to be sure, but also, possibly, by using Kantian, natural law, contract, or any other theory instead. But, in addition, for now I am assuming that any of us could engage in critical thinking without appealing to any theory at all" (2014, p. 29).

A generous admission, it may seem, in the direction of nontheoretical thinking, but in fact Fotion's whole discussion leans on the assumption that moral theories (of a more or less contemporary analytic kind, complemented by Habermas) are an essential component in critical moral thinking. Theories, for Fotion, are entities that fulfill a specifiable list of criteria: They provide justification of moral norms, they offer a procedure for the generation of norms, they are universalizable, and they organize norms under a limited set of headings. (We may here leave aside the fact that Fotion pictures himself as providing a more relaxed idea of theory than what is habitual in analytic moral theory.) Theoretical accounts which do not follow the specified criteria are not candidates for taking ethical thought to a critical level. In practice, this means that thinkers like, say, Simone Weil, Soren Kierkegaard, or Michel Foucault would not take our reflection to a critical level of thinking, unless, of course, someone comes up with an idea of how to transform their thinking into an apparatus of theorized action guidance.

All in all, our capacity to relate reflectively and critically to our moral beliefs and judgments is pictured, by both Nussbaum and Fotion, as dependent on a quite specific type of cultural artifacts that are distinctive to modern moral philosophy specifically and the Western philosophical tradition more generally. Nussbaum traces the emergence of these artifacts and the practices related to them to Plato and Aristotle, making a sharp distinction between these beacons of the light of reason on the one hand and other "philosophical" schools of antiquity, where obedience and the adoption of a given way of life were emphasized (Nussbaum, 1994).[1] Fotion does not make distinctive historical claims but assumes more or less that the pursuits of Kant and Mill were comparable to the pursuits of contemporary moral theorists in all central respects. This is something of a standard approach to the history of moral philosophy in contemporary ethics. The classics are admired for originality of vision and wide-ranging concerns, while modern varieties of deontology and consequentialism are seen as developments, purifications, clarifications, and systematizations—in short improvements—to the views presented by the classics.

Both Fotion and Nussbaum, neither of whom is a "foundationalist," believe that critical thinking in ethics, in contrast to unreflective acceptance of the given, centrally involves the systematized (theoretical) presentation of "rational" grounds for why certain principles or ideals should be accepted. For both of them, any inquiry into our moral forms of life, no matter how important in its own right, is from a philosophical point of view ancillary or preparatory to such founding/normative project. Because of this, both fail, in a manner characteristic of present-day analytic ethics, to see the critical intent and potential in moral philosophical projects that reject the philosophical search for rational grounds and interrogate the form and nature of our moral lives in other ways.

Something to pay attention to in this picture of critical thinking and rationality is how particular and rather technical it is. Beginning with a commonsense notion of critical thinking as the thoughtful questioning of the given, it soon evolves into a quite specific procedure, intimately tied to contemporary moral theory. That critical thinking in the everyday sense can be expressed in narrative, visual art, dance, practices of consumption, gestures, refusals, or indeed other kinds of philosophical thought is bypassed, and the idea of critical thought is sold back to us in a two-for-the-price-of-one package with moral theory. But there is no intentional deceitfulness in this procedure: It is how things look for many people from the inside of analytic moral theory. (I have a memory of seeing moral thought from this perspective too, as a student. This is what the textbooks let us think.)

It should be emphasized, though, that neither the grounding role nor the normative role of philosophy is unanimously embraced by analytic philosophers. Many analytic philosophers, especially of the mid-twentieth century, were rather skeptical concerning the normative implications and reformative potentials of moral philosophy (like Ayer 1952) and saw the role of philosophy mainly in theoretical elucidation. Many of these skeptics have done their work in metaethics, elucidating the status and nature of moral utterances and judgments. But metaethics too is constitutively uninterested in the contents of our contingent moral situations, practices, and lives.

For heuristic purposes, although this by necessity involves simplifications, I suggest that we identify two distinct strands in modern moral philosophy. First, there is a mainstream which follows the division of labor between metaethics and normative ethics, and which generally holds that the former should provide ideas concerning the nature and status of morals and the latter should provide rational grounding of morals along

with action guidance. To these philosophers the contingent facts of our moral lives mostly appear as in plain sight, and the main tasks of the philosophers lie in metaethical theory or in normative theory as roughly outlined by Fotion.

Second, there is a strand of moral philosophy which gives priority to the description of our moral lives, moral practices, historically contingent norms, ideas, and habits. What is distinctive to the latter group of philosophers is that they find, in the very facts of our moral lives—habits, ideals, practices, norm-systems, language—a vast area of unclarity that prompts continuous inquiry. In their view, our moral lives are not transparent to ourselves, and the challenge of moral philosophy is to achieve cultural self-understanding.

The distinction is not one between philosophers who ascribe normative or meliorist aims to philosophy versus those who refrain from normative aims to the benefit of pure detached description. I do not assume that there is such a thing as pure detached description in ethics, because all kinds of metaethical and meta-philosophical commitments have evaluative and normative aspects, dimensions, or consequences. Furthermore, many of the philosophers of the descriptive strand have quite distinctly normative moral aims. Nietzsche and Kierkegaard can be counted into the descriptive strand due to their efforts to uncover aspects of our historically contingent ways of life that may be difficult to perceive, notwithstanding the fact that both are distinctly moralists. Dewey's work is thoroughly illuminated by his meliorism. Foucault's persistence in noncommittal archeology and genealogy is just one side of an oeuvre that is driven by a deep moral concern with the question of human freedom and the possibilities for liberation and transcendence. Taylor sets as his explicit task the defence of certain aspects of the modern moral framework. Murdoch's broad cultural investigations into modern moral life are accompanied by a normative "ethics of attention."

In a like manner, philosophers of the mainstream of analytic ethics can either have or not have normative or meliorist aims with their work. Some have great doubts about the possibilities for philosophy to offer action-guidance, while others, like Nussbaum, think that the central task of moral philosophy is indeed to make a better world. Many of the dominant English-language philosophers of the mid-twentieth century were convinced that philosophy properly should confine its role to conceptual elucidation and this is still a viable position among philosophers whose

main concerns lie within metaethics. Modern normative ethics, to the contrary, is mostly guided by the idea that moral philosophy can and should make an intervention into our moral life. The tasks of systematizing moral thought and seeking "rational grounds" for our moral understanding (described above) are seen as parts of an important real-life task of improving our moral lives.

Thus, although the descriptive project of moral philosophy is sometimes framed as normatively noncommittal, in contrast to mainstream ethics, I want to emphasize that this is misleading, concerning both descriptive ethics and mainstream ethics. But it is important to pay attention to how the ways of making normative commitments in descriptively focused accounts differ from ditto in mainstream ethics. I will return to this issue in due course.

The moral philosophers' novel turn to virtues, character, and personhood from the mid-twentieth century on has opened up for a broader descriptive take on the moral life in analytic ethics. We see this in the work of people like Murdoch, Williams, Taylor, MacIntyre, Nussbaum, and their followers. But if we follow the heuristic division above between a moral philosophy which seeks understanding through description and a moral philosophy which seeks rational grounding, we may note that the ethical turn toward virtue and character is divided between these modes or directions of philosophy. The most part of what goes under the label of virtue ethics in the broadly analytic context today is of the latter kind, building a normative theory of morals on virtues rather than norms, duties, rights, or the like. Rosalind Hursthouse and Michael Slote belong to this type, and it would, I think, be reasonable to count Philippa Foot to them too. Common to many of these philosophers in the present context is that they consider virtue ethics a viable alternative to utilitarian, deontological, and contractarian normative theories in ethics and do not express a radical dissatisfaction with the way the nature and role of moral philosophy is understood in mainstream analytic ethics.

By and large, it seems like those who have turned their interest in the virtues into a theory that can be read as offering rational grounds for moral conduct have been taken to represent what virtue ethics is essentially about in analytic moral philosophy. The moral philosophers for whom the descriptive project has been more central, and who have not sought to articulate an atemporal foundation and normative framework, have to a certain extent been misrepresented in, or excluded from, the debate. Among the somewhat misrepresented we find Murdoch

and Taylor, whose overall work has a more prominent descriptive emphasis and whose ideas of the relationship between philosophical work and normativity are quite different. I will return to the case of Taylor in Chap. 9.

Note

1. This separation does not in Nussbaum's case mean that the other philosophical schools would be completely discarded. On the contrary, she is sympathetic to many elements present in the other schools, such as their thinking about emotions, and draws on them in her formulation of her own account.

CHAPTER 5

The Challenge from X-phi

Abstract Hämäläinen identifies experimental ethics as a main claimant to the title of the contemporary descriptive moral philosophy above others. Reviewing three types of X-phi—the Knobe effect, the trolley cases, and the coin in the phone booth—she argues that contemporary experimental ethics is too close to analytic moral theory regarding its terms and presumptions to be a genuine alternative to mainstream analytic ethics. The experimental work conducted in this field can, however, contribute importantly to the formations of a broader descriptive approach to ethics.

Keyword X-phi

As noted before in Chap. 3, the past few decades have seen quite a lot of activity between moral philosophy and empirical research: The rise of moral psychology, within philosophy as well as within psychology, at the end of the twentieth century has provided opportunities for empirical curiosity in moral philosophy.[1] By and large it seems like the reaching out to empirical study has strengthened the interest in moral emotions and moral experience, providing these suspiciously ephemeral areas of moral inquiry with an additional leg to stand on outside philosophy.

There are many reasons to be sympathetic to the opening up toward various fields of empirical research but, like many others, I am cautious concerning the occasional attempts, seen in such discussions, to replace

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DOI 10.1057/978-1-137-58617-9_5

philosophical reflection with data of one kind or another. I have no quarrel with empirical research in ethics, but I have central cautions concerning empirical naivety. Empirical data can have a significant impact on moral philosophy, for example, by subverting commonly held beliefs about moral psychology or moral language use. Nonetheless, empirical research does not translate into philosophy and does not automatically yield philosophical conclusions on its own, but requires a complex activity of translation where scientists and philosophers as well as their readers may be needed as active participants. In this respect philosophy is no different from other fields where the collection of data about human subjects—their views, reactions, interrelations or interactions with some environment—constitutes a part of the scientific/academic work.[2]

The history and sociology of philosophical research would probably confirm the impression that the coinage of a concept and the gathering of a group around it are central for the shaping of thought, regardless of the innovative nature of the thinking involved. Innovative thinking may pass unnoticed, if it lacks a striking and memorable concept and a devoted (or becomingly conflict-ridden) in-group. And conversely, thinking may gain in appearance of novelty through the presence of these factors. The contemporary philosophical subfield called experimental philosophy, or more familiarly, X-phi, has gained from coinage, devotees, and controversy. It feeds on the present sensibility, which I share, that philosophy should communicate with empirical research on topics that are close to its concerns. We should certainly not think of this as a novel desire: Philosophers have at least up to the mid-twentieth century been in intense exchange with the sciences of their times. This point is helpfully emphasized by Anthony Appiah (2008), but often forgotten in the bustle of actual X-phi research. The ethos of mid-twentieth-century analytic philosophy, assigning to philosophy its own areas of specific expertise in logic and conceptual analysis, contributed significantly to the still influential image of philosophers as experts, whose task is to contribute to their own technically sophisticated internal debates. Furthermore the growth in numbers of both researchers and research publications has over the past 60 years made it difficult for anyone to keep up a satisfactory level of expertise even within one's own field or fields, with the effect that thorough and deep understanding of other fields is increasingly difficult. As a result, today, the philosopher's longing for scientific knowledge is not satisfied through a continuous deep companionship between philosophy as a field and other fields of moral study, but rather through occasional

borrowings, interventions, and novel linkages between specific philosophical discussions and equally specific branches of empirical study. X-phi is no exception in this respect: a fact which its proponents seem to be quite well aware of. This is how a web page devoted to information and discussion about X-phi defines the field: "Experimental philosophy, called x-phi for short, is a new philosophical movement that supplements the traditional tools of analytic philosophy with the scientific methods of cognitive science. So experimental philosophers actually go out and run systematic experiments aimed at understanding how people ordinarily think about the issues at the foundations of philosophical discussions" (http://pantheon.yale.edu/~jk762/ExperimentalPhilosophy.html).

That is, X-phi is an approach that provides a supplement to *the methods of analytic philosophy* from the methods of *cognitive science*. In practice, this means that most studies take their idea of the philosophical status quo from mainstream analytic philosophy and then borrow empirical tools such as surveys and brain scans (working together with scientists), to test the credibility and feasibility of philosopher's armchair assumptions and conclusions. Typically surveys relevant to ethics are constructed to elicit informants' "intuitions" concerning the applicability of a concept in a given situation, or the rightness or wrongness of a given course of action. Such studies can offer an extension to the philosopher's own "intuitions" about the questions at hand. The notion of "intuition" used is a fairly casual one, meaning, in practice, merely something like "what people would say" or "what people think they would say or do."

I will here provide a brief outline of a paradigmatic X-phi case, the so-called Knobe effect, in order to demonstrate a few aspects of the functioning of present-day X-phi (Knobe 2003). As a doctoral student in philosophy, Joshua Knobe conducted a study on a random sample of people in a New York park, presenting them with the following scenario: A vice president of a company presents, to the chairman of the board, a profitable plan, which he notes will, as a side effect, harm the environment. They go ahead with the plan and the environment is harmed. When a random sample of people were asked if this is a case of harming the environment *intentionally*, 82 % said it was so. Then the case was changed so that the vice president says the profitable plan will have the side effect of helping the environment. They go ahead with the plan and the environment is helped. When people were asked if this was a case of helping the environment *intentionally* only 23 % said it was so.

This variation seemed to require an explanation. If the harm and benefit are both knowingly caused (though not for its own sake deliberately willed) as a consequence of an action which is intentional, then there should be no difference concerning the intentionality of harming versus benefiting the environment. And yet people's linguistic or conceptual intuitions seem to suggest that there is some difference: The people in the test applied the word "intentionally" more easily in the case of harm. Knobe concluded that the informants' judgments varied with their moral assessment of the pictured situation. But how could this be and why? A substantial number of similar tests were conducted by Knobe and others, altering the example, preselecting the test group in relevant ways, simplifying it to be tested on children, testing on non-Western informants, and so on. Similar tests were also conducted for concepts like "decided" and "intentional." The results are various but the conclusion in most cases has been that the moral judgment of informants is indeed somehow linked to variation in their tendency to use morally "neutral" words such as "intentionally" to describe a situation. A range of answers have been offered for the phenomenon, many of them suggesting that the discrepancy signals some kind of confusion or emotional reaction on the part of the informants, distorting the (otherwise straightforward) attribution of intentionality. Knobe himself insists on the view that the case actually points to a fundamental intertwinement of "fact" and "value" in people's perception of the world (Knobe 2010).

The main reason for the broad interest in this case is that it goes against two distinct and central tenets of contemporary analytic philosophy, one to do with the philosophy of language and the other to do with both epistemology and metaphysics. The first one is that a word like "intentionally" should function the same way in both scenarios (that it is puzzling if it does not), because "intentionally" means the same thing in both cases, and people ought to be aware of that. The second tenet is that "moral beliefs" (it is wrong to harm the environment) should not affect our idea of the "facts" of the case (e.g., whether x did something intentionally).

But the effect is only strange and potentially disruptive if one has the analytic philosopher's preconceptions. An ordinary language philosopher following Wittgenstein or Austin would be likely to hold that there is nothing inherently strange about the alteration in the attribution of intentionality since concepts naturally have this kind of pragmatic fluidity and "intentionally" is not a transparent label for a singular core meaning. For this kind of philosopher, attention to this kind of variation is a central

part of the philosopher's work. The variation is interesting in many ways, because it can make us aware of aspects of our lives and language that we may not otherwise pay attention to, and because it may help us overcome undue philosophical generalizations, for example. But it does not constitute a puzzle that calls for an explanation, if one does not assume a kind of stable core meaning, independent of pragmatics.

Furthermore a Wittgensteinian, a pragmatist (like Putnam 1981, 2002), or a moral philosopher inspired by Murdoch would be likely to recognize the difference in attributions of intentionality as one more example which highlights the complex relationship between those things that we call facts and those things that we call values. Murdoch would have insisted that the description of a human situation, even when it contains no explicitly evaluative expressions, is shot through with evaluation. ("Life is soaked in the moral, literature is soaked in the moral" (Murdoch 1997, p. 27).)

I am not reviewing these different perspectives in order to take sides here, but merely to show that philosophical experiments (and the ways they are potentially interesting) are relative to and are made sense of in relation to philosophical assumptions, dogmas, and debates. The results of the Knobe test would not raise as much interest if it did not thwart commonly held (philosophical) views. Among ordinary language philosophers, it would sort as a humble exemplar among our attempts to map our uses of words, and one which more or less confirms what we expected to hear anyway, pointing toward a conceptual linkage between intentionality and moral accountability. This does not mean that its philosophical interest would thus be exhausted. Knobe's (2010) analysis of the conceptual relations in different tested cases brings interesting insight into the concrete functioning of language, which would not have been prompted by a philosophical perspective where conceptual fluidity and the presence of value in our descriptions of the world are taken for granted.

The strikingness of the Knobe effect for analytic philosophers lies, however, in its challenge to a specific framework of philosophical thinking. An "experiment" like Knobe's does not lay bare anything general, about our responses or concepts or intuitions, for example, but works as a kind of local test of philosophical presupposition, which to its contents is typical, not of philosophy in general but of a specific kind of philosophy. X-phi of this type works as a challenge to the style of using intuition in analytic philosophy: It can show us places where people do not judge, speak, or function the way analytic philosophers, in their theoretical work, take for granted that "we" do or should do. It does not as such replace or even add to philosophical

knowledge or insight: It needs to be interpreted, its potential implications investigated.

Let us take another example. The infamous trolley cases in analytic ethics operate on the discrepancy between the utilitarian emphasis on consequences and the deontological emphasis on action in its own right. The basic form of a trolley case is to imagine a scenario where a small action (on your own part) can save several people by sacrificing the life of one person. A trolley, for example, is on a track where it will hit and kill five people.[3] Would it be right to pull a lever which would steer the trolley onto another track, even if there is a person standing on that track, who is going to be run over if you do? A utilitarian perspective would suggest that I should prevent the death of many even if it would cause the death of one. According to a deontological view, the causing of the death of another person could not be justified by saving the many. In psychological tests built on trolley cases respondents are asked if they would think it is right to pull a lever to steer the trolley onto a track where it will kill one person instead, or would they, alternatively, see it better to do nothing and let more people die. In a well-known empirical trolley study people's measured emotional or stress reactions (in an fMRI scan) were greater when contemplating the case of pushing one person to save many—a result which (unsurprisingly) suggests a greater instinctive revulsion against doing harm that is "up close and personal" (Greene et al. 2001).

I am not here interested to ponder over the implications of these kinds of cases and tests, but rather to point out how such cases are premised on the specific tensions of contemporary analytic moral philosophy. Foots' original discussion, from which the trolley cases are derived (although there are no trolleys in it), was about the doctrine of double effect invoked by Catholics in the case of abortion. But the large interest in these cases has to do with the way they match an ethical discussion which (1) is dominated by utilitarian and deontological ways of conceptualizing moral action and agency, (2) is uncomfortable with genuine moral dilemmas (situations where all options are wrong), and (3) assumes that it is the task of moral philosophy to provide principled resolutions to questions like these, by means of a general theory. These presuppositions are indeed common in contemporary ethics, but not universally shared, and for those who do not share them the trolley cases may pose no particularly deep problem and provide no philosophically interesting information, in addition to the potential role they may have in experimental psychology.

A third, frequently cited type of moral X-phi is represented by studies where the context sensitivity of people's moral performance is tested. (See, e.g., Appiah 2008, pp. 40–41; Upton 2009.) In one subset of these tests people's readiness to generous action is tried after they have (or have not) experienced some minor positive occurrence, for example, found a coin in the phone booth or, as a comparison, have not found a coin (Isen and Levin 1972). Experiments of this kind have shown that a practically insignificant strike of luck to the benefit of themselves can dispose people to act more altruistically. The interest in cases like this lies in the way they suggest that our moral agency is extremely context sensitive. They suggest that things so small that we would rightly regard them insignificant may alter our moral performance substantially.[4] In this capacity, they work as reminders for anyone who thinks of moral philosophy as concerned with the intentional actions of rational individuals or with fully stable, acquired character traits. They do not interfere with the formulation of "worthy ideals," but help to think about whether our idea of actual moral agency is realistic. (Can our practical reasoning and moral action be helped by a philosophy, which assumes that we are something that we in fact are not?) Thus they do not directly intervene in debates of normative ethics, but rather help to raise the question of whether moral philosophy has been concerned with the right things, or rather, a broad enough range of things. Here the experimental work is not as clearly geared toward the concerns of analytic philosophy, but aims more generally at an empirical understanding of what in a broad sense has been called "moral psychology." But they are put to work, nonetheless, as local interventions into what is commonly assumed, also, and centrally, in analytic moral philosophy.

As paradigmatic cases of X-phi (whether done by philosophers, psychologists, or others), these cases give us an idea of why X-phi cannot be the sought-for descriptive/empirical counterpoint to the moral philosopher's search for grounding and normative theories. Insofar as X-phi is experimental, its mode of functioning is punctual. It provides interventions to help us rethink our broader picture, but it does not produce the broader picture in its own right. The broader picture is still produced out of a mixture of new discoveries, everyday taken-for-granted notions (often called intuitions), and the established presupposition, the common ground, of academic moral philosophy. (This is the case also when X-phi researchers move on to flesh out the significance of their findings.) This broader picture could be likened with a weave to which the experiment

pokes a threatening hole or adds a thread or pattern. The experiments are tests of the adequacy of the weave. We could not add together the interventions into a useful picture of moral life: They require a framework of understanding against which the experiments work as confirmations or challenges.

We could imagine that understanding in experimental ethics would emerge through a kind of hypothetical deductive method. Our moral and moral philosophical preconceptions would function as hypotheses which are tested through the experiments. But the idea of a hypothesis is not quite right, either for our casual moral beliefs, "intuitions," and precepts or for the ones presented by moral theory. Or perhaps it would be more apt to say that moral and moral philosophical ideas and conceptions are only rarely hypothetical, and the articulation of such ideas is only rarely the presentation of a hypothesis. They may be formulated with the awareness that they are fallible and potentially incomplete, but they are not formulated hypothetically, in order to be tested. Formulations of moral and moral philosophical belief and conviction are rather attempts to articulate a *moral point of view*; formulations of moral philosophy are attempts to provide, in some of the philosopher's available styles, an idea about the nature and coherence of morality. When moral theories are staged in opposition to one another in a philosophical debate, they provide alternative and competing ways of looking at morality, different ways of valuing, different ways of articulating human agency, responsibility, and the role of chance in human affairs. Way may introduce to this procedure an element of hypothesis: We do allow that certain empirical considerations, certain experimental results, certain pieces of knowledge, for example, about what we call moral psychology, should reasonably affect the constitution of our theory. But there is no clear procedure for how this effect is to come about. Moral outlooks and moral theories are not abandoned in favor of another hypothetical view, because of empirical evidence or experimental results. Such results are rather added to the many things that contribute to the sometimes slow and sometimes relatively quick course of reconceptualization and change in moral and moral philosophical thinking.

X-phi provides a range of ways of gaining empirical insight into philosophically challenging questions. But it does so always in relation to a given framework of thinking, both theoretical and quotidian. Insofar as it grows out of the soil of analytic philosophy, it tends to remain within the philosophical universe of analytic philosophy. Its task becomes,

inadvertently, to illuminate the world shown to us through the lens of analytic ethics.

In the search for a broad descriptive empirically curious ethics, X-phi cannot be the answer because it is, as it stands, premised on analytic moral philosophy, its theoretical presuppositions, the divide between normative ethics and metaethics. We do not here seek an analytic philosophy modified by frequent experimental reality checks. What we need is a study of morality which is empirical, conceptual, and historical: sensitive to input from neighboring fields of inquiry, from life and from art, seeking to know all sorts of things about morality and letting these things affect what one may have to say. The methods of X-phi can, and should, surely be a part of this—but only a part.

What I suggest is a completely different take on what an empirically informed moral philosophy would be. Instead of combining the concerns of analytic ethics with experimental and other empirical methods, I take a step backwards to gain a more perspicuous view. And there, indeed, we have, within twentieth-century philosophy a number of prominent thinkers, whose central concerns have not been the grounds of normative judgments, the (general) meaning of moral language, or the metaphysics of morality, but rather our complex forms of life, of which ethics forms a part.

I have thus far sketched out a rough picture of contemporary Anglophone moral philosophy: what it does, what it does not do, its center and peripheries, as well as its main internal contenders. I now turn to elucidating a take on moral philosophy where different descriptive endeavors, seeking to know more about our moral forms of life, are central rather than peripheral to moral philosophy. My aim in the following chapters is not to present new readings of the works of the four central philosophers of this book. All such things must lie outside the scope of this text. I intend merely to sketch out as much of their overall direction of inquiry and central concerns as is necessary to show how they make irreducible, heterogeneous, and original contributions to the larger project of an ethics which takes the very substance of our historically contingent moral lives to be the central concern of moral philosophy. My mode of reading is fairly personal, in the sense that I trace in the work of these philosophers some central things that I have learned from them. I have no ambition to do new scholarship here: merely to put my readings of these philosophers to work for a descriptive moral philosophy.

Dewey stands here for the attempt to shift focus, in moral philosophy and the theory of value, from an abstract study of value to an empirical

study of practices of valuation. Wittgenstein stands for a low-key, non-empirical, conceptual attention to our moral practices. Between these we have the probing question of the roles of *empirical study versus conceptual investigation in philosophy*. Foucault and Taylor both stand for deep engagement with the historicity of morals. Foucault's primary interest is the rootedness of conceptualization, value and belief in the practices and institutions that shape our day-to-day lives. Taylor's emphasis is more on the development of Western thought in its own right and how it has come to shape our everyday lives. More importantly, for present purposes, where Foucault seeks as far as possible a morally noncommittal posture in relation to his analyses, Taylor regards the affirmative articulation of a moral point of view as a central part of the philosopher's task, and the noncommittal posture of Foucault as self-defeating. Between these, thus, we have *the question of the role of normativity* in a broadly descriptive account of ethics.

Something that all of these four philosophers contribute to, in their different ways, is the attempt to understand our own historically formed moral and evaluative way of life, our moral present, and the various ways in which it is rooted in our social, linguistic, material, and institutional conditions. Perhaps this could be considered as a rough, preliminary idea of, if not *the*, then at least *a* special characteristic of philosophers in the realm of descriptive ethics. For social scientists, anthropologists, and historians the group or phenomenon studied is often one of which the researcher is not a part. Obviously there are exceptions to this: Swedish fathers studying contemporary Swedish fatherhood or Western white middle-class professors studying the income distribution effects of government austerity measures. But the results of these studies should not optimally depend on one's own involvement.

For the philosopher the situation is different. The philosophical study of the moral present is a study of the philosopher's self, how he sees things, and how he could see differently. Historical and comparative attempts too, insofar as they are philosophical, contain this aspect of intervention into one's own framework of beliefs, concepts, ideas, ideals, hopes, dreams, and projections.

Moral theory standardly aims at something atemporal. Descriptive ethics in the realm of philosophy aims at uncovering, making visible, the structure and nature of what we, quite contingently, are and do. How does it differ from what social scientists do in their reflective mood? In much social science there is quite a bit of philosophy in the sense of self-reflective work on one's background assumptions, beliefs, and

concepts. Calling it philosophy is not so much an attempt to appropriate it from the social scientists and others, but rather to mark it as something that philosophers should above all be concerned with.

Notes

1. For two helpful collected volumes of articles in the burgeoning field of experimental philosophy, see Knobe and Nichols (2008), (2014). Also see Appiah (2008); Luetge et al. (2014) for discussions on experimental ethics.
2. The domestication of empirical data into moral philosophy is an interesting issue in its own right, both empirically—how and when has this happened—and philosophically—how should we conceptualize and assess such occurrences from the point of view of our philosophical understanding. These complicated processes would be a fit object for research, for example, in the realm of science and technology studies.
3. For the original formulation see Foot, 1978 (originally published in the *Oxford Review*, no. 5, 1967). The trolley cases have been developed among others by Judith Jarvis Thomson (1976) and Peter Unger (1996).
4. In the wake of the virtue ethics boom in the 1990s, cases like these were held up to challenge virtue ethics and the very existence of virtues (e.g., Harman 1999). But many virtue ethicists find these "situationist" discoveries fully compatible with an ethics of virtue. For philosophers like Elizabeth Anscombe and Iris Murdoch, the search for a realistic moral psychology went hand in hand with an interest in virtues.

CHAPTER 6

Dewey's Empirical Ethics

Abstract Focusing on Dewey's late text "Theory of Valuation" Hämäläinen offers Dewey's work as an entrance point to a descriptive moral philosophy. Dewey shares with the mainstream of present-day analytic philosophy the emphasis on a search for rational grounds for (moral) conduct. But the grounds he seeks are nothing we think up in an armchair. His hopes go rather to the developing social sciences and psychology, which supposedly will provide us with a richer understanding of human practices. Dewey's theory of valuation has lately been picked up by social scientists who study the ascription and application of value in various contemporary social practices. The research done on this field of "valuation studies" provides at its best a kind of empirical philosophy of values and offers, in any case, a broad range of insights into sites where evaluative decisions are taken and evaluative standards are consolidated.

Keywords John Dewey · Valuation · Valuation studies

Dewey, in a sense, shares with the mainstream of present-day analytic philosophy the emphasis on a search for rational grounds for moral conduct as well as for moral goals or ideals. But the grounds and goals he seeks are nothing we think up or discover in the course of argument, and they are not to be fixed in and through philosophy. They are rather to be seen as evolving with our changing forms of life.

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N. Hämäläinen, *Descriptive Ethics*,
DOI 10.1057/978-1-137-58617-9_6

This general view has implications for his idea of the role and purpose of moral theory. Moral theorizing is in his thinking an aspect of our moral lives: It is a reflective practice, which seeks to think systematically about our moral views and the criteria for our moral assessments, when this is called for. "Moral theory cannot emerge when there is positive belief as to what is right and what is wrong, for then there is no occasion for reflection" (1932, p. 173). In a time of rapid change—quick communications, industrialization, the telephone, great advances in the sciences (medicine, not least)—new demands are placed on our capacities of moral and evaluative judgment, because both our knowledge and the very situations in which we find ourselves are different from what was before. Thus, he notes that "the present time is one which is in peculiar need of reflective morals and of a working theory of morals" (1932, p. 188).

This does not, as such, sound too different from the view proposed by Fotion (see Chap. 4), but Dewey's idea of "a working theory of morals" is something much more mobile, malleable, and practice oriented than the comparison would suggest. The task of theory is to serve as reflective resource when we encounter problems where habitual modes of thinking do not work. Theory helps us remake our thinking and doing in intelligent and responsible ways, not by offering a fixed framework with supposedly atemporal standards (or a struggle between alternative theories), but precisely by being responsive to what is happening around us and what we are going through.

This orientation toward practical problem solving that we find in Dewey's idea of the role of theory is also at work in his view of normative principles. The moral life is not in Dewey's view well captured by postulations of a fixed good, fixed norms, or fixed forms for moral conduct. We do not, as moral creatures, suffer from the lack of an account that would give unambiguous answers to our quandaries (such dogmatic accounts may in fact be harmful for our moral lives), but we do often suffer from impulses and desires that are not properly checked by reflection. Reflection does not aim at fixating values or procedures, but at orienting us in the world of values which is ours. He notes that "The difficulty in the way of attaining and maintaining practical wisdom is the urgency of immediate impulse and desire which swell and swell until they crowd out all thought of remote and comprehensive goods" (1932, p. 225). The solution to this practical difficulty is a particularly positive one, which at the same time leaves the question of ultimate goods and proper acts open: "In the main, solution is found in utilizing all possible occasions, when we are not in the

presence of conflicting desires, to cultivate interest in those goods which we do approve in our calm moments of reflection" (ibid.). The cultivation of interests thus interestingly takes the place of a focal aim in Dewey's "moral theory," precisely by virtue of being a means for making reflection bear on our practical conduct. It is not a postulated "highest good" but a good which will enable our reflective faculties to have more of a say in our practical conduct. This allows him to be utterly undogmatic concerning the contents of ethics, while at the same time giving quite substantial an idea of how we can improve our moral conduct and moral community.

Moral conduct is improved by engagement with the things we upon reflection find good, but a reflective take on morality also demands reflection over and knowledge about what our lives are becoming or have become. Thus Dewey's philosophical hopes go to our constantly mobile experience and to the developing social sciences and psychology, which he believes will provide us with a richer understanding of our own practices and conditions, to help us arbitrate between better and worse in the course of our practical lives. Abstract philosophical concepts and dichotomies (instrumental value vs. intrinsic value, individual vs. society) are, in his view, a central source of philosophical confusions that can mostly be overcome only by looking more closely at what we actually do, what we are, and how we live. (In the emphasis on sciences he is quite distant from Wittgenstein, whereas concerning the repudiation of habitual philosophical abstractions and the attention to practice they could not agree more.)

Philosophy, Dewey notes, was born in response to social change (Dewey 2008). The moral community of Socrates's and Plato's Athens was facing new uncertainties, and traditional knowledge was no longer considered a solid source of moral guidance. In response to this the philosophers invented the discourse of the transcendent Good, Just, and so on, in contrast to the muddle of everyday conceptions. The trouble, which was distinctively historical and local, received a mode of solution which was by definition above and beyond historicity and contingency. The real and true, in the emerging philosophers' picture, had to be atemporal. But what was achieved through this intellectual effort was an inherently dysfunctional form of thinking, which still harms moral thought in our time. Perhaps paradoxically the eternal forms, born in response to change, turn out to be particularly unsuited for making moral sense in a rapidly changing society.

The analysis of philosophy's mistakes, inherent in Dewey's genealogical picture, could be described as one of the twentieth century's central

philosophical themes. Its anti-metaphysical core sensibility is in different ways articulated by the most central philosophers of the century: the pragmatists, Heidegger, Wittgenstein, logical empiricism, early analytic philosophy, as well as Foucault. The prominence of this critique of philosophy, as the search for firmer (metaphysical, theoretical, systematically presentable) ground, is perhaps the most striking fact about philosophy in the twentieth century. Correlatively the most striking fact about philosophy in our time is perhaps that the critique has in important ways been forgotten, misunderstood, or simply dismissed: in the new analytic metaphysics, in the moral philosopher's search for grounds, in new trends like object-oriented ontology.

This anti-metaphysical sensibility was in the case of logical empiricism and analytic philosophy accompanied by the conviction that values and morals are not a proper domain for knowledge. The Deweyan critique of metaphysical thinking is, to the contrary, accompanied by the conviction that value is a central, and not particularly problematic, issue in philosophy. Seeking knowledge about things moral is, in Dewey's view, not as different from seeking other kinds of knowledge as we are accustomed to think. Philosophy, as we inherited it from the Greeks, has taught us to ask for timeless truths and to consider historical and temporal happenings as imperfect, ephemeral, and philosophically uninteresting. But value and evaluation are not fixed unchanging objects, looming somewhere above or beyond the tangible human world. This picture, with its awkward metaphysical presuppositions, is merely bound to make our thinking about values confused and unable to grapple with the things that really make difference in our lives. Modern science has, in large areas of human understanding, replaced the search for unchanging forms with empirical attention to the concrete, changing world. There is no reason why our study of morality and value should not go through a parallel process.

In accordance with this ethos Dewey presents in his late text, "Theory of Valuation," the theoretical underpinnings of a transition from the investigation of "value" to the investigation of practices of valuation. This transition, its underpinnings and its implications for moral philosophy, will be my concern here and perhaps the most important thing that Dewey contributes to a descriptive and yet philosophical ethics. He begins his discussion with the metaethical disputes which defined the question of the nature of value in philosophy, in his time as much as in ours. As he puts it:

> a survey of the current literature of the subject discloses that views on the subject range from the belief, at one extreme, that so-called "values" are but emotional epithets or mere ejaculations, to the belief, at the other extreme, that a priori necessary standardized, rational values are the principle upon which art, science, and morals depend for their validity.... The same survey will also disclose that discussion of the subject of "values" is profoundly affected by epistemological theories about idealism and realism and by metaphysical theories regarding the "subjective" and the "objective" (Dewey 1939, p. 1).

In short, the investigation of value is submerged in grand epistemological and metaphysical theories which propose quite contrary approaches to value, without giving much clue to how to proceed with investigating them. Against this setting Dewey finds it hard to formulate a "starting point which is not compromised in advance" (ibid.) by being the result of some "prior epistemological or metaphysical theory."

"Values," in the abstract mode in which they figure in these debates, are in Dewey's view the source of endless and futile debates concerning their "mode of being." Acts of valuation, in contrast, are concrete happenings with discernible effects in the world. Thus, a substantial part of the "Theory of Valuation" is dedicated to arguing that "valuing," rather than being the ephemeral feeling proposed by emotivists, is closely related to "modes of behavior" like "caring for," "cherishing," "tending to," and "being devoted to." He strives to get "theory away from a futile task of trying to assign signification to words in isolation from objects as designata. We are led instead to evocation of specifiable existential situations and to observation of what takes place in them" (Ibid., p. 14).

Studies in the realm of value should be concrete and empirical: "It is by observations of behavior—which observations (...) may need to be extended over a considerable space time—that the existence and description of valuations have to be determined" (Ibid., p. 15).

This turn from value to concrete instances of valuation has three distinct, though interrelated, benefits for Dewey. It enables him to (1) get away from empty ontological debates, (2) force value inquiry and ethical inquiry to pay attention to the empirical world, and (3) redirect philosophy from the study of supposedly atemporal forms to the study of *changing* reality. Thus investigated, Dewey believes, value judgments will turn out not to be so very different from other kinds of judgments; they are yet another aspect of human beings' practical engagement with her situation and surroundings.

Part of our trouble with values has to do with the inflated role assigned to the idea of end-values and things with supposed unchanging intrinsic value. Our life in the realm of value should not, in Dewey's view, be conceptualized as one of finding contingent means to abstract final ends, but rather one where we formulate what he calls *ends-in-view* in response to concrete questions and problems that arise in our day-to-day existence. Valuation only takes place when habit is broken; thus there is "an intellectual factor—a factor of inquiry—whenever there is valuation" (Ibid., p. 34).

Dewey seeks to illustrate these points through an analogy with the physician's diagnostic work and the abstract idea of health. The physician has to determine the course of action necessary for relieving his patient from an ailing condition. Considering the patient's troubles he forms ends-in-view and takes measures to help the patient get rid of the troubles. But he does not have an absolute conception of health as an end-in-itself that would determine the course of inquiry and treatment.

> On the contrary, he forms his general idea of health as an end and a good (value) for the patient on the ground of what his techniques of examination have shown to be the troubles from which patients suffer and the means by which they are overcome. There is no need to deny that a general and abstract conception of health finally develops. But it is the outcome of a great number of definite, empirical inquiries, not an a priori preconditioning "standard" for carrying on inquiries. (Ibid., p. 46)

Just like the abstract notion of health may have a role for the physician, the abstract formulations of central values as ends have their role in the process of valuation, but not as fixed, a priori guiding stars. They are handy abstractions of things we may need to attend to, but also changing and responsive to what happens at "ground level" in the actual work of valuation, how we solve our problems by formulating new ends-in-view.

By directing attention to concrete happenings in our common world, away from a priori metaphysical postulates and unnecessary abstractions, Dewey wants to open up for a study of value which fosters an intelligent, sensitive, and situation-bound attention to our valuations. The philosophers' task in ethics and value theory is not to explain, explain away, provide foundations, or fix ends, but rather to help us understand and critically examine our acts of valuation, the working ideals in and behind them, the practices upholding them, and their actual effects in the world.

Dewey's preferred approach is thus distinctly descriptive and empirical, seeking to uncover what is rather than what ought to be, but it has a critical aim in the modifications that we make to our practices when we understand their natures and ways of functioning better. What has previously been a central and sensible value may over time lose its place. Valuations make sense as part of a way of living, and certain ideals guiding our valuations may lose their sense when conditions change. Science and technology also bring new objects of concern into being, and changing material conditions make new political and social arrangements practicable. Technological advances and industriousness, which have done much good for human kind, come forth as problematic in the face of global warming. In our real lives, means come to be valued as ends, and ends are transformed by the means that are used to reach them. The proper study of value is thus framed as starting with attention to aspects of our world which are not necessarily available to us from the armchair. We need to know how our practices and valuations make sense, how they have changed or are changing, and what makes them change or remain the same.

Yet Dewey's own work on these issues is very much the philosopher's discussion of principles for study, rather than the hands-on empirical work that he calls for. The questions remain: How does such empirical inquiry function? What would its relation be to philosophical reflection? These things are to a certain extent yet to be discovered. The effect of Dewey's work on conceptions of value in contemporary Anglophone moral philosophy and value theory is practically nonexistent, but Dewey's theory of valuation has lately been picked up, as one central reference, by social scientists who study the ascription and application of value in various contemporary social practices. (See, e.g., Muniesa, Kjellberg et al.) This novel interest in the question of valuation is not so much prompted by a scholarly rediscovery of Dewey or primary concern with the value-theoretical issues that Dewey investigates in his *Theory of Valuation*. It is rather the consequence of a recent proliferation of practices of valuation and evaluation in various institutional settings. Rational government of public bodies as well as private enterprises is increasingly seen as requiring the explicit formulation of values and goals, along with procedures of evaluating how well these goals have been reached. Also in the management of our individual lives we are increasingly encouraged to valuate and evaluate. Forms and procedures of self-evaluation are dispersed through work places and public health institutions, as well as self-help manuals and glossy magazines.

For the social scientist, attention to these practices of valuation offers a window to some central sites where our collective evaluative frameworks are remade (see, e.g., Lamont). These studies include attention to things like different contexts of valuing a tomato (Heuts and Mol), the appreciation of the monetary value of environmental damage (Fourcade), assessment of the life skills of youth in danger of exclusion, and the self-assessment strategies of self-help literature. The research done in this broad field of "valuation studies" can at its best provide a range of insights into sites where evaluative decisions are made and evaluative standards are consolidated or undone. The aim is a multifaceted, nonnormative, comprehension of our own forms of life: where we are and where we are going. But there is also often a critical intent in studies of this kind: By exposing novel practices of valuation we may come to discover abuses of power (humiliating instruments for assessing people in distress), arbitrary or surprising transfers of ideals from one domain to another (e.g., organizational ideals that travel from the private to the public sector), educational practices that do not accord with the needs of students and society, and so on. In both the descriptive role and the critical role these studies are remarkably true to Dewey's intent: They exhibit a very Deweyan mixture of empirical inquiry and situated, piecemeal assessment and reassessment of the valuations revealed.

But what does this work have to give to philosophers, who may quite legitimately persist in the conviction that these social scientists involved in the study of valuation are not addressing the problems of philosophy, but merely tending to their own disciplinary concerns? First we must remember Dewey's conviction that the philosophers' immediate concerns in research must be remade if they are to find their way out of the mesh they have made for themselves in the study of value. He insists on observation of behavior and obviously that is a task more easily interpreted in terms of the practices of social science than in terms of philosophical argument. But we should also see that the study of valuation (as a general topic area)—as prompted by Dewey, but also as done by social scientists—is a kind of empirical philosophy of values. It asks about specific contexts and specific agents, but its philosophical core is the fascinating unfolding of the very human process of valuing, value change, and the constant, practical, collective making and remaking of the very horizon that Nietzsche's Zarathustra famously thought had been wiped out. It is, in this sense, to borrow J. L. Austin's phrase, a species of "fieldwork in philosophy" (Austin 1956–1957, p. 9). Instead of considering this a

concern for other people, I suggest that we moral philosophers think of it as an area of perhaps necessary rapprochement between philosophers, social scientists, anthropologists, and literary scholars, as well as others with similar concerns.

CHAPTER 7

Wittgensteinian Applications

Abstract One of Wittgenstein's lines that could be cited as a motto is "Don't think, look and see" (PI § 66). This can be described as an empirical and descriptive but not scientific creed for the practice of philosophy. Wittgenstein focuses on language use, but language for him is always merely one aspect of human practices. Philosophical trouble is in his view frequently caused by use of language which has become meaningless through the loss of an appropriate, meaningful setting. By "bringing back words" to their ordinary uses we retrieve a sense of their proper functioning. In ethics Wittgenstein's later philosophy has inspired a body of work which is less concerned with our language and more with our lives. Rather than focusing on moral language, the work of philosophers like Peter Winch, Cora Diamond, and Raimond Gaita has been concerned with describing (their own, our own) frameworks of moral life where certain ways of talking and thinking make sense. Moral philosophy, in these terms, is a kind of excavation of one's own moral understanding.

Keywords Ludwig Wittgenstein · Cora Diamond · Description

In contrast to Dewey, Wittgenstein finds little room for empirical, scientific research in the elucidation of philosophical problems. Where Dewey emphasizes empirical attention to our practices of valuation, for the purpose of a reorientation of our philosophical study of values, Wittgenstein

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N. Hämäläinen, *Descriptive Ethics*,
DOI 10.1057/978-1-137-58617-9_7

(of the *Philosophical Investigations*, hereafter PI) would place empirical concerns and the accumulation of data consistently outside philosophy. There is a very simple, indeed simplistic, way of approaching this difference, which focuses on their difference in time and place. Dewey rides on a wave of scientific optimism. He invests, like many of his contemporaries, high hopes in the scientific approaches to humans and human societies, seeing in them the promise of a more rational, humane, and enlightened society. He retains this impulse in his late writings. The borderlines between philosophy and these other fields are not sealed, but rather porous, the need to read outside one's field is pressing and obvious. Wittgenstein again comes slightly later and is introduced to philosophy through the Vienna circle on the one hand and the Cambridge philosophy of Russell and Moore on the other. They too represent a scientific optimism, but it is a different one, increasingly placing a strain on the very possibility and meaningfulness of philosophy. Part of Wittgenstein's unavoidable task is to negotiate a role for philosophy in a world of research which is increasingly defined by specialized scientific inquiries.

It should be noted at the outset that I am not here concerned with interpretations according to which there could, properly speaking, be no Wittgensteinian moral philosophy, because Wittgenstein supposedly placed ethics outside the realm of the philosophical. The substantial body of work in "ethics after Wittgenstein" proves this emphasis redundant (Cavell, Paul Johnston, Cora Diamond, Raimond Gaita, etc.). I am not concerned with what a properly Wittgensteinian ethics would or should be, or even with Wittgenstein's own thinking on ethics, but rather with how the questions of ethics are shaped by philosophers under the influence of Wittgenstein.[1] Post-Wittgensteinian ethics is, arguably, shaped more by Wittgenstein's ideas of language and the nature of philosophical work, than it is by his ethical ideas.

I will argue that the contribution of post-Wittgensteinian moral philosophy benefits from being understood as part of the tradition of descriptive moral philosophy and also adds to our picture of a philosophical descriptive ethics. Here it constitutes a distinctively philosophical (in the sense of nonempirical) response, or indeed a certain range of distinctive responses, to the question of what ethics in the descriptive mode can be. Wittgenstein's idea of what philosophical description amounts to poses an interesting challenge to the other philosophers that I discuss in this book, through its introvert, non-expansive, conceptually oriented, and rather armchairish approach. Before moving on to

characterize post-Wittgensteinian ethics, I will give an outline of some of Wittgenstein's central methodological notes in the *Investigations.*

Philosophical inquiry, in Wittgenstein's view, begins with confusion: "A philosophical problem has the form: 'I do not know my way about'" (PI § 123). What prompts this confusion is often the sense that language is out of joints or does not work to express what we need to, or produces contradictions. Yet the solution to it is not that we propose novel ways of speaking that would overcome the problem we perceive: "Philosophy may in no way interfere with the actual use of language; it can in the end only describe it. /For it cannot give it any foundation either. /It leaves everything as it is" (PI § 124). Philosophical work is thus about coming to terms with what we already, in some sense, have: the language, the conceptual resources, the ideas. We look for a new way of seeing things, though not through uncovering something that was hidden:

> Philosophy simply puts everything before us, and neither explains nor deduces everything.—Since everything lies open to view there is nothing to explain. For what is hidden, for example, is of no interest to us. One could also give the name of "philosophy" to what is possible *before* all new discoveries and inventions. (PI § 126)

Philosophy is conceptual work of a kind, but not inventive work. "The work of the philosopher consists in assembling reminders for a particular purpose" (§ 127). It is the work of assembling what we already know in a new way, so that the problem we perceived is dissolved. Its guiding virtues are patience, humility, perceptiveness, and carefulness. It is not grand. The point is not to say something new, but to bring what is already before us into view, so that its presence and obviousness speaks to us. "If one tried to advance theses in philosophy, it would never be possible to debate them, because everyone would agree to them" (§ 128).[2]

This procedure, idiosyncratic as it may seem, is prompted by the difficulty of noticing what is closest to us: our ordinary ways of speaking, our most fundamental beliefs and habits, our framework of understanding. "The aspects of things that are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity. (One is unable to notice something—because it is always before one's eyes)" (§ 129). Philosophy thus is the work of recovering the ordinary—it does not bring us new knowledge, but rather reorganizes what we already in some sense knew.

One of his lines, that could be cited as a motto for his later philosophy, is "Don't think, look and see" (PI § 66). Combined with the earlier

quoted methodological injunctions, we get the impression that the scope of "look and see" must be quite specific and rather narrow. The philosopher qua philosopher stays close to home and does not, in his philosophical work, "look" in order to *extend* his knowledge of things. By "bringing back words" to their (variety of) ordinary uses we retrieve, in the course of inquiry, a sense of their proper functioning and regain the capacity to speak meaningfully about a given issue. The philosopher's interventions are local and concrete, concerned with how we should speak to make sense in a situation, though they can have repercussions in wide areas of understanding, especially in cases where the concepts investigated have a key role in a philosophical discussion.

Wittgenstein is adamant about not presenting a theory of language (or a theory of anything else), but behind this method there is a specific picture of language that could be summarized in the following points: (1) Language is an aspect, dimension, and part of human practices; (2) the uses of a word in natural language cannot be contained in a definition; they often, rather, relate to each other through "family resemblances" that can be traced or mapped; and (3) this practical character, impervious to definitions, is essential to the way natural language works. Technical and scientific language works in a different way, allowing and indeed demanding strict definitions for specific purposes. But philosophy is not a technical or theoretical pursuit in this sense. Its task is to help us think over difficult questions, issues, and concepts that we encounter in our ordinary lives. Truth, knowledge, love, goodness, the self, the mind, God, free will, and so on are part of our vernaculars and the problems related to them are not solved by proposing novel definitions that would change their meaning and use. Yet philosophy has the tendency to do precisely this: Rather than becoming clear about the nature of our ordinary understanding, it heads for technical and theoretical abstraction to replace our ordinary understanding. But by this means nothing in the line of understanding is achieved and an empty abstract debate is conceived.

Thus, Wittgenstein, like Dewey, is centrally concerned with how philosophical and theoretical abstraction distorts our understanding of the world, but he envisions the task of philosophy as one quite different from the one guided by Dewey's empirical appetites. Indeed, one of his central methodological instructions has to do with the distinctiveness of philosophical inquiries from scientific ones. As he puts this in the much quoted passage of PI:

> It was true to say that our considerations could not be scientific ones.... And we may not advance any kind of theory. There must be nothing hypothetical in our considerations. We must do away with all explanation, and description alone must take its place. And this description gets its light, that is to say its purpose, from the philosophical problems. These are, of course, not empirical problems; they are solved, rather, by looking into the workings of our language, and that in such a way as to make us recognize those workings: *in despite of* an urge to misunderstand them. The problems are solved, not by giving new information, but by arranging what we have always known. Philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of language. (Wittgenstein, PI § 109)

This is a luminous picture of the task of philosophy, which has inspired many people to a kind of low-key work of reclaiming our language from theoretical abstraction, looking instead closely at the way we talk about things in quite ordinary situations. In order to understand Wittgenstein rightly in contrast to Dewey's empirical cheerfulness, it is important to appreciate what kind of idea of knowledge seeking Wittgenstein is speaking against here. He addresses a specific idea of what the advancement of knowledge is, modeled on science: the making of theories that allow us to formulate hypotheses, which can be tested, with the goal of assembling more (and more accurate) facts about the world, or alternatively, the assembling of data in order to be able to make predictions, projections, and generalizations based on it.

Summing up, both Dewey and Wittgenstein can be seen as intensely engaged with the scientific worldview of the twentieth century and critical of the Western traditions of philosophical theory. Dewey is enthusiastic over the possibilities, opened up by the social sciences and psychology, for a better understanding of human behavior and human communities. Wittgenstein again sees philosophy, above all, as an independent form of thought, at risk of being distorted or misunderstood due to the dominating role that scientific modes of knowledge and knowledge seeking have achieved. This does not of course explain the difference between them concerning the role of empirical input in philosophy, but it can provide a starting point for negotiating the terrain between them. The articulation of a descriptive ethics in our time can benefit much from a clarification of the contrast between Wittgenstein and Dewey in this matter, because of the way they embody two partly contrary and partly mutually supportive aspects of the twentieth-century rethinking of the nature of philosophy.

Nonetheless, Wittgenstein's credo that philosophy does not seek new knowledge, merely reorganization of what we already know, has been central for the shaping of post-Wittgensteinian discussions on ethics as well as on other topics. The passage from § 109, quoted earlier, has prompted philosophers like Stanley Cavell (1976) and Raimond Gaita (2003) to emphasize the distinction between "conceptual" investigations that are conducted through attention to language and "empirical" investigations that are conducted by collecting new information. This is an important matter and I will return to discuss this idea of philosophy and its limitations in Chap. 9, which is dedicated to the relationship between the "empirical" and the "merely descriptive" in the articulation of a workable descriptive moral philosophy.

The interesting matter for present purposes is what kind of moral philosophy this idea of the philosopher's practice has inspired and how it contributes to enriching our descriptive take on morality. One could claim that the most interesting kinds of work done in the spirit of Wittgenstein give emphasis to "look and see" rather than "conceptual, not empirical" and indeed interpret the look and see in a rather more open-ended way than Wittgenstein's own remarks suggest. In ethics Wittgenstein's later philosophy has inspired a body of work which is perhaps less concerned with our "lives *in language*" and more with our "*lives* in language."

Rather than focusing on moral language or paying attention to how we speak in situations of moral significance, the work of philosophers like Winch, Diamond, and Gaita has been concerned with describing (their own, our own) frameworks of moral life, our life worlds, our forms of life, where certain ways of talking, thinking, and doing make sense. The most telling form of this work has been their philosophical discussions on narrative literature. In these discussions the literary text performs a number of interlinked functions:

1. First, a literary narrative is offered, to present a morally, philosophically, or existentially interesting case or scenario.
2. Second, our attention is directed to aspects of the scenario which are not helpfully illuminated through the use of standard ethical theory: The literary piece works, for example, as an aid in seeing aspects or "seeing as," or as a way of reminding us of some aspects, of our everyday world or modes of interaction.
3. The literary work is brought forth as a site for the renegotiation of understanding and communality. Conversation over a piece of

> literature or a reading of a piece of literature will offer a place for seeking a common understanding of the lives depicted, the moral questions, goods and evils exposed, as well as the concepts involved.

The result is not necessarily perfect agreement, and even in cases of agreement in judgments the "action guidance" gained through the philosophical effort is left rather vague. The real gain of the inquiry is a richer understanding of the moral horizon of the story and the moral horizons of the (philosophical) interpreter and of oneself, as reader, interlocutor, or partner in conversation. Together they constitute an inquiry into what we live by but often do not quite see, how we talk about it, and what our words mean. Moral philosophy, in these terms, is a kind of excavation of one's own moral understanding, together with others, much in line with Wayne Booth's (1989) idea of ethical criticism in his book *The Company We Keep*.

This line of work can be characterized as antitheoretical, but its proper purpose is not the negation of the philosophical tendency to theorize (as D. Z. Phillips 1992 thought) but rather the careful and nonreductive articulation of our way of life and our ways of making sense of life. There are many styles of doing this even among the post-Wittgensteinian philosophers and I will here merely briefly look at one, which has been particularly influential in shaping the ways in which younger philosophers in this area understand their task. The case is Cora Diamond, and the text I refer to here is a brief introduction (2004) to her classic essay "´Having a Rough Story about What Moral Philosophy Is" (included in Diamond 1991). In this introduction she explicates the Wittgensteinian influence which is strongly present, but not highlighted or developed in the earlier text.

Diamond draws here on Wittgenstein's letter to Ludwig von Ficker, concerning the *Tractatus*, where he notes that his work "consists of two parts: the one presented here plus all that I have not written. And it is precisely this second part that is the important one. My book draws limits to the sphere of the ethical from the inside as it were, and I am convinced that this is the ONLY rigorous way of drawing those limits" (Wittgenstein, quoted by Diamond 2004, p. 129). The point, as Diamond sees it, is that "the *Tractatus* can help one to understand the ethical only if one oneself turns this absence of the ethical in it into something that transforms one's understanding" (ibid.). What one may learn here, concerning the ethical, is not something that is in the text, that the author holds in his hands and conveys to the reader, but something that the reader must figure out for himself. This sounds curious, but the play of presence and absence can be

given a perfectly commonsense reading, especially when reflected through Wittgenstein's remarks on literary texts. A similar movement of thought is at work in Wittgenstein's preference for certain literary works. Diamond notes that "throughout his life, Wittgenstein greatly admired Tolstoy's *Hadji Murad*. He wrote about it with great enthusiasm to Russell in 1912, and to Norman Malcolm in 1945. Tolstoy, he said to Malcolm, impressed him infinitely more when he turned his back to the reader and just tells a story, as opposed to the Tolstoy of Resurrection" (Ibid. p. 129).

In Wittgenstein's view *Hadji Murad* inspires ethical (and philosophical) thought and manages to say something profound, precisely by remaining silent concerning potential lessons that the reader should take home. Tolstoy in his didactic mood is, in this view, not only a worse author and artist, but also a poorer source of ethical insight.

These observations should not be understood as pointing to the view that Wittgenstein gestures here toward some mystical, ineffable truths. (This is neither what Diamond thinks of Wittgenstein nor what Diamond herself wants to say.) The idea is rather that certain forms of insight do not have to do with what we know or what propositional beliefs we hold or which evaluative commitments we share, but are rather about how we look at the world, how we engage it, and how it engages us. The literary author, who is not didactic, but lets his judgment rest in the act of just telling a story, may provide for us (if he is good writer) not only a more gratifying work of art, but also a better and more fulfilling place for transformative ethical thinking than a didactic text. The transformation of our ways of looking is not external to philosophy, but internal and indeed essential to it. Philosophers, when emphasizing verbalized, argumentatively assessed conviction, tend to miss out on the real adventure of philosophy and the real challenge of ethical thinking, which is precisely this transformation.[3]

This train of thought can easily be connected to the chain of remarks quoted earlier from the *Investigations*, where it was established that philosophy does not present a theory or hypothesis and that philosophical problems are not empirical ones. These lines of reasoning come together in post-Wittgensteinian ethical readings of literature, in a specific way of articulating what such readings are about: Literary texts do not present theories or hypotheses; they do not give us facts about a matter or argue the rightness of a given normative view. Neither do they illustrate positions that are already established elsewhere. Or they can indeed do all of these, but these things are not what make a literary text ethically or philosophically interesting. Their real philosophical and ethical work, in

this view, has to do with our concepts, and the way things appear to us, the ways we conceptualize the things that are already known to us. They do their work as a part of "working on oneself. On one's own understanding. On the way one sees things. (And on what one demands of them)" (Wittgenstein, 2005: § 86).

This is an important insight concerning the role of literary texts in relation to ethical thought and moral philosophy. It is also a profound idea of what ethical insight is and what philosophical progress may require.[4] But it is also a view which we need to problematize here. Its danger lies in an undue focus on what we already have and know (what we only need to reorganize for a better understanding). Some philosophical investigations may indeed properly be of this kind, and some readings of literature may indeed do precisely this sort or (merely) reorganizing work. But good literature is also and always a window to the world, to what is not ourselves, not our world. It always adds, pleasurably or disquietingly, to what we know: It enriches us. This expansive movement involved in reading and sharing literature is not only important for understanding what literature is and does. It is equally important for formulating what is at stake in the remaking of our own understanding and our shared understandings in philosophical work.

Philosophical readings of literature do not add to our "empirical" knowledge of the world, but they do rely on complex forms of experience that may be ours, but may equally well be completely foreign to us. Reading literature is putting experience on trial. In reading stories we try our language and our concepts, but also share experiential possibilities. There is an aspect of "hypothesis" and "experiment" (in a broad Deweyan sense) both in the writing of fiction and in the reading of fiction for purposes of moral reflection. It makes sense to frame this experimental aspect of literature in Stanley Cavell's (2008) terms, as exercises in "seeing aspects" or "seeing as." As such it could be conceptualized in terms of an inquiry into ordinary language (Forsberg 2013), a conceptual inquiry or an inquiry into what we did not know we knew. But this is, as I want to emphasize, only one side of the story. Post-Wittgensteinian ethical discussions on literature are only partly inquiries into what we already knew or the uncovering of aspects of our "lives in language." They are also about negotiating a lived experience by putting it into dialogue with the lived experience of others. Literary readings in this genre contain confrontation with otherness as well: new discoveries, the imagining of things we did not know, the effort to learn more about things beyond ourselves. In fact they

contain much of the same empirical appetite, the curiosity about the real that is emblematic for Dewey, though by other means. Novels, even when based on thorough research, are obviously not documents of the real. But the aim and direction of studying novels in moral philosophy is more often than not that of putting us in relation to something that is not us or ours—that is not exhausted by the reorganization of what we know or a discovery of "we did not know we knew" (Murdoch 1997, p. 12). Ian Hacking quite helpfully notes, in response to Cora Diamond and Stanley Cavell (in the little book *Philosophy and Animal Life*), that "In any event, the relations among seeing, seeing as, and new information are subtle" (Cavell et. al. 2008, p. 145). Barring "new information"—empirical reports, new data, the experience of others—from philosophical studies is artificial to say the least, because sometimes indeed it is precisely new information that will settle or change the debate. So the question is: How do we reconcile the (demand for) "new information" with the idea of philosophy as a reorganization of our understanding of what is already there for us?

It is typical for the post-Wittgensteinian philosophical use of literature that the line between new information and what we already knew is blurred. Some psychologically accurate and culturally familiar texts, like the short stories of Raymond Carver or Alice Munro, may operate, in their original context, rather little on the possibility of being informative and much on showing us the familiar anew. The moral philosophical interest in the authorships of J. M. Coetzee or Doris Lessing, however, is only partly due to their capacity to enter into our own sensibilities as, say, Western literate persons, with certain kinds of moral horizons and moral concerns. It is equally due to how they use settings that we may know little about: colonialism, Rhodesia, South Africa. New thoughts, new information, new pictures mingle with what we did not know we knew. It is no coincidence that post-Wittgensteinian moral philosophers fashion themselves as interested in "philosophical anthropology." And anthropology, even if it is "philosophical," cannot be merely about reminding us of what we already in some sense know. From this perspective, the idea of the philosophers' work as "conceptual" constrains the philosophers' "look and see" in ways which may in actual practice be counterproductive to Wittgenstein's own project of uncovering our forms of life through description.

Attention to the nature of the communality of philosophical work, in Wittgenstein's view, may support this reading. In contrast to what is

often supposed, Wittgenstein does not picture “our language,” that is, “ordinary language” as finished and readily available. Discovering and uncovering aspects of our own forms of life in language is rather a constant work, and the communication of one’s discoveries requires that one finds a common horizon of understanding with one’s interlocutors. Conversations in philosophy fall under the same rule as other conversations in the respect that communication requires agreement in presuppositions.

> If language is to be a means of communication there must be agreement not only in definitions but also (queer as this may sound) in judgments. This seems to abolish logic but does not do so. It is one thing to describe methods of measurement, and another to obtain and state results of measurement. But what we call “measuring” is partly determined by a certain constancy in the results of measurement (PI, § 242).

We should keep in mind that language for Wittgenstein (as for the pragmatists, as for Foucault) is always merely one aspect of human practices and forms of life. Communication relies on a shared world, and to write, read, and talk about philosophy is to seek communality. It is to seek common ground below the abstraction of philosophical theory. It is a shared exercise in thinking about our world and our ways of inhabiting it in language and deed. The insistence on philosophical inquiries as conceptual tends to delimit the seeking of common ground to the negotiation of what could be called “linguistic intuitions,” the native speaker’s command over his linguistic apparatus, and ability to trace his way back to ordinary language use, where theorization, abstraction, or simplification has led him astray. This is the primary ground where negotiation is to be conducted. But philosophical conversations often come prematurely to a halt when conducted in this way. People’s ideas of “what we should say when” (Austin 1956) may differ. Looking for arbiters external to the participants’ linguistic intuitions the philosopher may reach for empirical facts about language use or empirical data about the objects of discussion or instead seek common ground by the use of stories or literary narratives.

What I would suggest is that, under closer scrutiny, the picture of philosophy suggested by Wittgenstein in § 109 earlier was perhaps too luminous to be helpful. The contrasting of the philosophers’ proper, merely “descriptive” work with “theory,” the “hypothetical” and “empirical,” lures us into too narrow and rigid ideas of what one or the other of these can be. The kinds of description that are relevant and enriching for

our philosophical understanding of morality and our moral forms of life do not exclude the empirical or even the hypothetical. A helpful descriptive philosophy will often be reliant on knowledge or insight which the philosopher could not have brought forth on his own: empirical data, the literary author's experiences, and artistic experiment, among other things. The assembling of new facts or new insights does not provide us with ready answers to philosophical quandaries; in this sense philosophical questions are not empirical ones. But when reworking our understanding and negotiating common perspectives with others—the work on our concepts and how we see things—we are as much reliant on what we did not already have before us, on what is new to us, as we are on transforming our understanding of what we had.

Thus I propose a kind of practical marriage in ethics between Dewey's empirical spirit and Wittgenstein's emphasis on conceptual elucidations. An adequate descriptive moral philosophy for our time needs to be sensitive to the kinds of conceptual elucidation prompted by Wittgenstein (on how we see things and how we talk about them), in conjunction with a philosophical appetite for all kinds of things that science and arts can bring us. A philosophical study of morality will most often not be a project of describing something external to ourselves, but will rather, importantly, also be an odyssey into how we see and conceptualize things. This is the central insight from Wittgenstein. Yet how we see things and talk about them and how our ways of seeing and talking change are not disconnected from what we know and what we are acquainted with. Reading a sociological study on how ecological damage is translated to monetary value in the United States and in France (Fourcade 2011) may teach us something crucial about our ethical form of life. So may a collage of case studies on multiple personality disorder (Hacking 1995) or even some rather dull statistical data concerning the correlations of socioeconomic status and certain illnesses. Above all a moral philosophy which is unable to learn from these kinds of studies is a moral philosophy condemned to be ignorant of its own time and place and guiding presuppositions.

In order for Wittgenstein's work to contribute to the broader project of a descriptive ethics, the narrow idea of philosophy as pure, nonempirical, conceptual elucidation must be overcome. Indeed, looking at the rich curiosity about the world that is emblematic for Wittgensteinian philosophers we could say that this idea, though true to Wittgenstein verbatim, is not true to the spirit and direction of his inquiries.

Notes

1. Nonetheless, for an excellent overview of Wittgenstein's own evolving ideas on ethics throughout his work, from *Tractatus* to his late thinking, see Christensen 2011.
2. The original German for "agree to" here is "Einverstanden" which denotes inclusion (in point of view) rather than merely shared opinion.
3. For similar lines of argument concerning the philosophical and ethical roles of narrative literature see, for example, Jonathan Lear (2010) on J. M. Coetzee and Niklas Forsberg (2013) on Iris Murdoch. A similar idea of the lesson not being in the texts is also prominent in Peter Winch's classical discussion of the parable of the Good Samaritan (Winch 1987).
4. This is a central point of agreement between Wittgenstein and Iris Murdoch (see Hämäläinen 2014), and Diamond draws on both of them when developing her view of the ethical role of literature.

CHAPTER 8

Foucault's Archeology and Genealogy of the Self

Abstract Like Dewey and Wittgenstein, Foucault is a thinker of the moving horizon, not interested in uncovering universal principles, but rather in understanding the different ways in which humans come to know about themselves and their world and act upon themselves and others: the conditions of possibility of taken-for-granted views and practices. Not all of this knowledge is ethical in any sense of the word, but much of it is. Foucault's late work, especially volumes 2 and 3 of the *History of Sexuality*, is often described in terms of being his work on "ethics." But these late writings present only the culmination of a thick descriptive and historical inquiry into moral personhood, ancient as well as modern. The essential input of his work for a descriptive ethics lies in his capacity to describe the complex interdependence of practices, institutions, values, forms of personhood, and forms of conceptualization. He also exhibits an intense relationship to his own moral present, which is exemplary for a descriptive philosophical ethics.

Keywords Michel Foucault · History of the present · Genealogy

If we add together Dewey's expansive empirical appetite and Wittgenstein's meticulous attention to "how we live our lives in language," we have two different but complementary entries to the investigation of our own moral habitat. What we need now is to turn to the historical dimension of our

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N. Hämäläinen, *Descriptive Ethics*,
DOI 10.1057/978-1-137-58617-9_8

moral and evaluative forms of life. Wittgenstein is not a philosopher known for his interest in history, but on the other hand the whole idea of forms of life with a "natural history" is thoroughly premised on a keen awareness of deep historical change, which may render the idea of universal moral principles deeply problematic (Hämäläinen, 2014). In post-Wittgensteinian ethics this aspect of Wittgenstein's work can be seen in the greater readiness of these philosophers to embrace the historicity of morality and the mutability of our forms of life. But this is a contested issue within post-Wittgensteinian philosophy.

The historical dimension is a central interest for Dewey, but I will not here open up the issue through his work. I turn here rather to Foucault and Taylor, who will transport us to one of my most central concerns: the question of how the present emerges out of its pasts. I return here to the quotation from Nietzsche's *The Gay Science* borrowed as one of the mottos for this book, because it opens up a picture of moral study startlingly different from the picture held by moral philosophers, and one which will help us approach Foucault.

> Anyone who now wishes to make a study of moral matters opens up for himself an immense field of work. All kinds of individual passions have to be thought through and pursued through different ages, peoples, and great and small individuals; all their reason and all their evaluations and perspectives on things have to be brought into the light. So far, all that has given color to existence still lacks a history. Where could you find a history of love, of avarice, of envy, of conscience, of pious respect for tradition, or of cruelty? Even a comparative history of law or at least of punishment is so far lacking completely. Has anyone made a study of different ways of dividing up the day or of the consequences of a regular schedule of work, festivals, and rest? What is known of the moral effects of different foods? Is there any philosophy of nutrition? (The constant revival of noisy agitation for and against vegetarianism proves that there is no such philosophy.) Has anyone collected men's experiences of living together—in monasteries, for example? Have the manners of scholars, of businessmen, artists, or artisans been studied and thought about? There is so much in them to think about. (Nietzsche 1974, pp. 81–82)[1]

Two things in this potential to-do list deserve immediate notice. One is that, in fact, quite a number of people have been fulfilling the tasks set in this passage over the past century and a half. Cultural historians today keep themselves busy with precisely these kinds of matters, trying to make

visible the passions, habits, and perspectives of people in various times and settings. And what is qualitative research in sociology but the collecting of people's experiences of living together in our time? Another thing to be noted is that parts of it read as a list of the works or potential works of Michel Foucault: a history of punishment, a history of madness, a history of attending to daily habits and dietary prescriptions.

A "study of moral matters" is for Nietzsche here a study of what "has given color to existence," of the forms and manners in which human beings make sense of their existence, and on the basis of which they build their world. A history of moral emotions and virtues and of the institutions within which these are shaped, of the everyday patterns of doing and being which moral philosophy cares little about, but to which we do give considerable moral weight in our day-to-day lives: the feeling of existential legitimacy that we get from having a full calendar, the necessity to write a page or two before noon lest the day be spoiled, the moral satisfactions of various strictly regulated diets—these and the like are part of the stuff of Foucault's scholarship, from early to late. But where Nietzsche's words here are the hovering, visibly self-satisfied smile of the momentarily invisible Cheshire cat, Foucault is quite earnestly visible and present in his strenuous attempts to dig and to trace, to help unfold the practices out of which our modes of thinking of ourselves and the good are crafted.

To replace "moral philosophy" with a "study of moral matters" opens up, for inquiry, a vast number of possible, probable, and improbable entities that have bearing on our moral lives. Epochs, places, institutions, texts, groups, habits, words offer themselves as equally plausible (if not more plausible) objects of study than the canon of philosophical texts and the questions we habitually take to be most distinctively moral. Obviously this kind of study is unsuitable to anyone too fond of neatness and completeness. It suits the temperament of a historian better than that of a philosopher, and precisely because of this its sharpest edge is pointed to the philosopher who entertains the thought of settling all things moral in the comfortable embrace of his armchair.

Foucault takes on the smiling challenge with an unusual capacity for work and an evolving battery of questions quite distinctly his own, not immediately concerned with "moral matters." Of course, unlike the boisterous Nietzsche of this passage, who mischievously seems to grant all things moral a potentially equal interest, Foucault's work has its pre-given focal point in the philosopher's own present. The question that brings his

studies together is the question of what we have become: the twentieth-century human being as an amazing and surprising product of distant times and places.

His early studies, *The Birth of the Clinic* and *The History of Madness*, take on the task of studying the institutions that take shape around human illness and human deviance. In *The Order of Things* he investigates the institution of scientific knowledge concerning language, life, and labor in what the French call the classical age. His philosophical invention lies in the so-called archeological method, a mode of digging into the deeper layers of the understanding of a given epoch. He offers not just the history of experience, asked for by Nietzsche, but proposes to excavate the underlying forms that give sense and coherence to a given mode of thinking and that seem to settle the boundaries of what can be meaningfully said.

He shares with a number of contemporaries, like Thomas Kuhn, the insight that we will learn little of the nature and development of human knowledge if we treat previous frameworks of understanding as confused and inferior varieties of our own (Kuhn 1962). What we need to understand are the principles that organize understanding at a given time and in a given place. This is not to deny potential superiority to present modes of understanding, but to offer more truthful grounds for any reasoned claim to superiority. If we do not understand the organizing principles of past frameworks of thought, then we do not know these systems and cannot judge them without utter arbitrariness. The lesson of Foucault's archeology for a descriptive ethics lies precisely in his attention to the depth, complexity, and holistic nature of systems of knowledge, understanding, and conceptualization. Just like in the case of science, our moral past does not consist of stages in the teleological development toward the present (say, present-day liberal humanitarianism), but of moral orders quite differently put together. Understanding how the moral order of some previous time was put together may help us better understand what our own order is like: what is contingent and what is necessary in it, which factual or metaphysical beliefs it relies on, how it relates to the parts of our worldview which we think of as external to morality, and so on. An archeological study of a moral system would be an exercise in what it could be to take a moral framework as a whole, in its own present complexity, and make it into an object of inquiry.

But what the archeological method lacks is a substantial analysis of the very process of transition and change. Manners of doing and conceptualizing come about and cease to be, but the early Foucault, familiarly, has little to say about how and why the changes he has found occur in the first place. This is to be remedied in his subsequent work (Gutting 2005, pp. 45–46). By the time of *Discipline and Punish* (1975) Foucault is comfortable writing about the dynamics of change: His attention to the emergence of the modern prison centers on how the practical problems and conflicts come to be addressed with practical solutions in the hands of people and how practical solutions again give birth to new practices which remake our understanding. The central topic of the book—the changes that occur in punitive systems between the classical age and our time—constitutes a virtual diorama for illustrating and enacting a number of philosophical lessons, some of which are historical and some of which are atemporal. These include the following:

1. The idea that modernity is not distinguished by an increase in the freedom of people and a decrease in the exercise of power, but rather by a different organization of power
2. The idea that the modern era is not fundamentally more humane and that the pursuit of more humane and compassionate modes of governance has not been the driving force of modernization
3. The idea of an intimate relationship between power and knowledge: how the exercise of power is both dependent on and generative of a given mode of knowing
4. The idea of a dispersed or agentless power typical of modernity: that power in the modern era is bureaucratized and based on knowledge as expertise—the experts who in the modern world hold the knowledge that makes people act in given ways are not necessarily hierarchically above those over whom they exercise their power

All of these points have potentially important implications for morality and the pursuit of moral philosophy, not least concerning questions of individual freedom, autonomous agency, coercion, and moral epistemology. But the most central insight for the purposes of a descriptive ethics is the rather low-key insight that the motors of societal change frequently are lowly and practical, that changes in modes of understanding are premised on changes in practice. New thinking emerges in tandem with doing and with needs to reorganize one's doings. Thus practice, not theory, not

ideas, constitutes the best vantage point for making sense of change. Foucault's "genealogical method" is thus born as a work of tracing the mundane and the concrete. This again, does of course not mean that thinking could never be the source of change. The claim is not here related to the anti-intellectual chant that thinking, theoretical reason, and scholarship are inert or ineffective. The point is rather that when thinking is divorced from the practices and institutions where it has a home and makes sense, the process of change in thinking, conceptual change, and the changes in structures of thought are often rendered unintelligible or open to serious misunderstandings.

But why is this of such importance for present purposes? Foucault's way of putting this idea to work disperses the mystery attached to the transitions between *epistemes*, that is, regimes of knowledge, as he described them in his earlier work, because he can trace the interplay between ideas, language, and practice where certain ways of speaking and knowing become meaningful in relation to specific quotidian doings. This very same move, if we are convinced to try it, can help us disperse the mystery in transitions between morals past and morals present: It gives us tools not only for describing different moral habitats and the different moral atmospheres of different historical settings, but also helps overcome the mystery in gaps between different moral orders within our own present world, because we can see how they are rooted in practical life and undergoing change. Seen as parts of a broader form of life, we can more easily make sense of how one becomes the other. In short, Foucault's practice-oriented take on change—social, moral, institutional, political—provides us with a practical model for describing not only a stable moral world, but also a moral world in motion.

We can note that Foucault, like Dewey, is paying attention to problematizations as central for evaluative change.[2] We encounter something as a problem, or formulate something as a problem, and venture to solve it. Both the formulation and the solution remake our understanding of what we are dealing with. The practical remaking of manners and aims of human action opens up through attention to a moment of trouble, an agonism, a ripple in the smooth continuity of activities. But where Dewey celebrates the moment of practical readjustment, of remaking of both means and ends, as an opportunity for progress, Foucault is noncommittal concerning the positive gains inherent in historical change. This is not because something like "improvement" would, in Foucault's view, be impossible, but rather because our propensity to think in terms of progress

is prone to make certain important things more difficult to perceive. First, modernity has its own distinctive forms of oppression, many of which we easily do not recognize if we see our world as the current endpoint of progress, and second, thinking in terms of progress will make us less capable of understanding the independent nature and internal coherence of previous modes of understanding.

In Foucault's genealogical thought the archeological idea of the relative synchronic coherence and integrity of a system of thought is, thus, in a sense, preserved, although in a substantially qualified form. Changes in thought and practice are no longer pictured as sudden, unannounced upheavals, but rather as the contingent sums of a range of contingent things and events that happen to come together. For any interesting event or phenomenon in a human society we can trace a number of partial contributory factors and a large element of arbitrariness. As Foucault says in a late interview with Rux Martin, "In my books I have really tried to analyze changes, not in order to find the material causes but to show all the factors that interact and the reactions of people. I believe in the freedom of people. To the same situation, people react in very different ways" (Foucault 1988b). Or as Gary Gutting helpfully puts it "Foucault was skeptical of grand teleological narratives focused on such goals and proposed instead accounts based on many specific 'little' causes, operating independently of one another, with no overall outcome in view" (Gutting 2005, p. 46). The factors adding up to the modern punitive system, and a modern understanding of the role and rationale of legal punishment, include the actions of many people who have reacted to situations and reasoned about measures in individual ways.

Like Wittgenstein, Foucault is thus interested in our own *forms of life*, but what the comparison brings out is the lightness with which Wittgenstein handles the notion, investigating it mainly from the armchair and separating it from any deeper investigation of the historicity and materiality of these forms. Both Wittgenstein and Foucault have been taken to be mainly concerned with discourse, words, language, but for both, language is only one aspect of a form of life. As Hacking notes concerning the latter, "Foucault's books are mostly about practices and how they affect and are affected by the talk in which we embed them. The upshot is less a fascination with words than with people and institutions, with what we do for people and to people.…Foucault has not been locked in a cell of words. Moreover, it is precisely his intellectual work, his philosophical work, that directs our attention away from our talk and

onto our practices" (Hacking 2004, p. 47). Words, in this kind of inquiry (whether done in the armchair or in the archive), are a kind of doing and, for linguistic beings, an accompaniment of nonverbal doings. Discourses are an aspect of the human way of being in a herd, of grazing together. For neither of these two philosophers is there to be discovered an exact way in which linguistic activity generally corresponds to nonlinguistic activities.

In the case of Wittgenstein I bypassed the study his own various remarks on ethics and focused on how his work has been put to use by others in moral philosophy. In the case of Foucault, similarly, the most central import of his work for a descriptive ethics is not in the texts that he himself most clearly thematizes as ethical. We need to take a brief closer look here at why this is so.

Foucault's late work, especially volumes 2 and 3 of the *History of Sexuality*, is sometimes popularly described as his work on "ethics," in contrast to his previous work on language, knowledge, and power, assuming that this is the part of Foucault's production directly relevant for moral philosophy.[3] What Foucault here identifies as "ethics" is a specific area of morality: an exercise of the self, the kind of work that a person does upon himself, in order to shape himself as a subject in relation to moral demands. His studies elucidate the practices of this shaping of oneself as a subject in two different contexts: Greek antiquity in *The Use of Pleasures* and Roman antiquity in *The Care of the Self*. These late writings present the culmination of a thick descriptive and historical inquiry into the making of moral personhood, ancient as well as modern. From the large-scale and modern focus of his previous books—underlying structures of scientific language and rationales of institutional organization in the management of people, language, power, and knowledge—he moves to the ancient world and small scale of the individual person's attentions to himself, in the realm of the body and its appetites. The tone of the two later parts of the *History of Sexuality* is more intimate and less heavily theoretical than his previous work, and they are often experienced as a more pleasant read. Without doubt the turn toward ancient practices of the self brings new concerns into Foucault's work: explicit attention to the ethical, explicit attention the individual person's relation to himself, and a novel room for freedom in the practices of the individuals' self-making. The person is not only a product of practices, discourses, truths, and power-structures that surround him, but a participant maker of the unity that is to become himself.

One way of spelling out Foucault's relevance for moral philosophy today, following this identification of a late ethical phase in his production, is that Foucault (1) suggests a definition of ethics where the formation of the self takes precedence over rule-bound and other-regarding aspects of the ethical or moral life and (2) affirms this precedence of self-care as his own ethical (moral philosophical) standpoint. There are several different developments in contemporary moral thinking that contribute to the attraction of this idea of ethics. We have the emergence of virtue ethics in Anglophone moral philosophy from the 1960's onward, which has rekindled an interest in the idea of the ethical life as the cultivation of dispositions—that is, the cultivation of oneself. We can also perceive, in contemporary moral philosophy, an interest in the possibility of formulating (in Murdoch's words) a "philosophy to live by," as an antidote to the technicalization of philosophical discussions over the past decades. For this purpose the ancient schools of philosophy that provide Foucault's materials in his late work are generally found inspirational. Furthermore, the themes of mental and bodily self-care that are foregrounded in these works have a pop-cultural parallel in the contemporary self-help industry, which has by now conditioned our cultural mindset toward the idea that the participation in regimes of self-cultivation is central for our moral lives.

Thus, the idea that the late work constitutes Foucault's contribution to ethics gains support from a certain attraction that the idea of small-scale practices of the self exercises on contemporary moral thought. But to confine our idea of Foucault's relevance for moral philosophy to the late work would be problematic for three interlinked reasons.

First, Foucault is very clear about how his concept of ethics as self-formation only covers one aspect of the moral life. Ethics in this sense is a subcategory to morality (1990, pp. 25–29). He reverses the ordinary, though fluctuating, usage where "ethics" stands for a broader category of concerns about "how one ought to live," while morality is a specific area of ethics, concerned with rules of (other-regarding) conduct. But there is nothing peculiar about this, if one notices how he introduces the notion in the third part of the introduction to *The Use of Pleasure*, since there is no stable manner of using these words in philosophy. His notion of ethics is not meant to replace the ordinary range of concerns of moral philosophy, but to name within it an area and subject matter which is perhaps insufficiently attended to in modern philosophy: the individual's constitution of himself and work on himself as a moral subject. It is thus not possible to

derive something like "Foucault's ethics," meaning "Foucault's moral philosophy" as a whole, from these late works.

Second, the isolation of the late work to an "ethics" would be to neglect the continuity of Foucault's work, perceivable in his writings and stated by himself. In the early 1980s he notes retrospectively that "Perhaps I've insisted too much on the technology of domination and power. I am more and more interested in the interaction between oneself and others in the technologies of individual domination, the history of how an individual acts upon himself, in the technology of self" (1988b, p. 19).[4] Stated like this, the core of his work comes forward as an interest in the making of people, by themselves and by collective others, through practices of personhood on a larger or smaller scale. From this perspective, what is distinctive to the late work is the smaller scale (one's work on oneself), whereas questions relevant to ethics or morality have been part of his work all along.

Third, and most important, the idea of Foucault's late work as his ethics is bound to make it more difficult for us to perceive the immediate and immense relevance of archeological and genealogical investigations for our enquiries into our historically formed moral forms of life. This relevance is my main concern here.

Without downplaying the current and future importance of Foucault's interest in self-practices I would suggest that Foucault's central contribution to moral philosophy is how he teaches us, through his own example, to attend to our current assemblages of knowledge, practices, beliefs, and concepts as contingent products of many quite random happenings (Foucault, 1984a). The archeological approach opens for the moral philosopher a way of treating previous or foreign moral frameworks as deeply different from ours and yet traceable and understandable. It does not offer a dull, non-transparent relativism (as Taylor 1984 thinks), but an adventurous researchability of the past through attention to how other systems have made sense. The genealogical approach offers a practical perspective on the anatomy of change: that we should not look for explanations to present phenomena in the past but rather trace the complexity of their origins.

All this searching of the past points to the present: to gaining a new understanding of what we have and who we are. Not so that the past would constitute a victorious path to the present (as the standard enlightenment narratives would have it), but in the sense that the things we take for granted in the present are both destabilized and illuminated. Through

the contingencies of becoming we come to see the firmness, deep groundedness, of what we are, but also its necessary openness to change (Foucault 1984b). This mode of inquiry, in the realm of moral philosophy, can cover virtues as well as rules, institutions as well as practices; it can be extended to all the things moral that are listed in the passage by Nietzsche above. It provides a wide range of ways of making sense of our moral present by the aid of history: an ambitious but also perhaps more risky strategy for a rich descriptive ethics than what is offered by either Dewey's attention to practices of valuation or Wittgenstein's attention to how we live our lives in language. What it does not provide, of course, is a normative ethics to tell us what makes actions good or bad. Neither does it provide us with an idea of what the central concerns of a moral or ethical philosophy should be: The whole list of things moral suggested by Nietzsche present themselves as possible, exemplary objects of interest. (This again is a question that should remain unanswered in this book.)

But there is one thing above others that Foucault asks his genealogical questions about, and that is the human subject, such as he has become by the mid-twentieth century. He is not a human constant, but a quite specific creature, whose constitution has been formed by a variety of things: religious and spiritual practices, scientific knowledge, institutional practices, medical practices, and so on. This asking about the human subject through attention to practice, and forms of expertise for guiding practice, is equally prominent in the work of certain thinkers inspired by Foucault. "What kind of creatures do 'we' think we are, we human beings? And how have we come to think of ourselves in this way?" These are questions posed by Nikolas Rose and Joelle Abi-Rached at the beginning of a recent sociological article on neuroscience (Rose and Abi-Rached 2014). Similarly Hacking asks, at the outset of his book *Rewriting the Soul* (2005), a number of questions concerning memory that could be paraphrased as follows: How did memory become a central category for understanding a range of disparate phenomena, which seem to define what we human beings are? He then goes on to study the emergence of therapeutic practices, diagnostic criteria and beliefs around multiple personality syndrome—all of which operate on a quite particular connection between memory and personhood.

For these thinkers, the open-ended questioning of "the human" is connected to a certain open-endedness in the pursuit of sociology/philosophy. When seeking to understand the historically malleable human in its

historically changing habitats and in its relation to qualitative distinctions, then the moral theory of the Western tradition will not be the primary choice. Nonetheless there is something distinctly ethical to these questions. Moral philosophy, in its habitual trappings, proceeds from postulations and definitions, but what we want to understand is the good and evil of a historically formed creature in the world, not a supposedly simple "agent" or even a complex "self" with supposedly universal attributes. Moral philosophy tends to take agents and subjects for granted, while these thinkers, following Foucault, ask how contemporary phenomena like the sciences of memory, psychiatry, and neuroscience are continuously at work in reconstructing our idea of what a human person is (and how a person relates to its world).

Like Dewey and Wittgenstein, Foucault is a thinker of the moving horizon. He is not interested in uncovering universal principles, but rather in understanding the different ways in which humans come to know about themselves and their world and act upon themselves and others: the conditions of possibility of taken-for-granted views and practices. Not all of this knowledge is ethical in any sense of the term, but much of it is, insofar as it concerns who we are, what we do (and do not do) to ourselves and others and how we build our world. And above all much of it is likely to have an impact on how we understand the subject matter of moral philosophy. The task of the philosopher here is to comprehend and to make comprehensible in order to open up for a possibility to transcend the given. "My role—and that is too emphatic a word—is to show people that they are much freer than they feel, that people accept as truth, as evidence, some themes which have been built up at a certain moment during history, and that this so-called evidence can be criticized and destroyed. To change something in the minds of people—that's the role of an intellectual" (Foucault 1988b, p. 10).

We need to look a bit closer at this ethos of change in order to disclose its significance for the descriptive project of moral philosophy that is under construction here. In his essay "What Is Enlightenment?" (1984b) Foucault traces his own manner of doing philosophy to Kant's essay with the same name. Where Kant's critiques seek to articulate the universal conditions of reason, as they appear when liberated from human beings' self-inflicted immaturity, this text brings forth a different, temporal Kant, whose most intense philosophical relationship is to his own present.

The distinction here is not simply one between universality and historicity, but something rather more intricate. Historicity, if we follow

Foucault, is present in all of Kant's work. The critiques too are expressions of a time and answer to a temporal demand: the people of the enlightenment coming to realize their rational nature. "The critique is, in a sense, the handbook of reason that has grown up in the enlightenment; and, conversely, the Enlightenment is the age of critique" (1984b, p. 38). The universalizing address of these is what Anglophone philosophy has inherited from Kant, but mostly stripped of the sophistication of its historical frame. Kant's more expressly ghistorical texts again deal with historical processes, origins, and the future. The enlightenment text stands out, not because of its historicity but because of the special purpose for which the historical sensibility is mobilized. As Foucault puts it "this little text is located in a sense at the crossroads of critical reflection and reflection on history. It is a reflection by Kant on the contemporary status of his own enterprise" (Ibid., p. 38).

Kant poses here the question of what the enlightenment is, as prompted by the competition of which the essay formed a part, and postulates the enlightenment as "an Ausgang, an 'exit' a 'way out'" (Ibid., p. 34). It is a way out of the dependence on the authority of others and the inability to use one's own reason. This is characterized by Kant as a phenomenon and process, but also as "a task and an obligation," on the one hand of individuals, but on the other hand also of communities, which must make possible the free and public use of reason. This second demand opens up the political dimension of enlightenment. Kant indeed suggests a contract between rational despotism and free reason: "the public and free use of autonomous reason will be the best guarantee of obedience, on condition, however, that the political principle that must be obeyed itself be in conformity with universal reason" (Ibid. p. 37).

Thus rather than presenting the present merely as descriptive task, something to be described or articulated, Kant presents his own particular present as a practical task, a challenge. What Kant according to Foucault articulates here is "the attitude of modernity," which he reflects over as follows:

> I wonder whether we may not envisage modernity rather as an attitude than as a period of history. And by "attitude," I mean a mode of relating to contemporary reality; a voluntary choice made by certain people; in the end, a way of thinking and feeling; a way, too, of acting and behaving that at one and the same time marks a relation of belonging and presents itself as a task. A bit, no doubt, like what the Greeks called an ethos. (Ibid. p. 39)

This idea of modernity, not as an era but as an ethos, is further elaborated by Foucault through Baudelaire. He notes that Baudelaire not only accepts and records the transient fleeting character of the present. What is distinctive to modernity "is the will to 'heroize' the present" (Ibid. p. 40). And yet, this heroization is ironical. It does not strive to preserve the fleeting moment, nor to collect the valued but transient moments as interesting objects. The modern man is to be distinguished from the flâneur, whose curious but disinterested mode of engagement is bound to place him in the spectator's role. The modern man is dedicated to grasping the present and remaking the present in the very same act. "For the attitude of modernity, the high value of the present is indissociable from a desperate eagerness to imagine it, to imagine it otherwise than it is, and to transform it not by destroying it but by grasping it in what it is" (Ibid. p. 41). This modernity is further not just a relationship to the present but also a relationship to the self: It is an exercise of oneself, an ascesis. For Baudelaire this modernity is most distinctly realized by the dandy, who seeks to transform every aspect of his being into a work of art. Indeed, in Baudelaire's view, all of these aspects of modernity—the theorization, the transformative perception of reality, and the distinctive ascetism—can only be properly realized in art.

Now putting these two small exegetical exercises together we may see how Foucault uses them to explicate his own philosophical credo and his place in the Western tradition. He describes himself as an intellectual heir of Kant's Enlightenment essay. His philosophical passion, in spite of his verbose engagement with the past, is for the present. The historical and descriptive work is put to active use: The present is made understandable and embraced as a task by means of historical analysis of its constituent parts. In this process both the present and the self are transformed.

But the past uncovered is not faded away, in the process, in order to give room to an action-oriented, reformist philosophy. It is no mere ladder to be thrown away when a satisfactory account of the present is achieved; it forms an essential part of our understanding. Foucault insists that we must seek to understand ourselves "as beings who are historically determined, to a certain extent, by the enlightenment" (Ibid. p. 43). But this analysis shall not offer the habitual story of the progress of rationality. It rather illuminates the various conditions that made our present possible. And the task of philosophy for Foucault is not the transcendental critique of our modes of understanding, but rather "a critique of what we are saying, and thinking, and doing, through a

historical ontology of ourselves" (Ibid. p. 45). We do not look for formal structures but at historical and thus transient constellations, and the conditions we seek to lay bare require attention to what has been and what is, how one has become the other.

This attention to the historical accidents that constitute ourselves and our present habitat, has its epistemic justification in the fact that the ahistorical mode of philosophy often makes us unable to deal with present-oriented biases in our thinking. Engaging with the present as historical increases our capacity to reflect over our own preconceptions and gives us, ideally, a kind of intellectual freedom and mobility, which helps us to think new things. This epistemic demand—to know what underlies our own thinking—is central to my motivation for insisting on descriptive ethics in philosophy. Unless we take the descriptive work seriously and are prepared to place it at the center of our endeavor, we will not know ourselves well enough for a fruitful moral philosophy. Foucault's reflections on Kant and Baudelaire highlight his affirmation of a changing present, the affirmation of both the present and its inevitable ceasing to be. This affirmation of change at the heart of his thinking is helpful for understanding the relationship between descriptive moral philosophy and standard moral theory, namely, it can help us to see that they are not quite as different as one would think.

Wittgenstein, as we saw, insists that philosophy "leaves everything as it is," meaning that philosophy is not revisionist, does not form new beliefs or new ways of speaking to replace old ones. Dewey similarly insists that philosophy should turn to look at acts of valuation rather than values as abstract ideal postulates. For these philosophers, like for Foucault, the center of philosophical action is the bustle of everyday life, not the clarity of abstraction. But the turn to description does not mean a turn to "mere description" in the sense of a philosophy which stands still or embraces conservatism, in valuation and worldview.

Where moral theory relies on the transformative potential of systematization, grounds, and principles, descriptive moral philosophy relies on the transformative potential of knowing well our contingent moralities, valuations, and forms of life, past and present. Description does not lie idle here. Dewey's attention to practices of valuation comes with the conviction that describing what we do in relation to value can help us value, in some sense, better—that is, correct various ills of our evaluative reasoning and practice. Wittgenstein seeks, in meticulous descriptions of our

linguistic habits, the liberation from unproductive philosophical abstractions and empty metaphysics. From the descriptive point of view the task of philosophy is not to arbitrate between, say, Kantian moral intentions and utilitarian moral consequences. But by investigating the moral universe in which this conflict looks prominent, philosophy can help us deal with conflicts of this kind.

Where broadly analytic moral theory seeks, in its quasi-hypothetical manner, an atemporal moral truth to replace contingent, conflicted, incoherent sets of moral beliefs, descriptive moral philosophy seeks, in a more thorough understanding of these beliefs, the possibility to transcend them bit by bit, when need be. In the absence of god, modern analytic moral philosophy seeks transcendence through the perfection of universally valid theory and argument. In descriptive moral philosophy, to the contrary, the affirmation of transience joins hands with the hope for transcendence. Transcendence is not sought in universal illumination but in the shifting horizon of understanding: the ways in which we are remade and the world is remade through us. This transience is without an end point or culmination: It does not even in principle aim at or result in a perfect understanding of things moral, because everything undergoes change: human beings, societies, human bonds, words, meanings, possibilities of doing and being. New conditions produce new concepts, new concerns, new articulations, and new solutions. Thus moral philosophy is a constant reflective companion to moral life, interested not mainly in what is universal, but also and most centrally in what is contingently present.

This does not mean that philosophers should not and could not take substantial stands on evaluative issues: Obviously they do so. Dewey is passionately concerned with the individual human being's qualitatively rich engagement with her fellows and her surroundings. Foucault is concerned with freedom: not only as a philosophical puzzle but as a moral and existential possibility. The Wittgensteinian moral philosophers grant a special role to a keen perceptiveness in human situations, independently of its instrumental role in facilitating good actions. But these concerns, as evaluative and moral ones, do not originate in philosophy. Philosophy is rather a place where they can be articulated and investigated in their complex dependencies on other concerns, values, ideals, and practices.

Notes

1. My thanks to Niklas Forsberg for pointing me to this passage.
2. For discussion of this communality see Rabinow (2003), pp. 15–20, 48.
3. This is the case, for example, in the *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. The *Stanford Encyclopedia* notes, more cautiously, that the "treatments of ancient sexuality moved Foucault into ethical issues that had been implicit but seldom explicitly thematized in his earlier writings."
4. See also the essay *The Subject and Power* (Foucault 1982).

CHAPTER 9

Charles Taylor's Affirmation of the Modern Self

Abstract Taylor's work offers itself as a vantage point to descriptive ethics, which seems close to the concerns of contemporary mainstream Anglophone moral philosophy. He places himself in explicit dialogue with contemporary Anglophone ethics and social philosophy, and his manner of coining concepts is amenable to Anglophone moral philosophers. But his work is constructed in a way which defies the demands of mainstream moral theory. His most influential book *Sources of the Self* is not just a history of ethics or moral personhood. It is also an essay on moral genealogy, as well as an exercise in moral and evaluative self-knowledge. Not suggesting a "rational grounding" and theoretical basis for given values and norms, but rather investigating certain aspects of our own evaluative framework, Taylor's project is close to Foucault's. But in contrast to Foucault he argues that an affirmative articulation of one's own normative commitments is essential for a consistent descriptive moral philosophy.

Keywords Charles Taylor · Moral history · Self · Articulation · Moral sources

With Charles Taylor, the fourth of our quartet of philosophers, we move closer, again, to mainstream moral philosophy. The two central themes in his rich work, most relevant for present purposes, are (1) his persistent

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N. Hämäläinen, *Descriptive Ethics*,
DOI 10.1057/978-1-137-58617-9_9

attention to the historicity of moral practices and values and (2) the use of a historical perspective to articulate the central values of modernity.

Intellectually placed between analytic or Anglophone philosophy and continental philosophy, Taylor emerged in the 1980s as a central proponent of what was then labeled the communitarian critique of liberalism. Alongside Michael Sandel, Michael Walzer, and Alasdair McIntyre he criticized the broadly liberal framework of social philosophy and ethics for a false self-understanding and the denial of the constitutive relation between morality and community. He has also been one of the central philosophical elucidators of contemporary morality and spirituality, with its special mixture of liberal individualism, affirmation of work and family, secularism, and a novel range of spiritual strivings.

Taylor's work offers itself as a vantage point to descriptive ethics, which is closer to the concerns of contemporary mainstream Anglophone moral philosophy than our three previous philosophers. He places himself in explicit dialogue with contemporary Anglophone ethics and social philosophy, and his manner of coining concepts is amenable to Anglophone moral philosophers. But his work is constructed in a way which defies the demands of mainstream moral theory, perhaps more so than is often acknowledged by those who appropriate his thought. His most influential book *Sources of the Self* is not just a history of ethics or moral personhood. It is also an essay on moral genealogy, as well as an exercise in moral and evaluative self-knowledge. Not suggesting a "rational grounding" and theoretical basis for given values and norms, but rather investigating certain aspects of our own evaluative framework—that is, our moral present—Taylor's project is close to Foucault's. Yet where Foucault focuses on the formation of subjects, leaving the more specifically moral or normative implications of this to some extent unexplored, Taylor's work essentially contains both an extensive argument for how our historically conditioned conception of personhood is constitutive of our moral framework and a kind of critical affirmation of the liberal humanitarianism which he presents as the core of our contemporary moral sensibility.

Taylor's role here is precisely to help form an understanding of normative commitments under the auspices of a descriptive ethics and also to suggest that a merely descriptive, fully noncommittal account of ethics might be impossible or self-defeating. But first we need a brief tour through Taylor's point of view. The focus here will be on *Sources of the Self*, which offers a helpful and quite explicit counterpoint to Foucault's work.

In the first part of *Sources of the Self* Taylor presents his critique of modern moral philosophy and, at the same time, a program for the study of morals. The central problem of modern moral philosophy is its denial of moral situatedness, that is, the human person's unavoidable attachment to certain values that constitute our moral identity and capacity to make evaluative judgments. Taylor emphasizes that insofar as we are moral beings at all, we are this by virtue of being situated, by being someone for whom certain things stand as valuable, and some of these stand as absolutely valuable, and as standards against which other evaluations are made. Modern moral theory, shaped by the liberal instincts that lie behind both Kant's philosophy and classical utilitarianism, has sought to formulate a purely procedural moral philosophy. Such a philosophy seeks to articulate what is right without taking a substantial stand on questions of values. According to this ideal, questions concerning "the good," values and the good life, are to be settled by each for himself and are not a fit object for moral philosophers' work. Thus moral philosophy is to be concerned only with a narrow range of obligatory action, the central goal of which is to safeguard equal freedom and respect for all. The subject matter of moral philosophy is conceptualized as ahistorical, universal, and not relative to culture. Morality itself, as the subject matter of moral philosophy, is similarly understood as concerned with a narrow range of questions concerning interpersonal action, which are essentially disconnected from the broad range of things we individually find good and valuable.

Taylor himself is critical of the attempts to segregate a narrow realm of morality from a broader realm of value and the good life. In this he resembles many other Anglophone philosophers' writing in the 1980s: MacIntyre (1981), Murdoch (1997), Nussbaum (1990), and Williams (1985). The reason for his caution is the view that such a segregation of the narrow morality often rests on a denial of the fundamental dependence of a narrow morality on a larger evaluative framework. In order to understand our values and ourselves as evaluative beings we need to see the larger picture, its historical contingency and its plural sources in the past. In contrast to the modern conception, Taylor presents a picture where narrowly moral norms for action depend on and participate in a broader, historically formed framework of value, and where such a framework is necessary for human personhood and moral agency.

Taylor further argues that the project of formulating a purely procedural morality is incoherent, because it builds on quite specific values, which are the product of a range of historically specific developments over

the past two thousand years: the emergence of modern inwardness, individualism, the high valuation of freedom from constraints, the humanitarian concern for the well-being of all human beings. We need to look more closely here at this alleged incoherence.

A defining feature, in Taylor's view, of both our narrowly moral concerns (how we act toward each other) and the broader "ethical" concerns that have to do with the good, worthy, and meaningful life, is that we do not think that our judgments in these areas are matters of simple preference or choice. Our judgments are rather guided by values and principles that do not seem to be up for grabs. These are what Taylor calls "strong evaluations." He describes them as "discriminations of right and wrong, better or worse, higher or lower, which are not rendered valid by our own desires, inclinations, or choices, but rather stand independent of these and offer standards by which they can be judged" (1989, p. 4). Strong evaluations are evaluations of a higher order, which constitute our ethical framework. Ethical frameworks do involve features that may be considered to be universally human, such as restrictions on killing and harming others (Ibid., pp. 4–5). But since these "universals" are also culturally mediated and historically formed, there is reason to investigate our given frameworks of strong evaluations as historical phenomena.

Related to the notion of strong evaluations Taylor coins the notion of "hypergoods." These are "goods which not only are incomparably more important than others but provide the standpoint from which these must be weighed, judged, decided about" (Ibid., p. 63). It is emblematic for modern moral philosophy that morality itself is conceptualized by reference to some such hypergood: Kant's categorical imperative and Habermas' emphasis on universal justice are examples of this.

"Strong evaluations" constitute a weave of discriminations that provide us with orientation among our desires and inclinations. They are a necessary, defining feature of any narrowly moral as well as broadly ethical framework. Without an idea of higher order discriminations shaping our choices and providing criteria for evaluating them, we could not have human agency. Hypergoods, in their turn, are singular goods that are elevated to a status above all other goods. Not all ethical outlooks have hypergoods; that is, not all ethical outlooks involve a good that is placed above all others, as overriding and affecting all of our other, ordinary goods.

Yet hypergoods are a persistent feature of our modern moral world, as we know it. They can be both collective and individual. Liberal humanitarianism is a strong collective hypergood in modern societies, but it can

for individual persons be overridden by the value of artistic creation, scientific discovery, or even the pursuit of prosperity, where this alternative striving takes a role of a highest good, properly to be sought at the expense of all other goods. Hypergoods can be found in theories and public debates as well as in people's individual deliberations. Collective hypergoods are intimately connected to the idea that a society organized around the given good is (morally) superior to a society organized around some other good. As Taylor puts it:

> An ethical outlook organized around a hypergood . . . is thus inherently conflictual and in tension. The highest good is not only ranked above the other recognized goods of the society; it can in some cases challenge and reject them, as the principle of equal respect has been doing to the goods and virtues connected with traditional family life, as Judaism and Christianity did to the cults of pagan religions, and as the author of the republic did to the goods and virtues of agonistic citizen life. (Ibid., p. 65)

Not all ethical outlooks are in this way organized around hypergoods. Aristotle's ethics, in Taylor's view, is a case in point, seeking a comprehensive view of our different goods, without elevating any one of them to a status where it would rule supreme over others. Modern moral theories to the contrary, even while hiding their substantial evaluative commitments, are typically built around hypergoods that are meant to override all other evaluative considerations: utility, universal respect for persons, and so on.

Hypergoods, like strong evaluations, are historical and potentially transient. "To have a hypergood arise by superseding earlier views is to bring about (or undergo) what Nietzsche called a 'transvaluation of values'" (Ibid., p. 65). In these kinds of upheavals, previous constitutive values and the horizons of valuation that they belong to are superseded, and the old values may even be given a debased, immoral air or reinterpreted as "temptations." But a transvaluation is not once and for all, or permanent: The warrior ethic was superseded in Greek philosophy, in Christianity, in modern liberal humanitarianism, but it is still in many ways with us. Thus, again, our evaluative frameworks are complex and, especially when guided by hypergoods, often inherently agonistic. Nonetheless, these frameworks provide us with a kind of fundamental orientation, without which moral reflection and agency would be impossible. As Taylor puts it, "the claim is that living within such strongly qualified horizons is constitutive of human agency, that stepping outside these limits would be tantamount to

stepping outside what we would recognize as integral, that is, undamaged human personhood" (Ibid., p. 27).

Here the topic of "identity" emerges as central to Taylor's moral philosophy. Since *Sources of the Self* coincides temporally with the late-twentieth-century upsurge of identity talk, identity politics, and a popular culture of self-development, it may be useful here to say a few words about how Taylor's notion of identity is to be understood. It is not a matter of authenticity, or being true to oneself, discovering one's true me. Neither is it centrally a matter of self-making, something we choose, construct, or elaborate, for example, through choices of lifestyle and consumption. (Ideas of authenticity, self-making, a true self, etc., are rather specifically contemporary forms for talking about, making sense of, and shaping personhood.) Identity in Taylor's sense is rather something more rudimentary: an unavoidable orientation in evaluative space. To be a human being, grown up in a human society, is to be a creature for whom evaluative distinctions and values are given and omnipresent. These distinctions form hierarchies: We may value the making of economic profit, but consider it overridden by concerns of social justice. We may affirm the value of promiscuous sexuality and yet see it overridden in our overall judgment by the value of consistent monogamy. Our identity in Taylor's sense is our orientation in evaluative space, particularly regarding those values which for us stand highest and are of overriding importance. We gain our identities and evaluative frameworks by growing up in human societies, but communities are not evaluatively homogeneous. We can experience Nietzschean transvaluations, collectively or individually. We can be, and indeed often are, deeply conflicted. We can lose our sense of orientation to the point of insanity. But we cannot move out of the predicament of being someone in particular for whom certain considerations are constitutive, without losing our capacity for agency and choice. Thus there is no point beyond moral identities and horizons from which we could (even hypothetically) choose a set of values or principles.

Summing up, a distinctive feature of modern moral thought, according to Taylor, is that it embraces a quite particular hypergood (which is historically and agonistically formed, by superseding previous and other goods) and yet denies its allegiance to any particular good. This hypergood is liberal humanitarianism, the cherished idea that each individual human person is above all free and equal, each commanding the same fundamental moral respect: an idea with deep roots in our Christian tradition. But instead of consistently articulating this hypergood and acknowledging its place in contemporary moral, social, and religious

thought, modern moral philosophy, in Taylor's view, tends to cover it up by a programmatic inarticulacy about fundamental values. Values are hidden behind a procedural conception of ethics, which seeks to establish the right without reference to a substantial conception of the good. The roots of this proposed neglect are interestingly complex.

There are epistemological and ontological reasons for this inarticulacy. An important part of it has to do with the naturalism that predominates modern thought, where the world as investigated by the natural sciences is seen as paradigmatic for what is real. This naturalism affects our conceptualization of values in different ways. In a crude version it amounts to the denial of the reality of evaluative distinctions altogether or conceptualizes evaluative distinctions as mere preferences or likings. A more sophisticated version of naturalism considers values as in some sense real and as a matter of knowledge, but deriving their reality wholly from a given form of life, with a strict cultural relativism as a consequence (Ibid., p. 67). In either case, a substantial philosophical discussion about values and goods is rendered awkward.

There are also moral motives to the inarticulacy. Among these Taylor lists the appreciation of ordinary life against supposedly "higher" goods and the modern conception of freedom which suggest that we should be able to choose for ourselves in the realm of values and goods. Furthermore a certain reading of the modern appreciation of altruism and benevolence gives rise to the idea that we should, morally, focus on plain actions that benefit others, rather than dwell on the state of our souls and our relation to various goods. He also notes the desire for a fully universal ethics as a moral motive for the inarticulacy about goods (Ibid., p. 85).

But, notwithstanding its humane and egalitarian motives, the modern inarticulacy is, in Taylor's view, the source of a disquieting lack of intellectual self-understanding in modern moral thought. To be more precise, modern procedural moral philosophies (placing the right over the good, supposing that the question of right can be answered without discussion of goods) build on two denials. First they deny strong evaluations and moral situatedness, supposing that our moral discernment rests on some kind of unsituated reason. Second they deny their constitutive attachment to a historically formed hypergood (liberal humanitarianism), which nonetheless works as the half-hidden motor of their thinking and which they certainly do not think of as purely culturally relative. The theorists of a procedural morality lift their own historically contingent goods to the status of something universal and at the very same time hide their value-

character. The result is a truncated and confused view of the role of value and morality in human understanding.

One part of Taylor's solution to the philosophers' predicament is to trace the constituent parts of our modern ethical framework through history. In order to see what our form of understanding is, and what it is like, we need to see how it has come about. Here Taylor is on the same track with Foucault, but where Foucault's sources of our moral present are to be found in practices, institutions, the reorganizations of human activity, we find in Taylor's work a keen interest in the great men of Western philosophy—Plato, Descartes, Locke, Rousseau, and so on—along with a range of theological thinkers. In the works of this tradition we see the modern outlook taking form. In this trajectory of attention Taylor is certainly less radical than Foucault, but it does serve his purposes. The historical tracing of the coming to be of modern selfhood in this way has two important functions for Taylor. The first is that it disperses the sense of obviousness that seems for us attached to the modern idea of a person. Seeing how what we take for granted has evolved helps us to conceptualize it as something in particular and to see how it could have developed differently. We see the ideal in its complexity, with its plural roots, conflicting strands, and its varieties of modern manifestations. Thus it gives us means to a better self-understanding. This perspective is what he essentially shares with Foucault, although their narratives and focal materials differ.

The second function of the historical perspective is that it makes possible an articulation of what we find good and worthy in a framework of moral thought constituted by liberal, individualist humanitarianism. Investigating its internal tensions—between liberal emphases and humanitarian concerns, between unbridled individualism and a universal concern for persons, the private nature of modern man and his public responsibilities, Christian origins and secular developments—we come to a better understanding of where we stand in terms of value and where we may want to go. This is the second part of Taylor's solution to the philosopher's predicament: an affirmative articulation of a certain evaluative outlook. And this is one place where he differs importantly from Foucault.

Where Taylor's genealogy in its first role is purely in the province of descriptive ethics, such as I have sketched it out, it is in its second role something else. His affirmative articulation of a framework of value and personhood, while based on a richly descriptive account of historically contingent ethical thought, moves squarely in the province of what

Murdoch describes as the task to "commend a worthy ideal" (2001, p. 76). It thus plays a role parallel to that of normative moral theories, but in a very different way. The aim of articulation is to make sense of our moral world, so to say from the inside, where certain things matter to us deeply, other things abhor us utterly, and others again leave us indifferent. It is to bring our moral world into a kind of self-conscious order, seeking a conceptually lucid formulation of our own moral and spiritual world view.

Modern moral theories have sought to design a rational apparatus for providing basic and binding reasons for moral action, stating, for example, that actions are right by virtue of being in accordance with universal respect for persons or leading to the greatest happiness or being what the virtuous person would do. But Taylor emphasizes that *articulating a vision of the good* is not about providing basic reasons of this kind. "It is one thing to say that I ought to refrain from manipulating your emotions or threatening you, because that is what respecting your rights as a human being requires. It is quite another to set out just what makes human beings worthy of commanding our respect, and describe the higher mode of life and feeling which is involved in recognizing this" (Ibid., p. 77). The former kind of reason-giving is what moral theories normally ask for, preferably to be presented in a systematized account. The latter is a kind of complex picturing activity which seeks a compelling and inspirational account of moral life. These two are interrelated but different in kind:

> It is true that clarification on the second is closely related to the definition of the basic reason we invoke in the first kind of claim. Our conceptions of what makes humans worthy of respect have shaped the actual schedule of rights we recognize, and the latter has evolved over the centuries with changes in the former. But they are nonetheless distinct activities. They offer reasons in quite different senses (Ibid., p. 77).

What Taylor calls "articulation" belongs to the province of normative moral philosophy in the sense of presenting an ideal for the higher mode of life. But it does not answer, in any straightforward sense, the question of what makes an action right. It rather seeks to formulate, from within a rich and complex ethical tradition, a kind of "best account" of our ethical predicament. A "best account" in this sense is an account that makes the best available sense of our moral lives, not from some external, supposedly more objective point of view, but from within those lives: "What we need to *explain* is people living their lives; the terms in which they cannot avoid

living them cannot be removed from explanandum, unless we can propose other terms in which they could live them more clairvoyantly" (Ibid., p. 58). Articulation is about presenting a vivid and engaging picture of a good (or a framework of goods) and its place in our lives. It is not about presenting "reasons" that any suitably rational creature would accept or a "theory" to conquer other theories of the good and right. He notes that moral reasoning, as a branch of practical reasoning, "is a reasoning in transitions. It aims to establish, not that some position is correct absolutely, but rather that some position is superior to some other. It is concerned, covertly or openly, implicitly or explicitly, with comparative propositions" (Ibid., p. 72).

Affirmative articulation in this sense is in Taylor's view important as a matter of intellectual honesty and consistency: We need to verbalize rather than try to suppress the values that guide our understanding. But it also works as a means for moral inspiration. As Taylor puts it: "The central notion here is that articulation can bring us closer to the good as a moral source, can give it power" (Taylor 1989, p. 92). The point of articulation is to move us: A well-formulated and reflective account of the values that we already in some sense endorse can give us the strength to defend them. A good articulation of the value of equality empowers our struggle against inequalities. "The constitutive good does more than just define the content of the moral theory. Love of it is what empowers us to be good. And hence also loving it is part of what it is to be a good human being. This is now part of the content of moral theory as well, which includes injunctions not only to act in certain ways and to exhibit certain moral qualities, but also to love what is good" (Ibid., p. 93).

This idea of "the good as a moral source" and of inspiration in the moral life is not one of the easiest to incorporate into the context of late-twentieth-century or present moral philosophy, and it may seem, in this light, an awkward addition to Taylor's philosophy.[1] Yet, looking at his broader context it is not odd at all. It fits naturally with Taylor's Christian framework, and a secular, "Platonist," relative to Taylor's account, is found in the work of Murdoch (1992, 1997).[2] The ideas of articulation and moral sources are also familiar from the way many of us have, at some point, been morally or politically inspired by a theoretical or literary text, where certain values are vividly and coherently expressed. Some might say that this kind of inspiration may be a fact of life, but has little place in philosophy. Taylor, like Murdoch, would disagree, thinking that this is one of the central tasks of moral philosophy (though of course not the only one).

Where God as an object of moral inspiration and veneration has become unavailable, and the modern man has relinquished the idea of transcendent goods, Taylor notes that he may instead find a moral source, for example, in nature or in the human capacity to "face a disenchanted universe with courage and lucidity" (Ibid., p. 94). Murdoch, again, unabashedly operates in terms of a generic, "Platonic" Good, though one which is manifest in our everyday attention to people and things.[3] For both, contemplation of the constitutive good, be it generic or more specified, can inspire us to live and strive in accordance with our best understanding. As Murdoch puts it: "One might say that true morality is a sort of unesoteric mysticism, having its source in an austere and unconsoled love of the Good. When Plato wants to explain Good he uses the image of the sun. The moral pilgrim emerges from the cave and begins to see the real world in the light of the sun, and last of all is able to look at the sun itself" (Murdoch 2001, p. 90). Murdoch's elaboration of this image could be described as an experiential account of moral inspiration. For her the Good as an object of love and veneration is central to the moral life, empowering our efforts to think hard about what is good and right and do one's best. She comments on the related idea of "good as a transcendent reality": "Of course we are dealing with a metaphor, but with a very important metaphor and one which is not just a property of philosophy and not just a model" (Murdoch 2001, p. 91).

Murdoch is aware of being unfashionable in a philosophical era which emphasizes plain theories of uninspired moral obligation, but also consciously connects to a venerable tradition of moral thought. This tradition includes, not least, Kant with his awe at the starry skies above him and the moral law within. But a place, in morality and moral philosophy, for inspired awe, love, veneration of divinity, goods, principles or virtues is no longer self-given, and thus Taylor questions the idea of "moral sources" in terms of historical possibility: Are these "moral sources" a thing of the past or, quite like strong evaluations, an essential part of the equipment of modern morality and moral philosophy (Taylor, p. 93)? Well aware of the ways in which the modern philosophical sensibility speaks against such moral sources, his answer is nonetheless clear. We do have and need moral sources; something still plays for us a role analogous to the role played by God or Plato's Good. The importance of articulating a best account of our constitutive values supports our relation to such sources. Affirmative articulation is a kind of renewal that counteracts the flattening of our idea of moral life.

This is part of the reason why he has no patience with the procedural/normative tendency in modern normative ethics. But for the same reason he would not easily yield to a descriptive ethics in the sense I proposed above: the philosopher's nonnormative descriptions of moral forms of life. In fact his whole conceptual apparatus for explicating the moral life—moral situatedness, identity, strong evaluation, and hypergoods—presupposes that we cannot step outside morality in such a way that we would be philosophically interesting, clear about our motives, and "merely descriptive" in an evaluatively noncommittal manner. A moral philosophy cannot be ethically noncommittal, because a person cannot be ethically noncommittal, and the values and commitments of the philosopher will be present in his account of morality, in concepts, concerns, interests, and so on. This is a serious challenge that we need to address, and I will do so by looking at Taylor's critique of Foucault.

9.1 Taylor on Foucault (Or the Articulation of Value in a Descriptive Ethics)

The sharpest edge of Taylor's critique of inarticulacy about the good is directed at Anglophone moral philosophy, such as it has become in the late twentieth century. But interestingly enough, Taylor finds the very same suppression of constitutive values in what he calls the "neo-Nietzschean" philosophies of the time. The defining feature of these is in his view the adoption of a forced neutral stance in relation to the historically variant systems of valuation, moral thought, and moral practice. These philosophies stand for a refusal to affirm and identify with one's own situation in moral space and thus a denial of things upon which one at the very same time relies.

The primary case of this kind of philosophy, for Taylor, is Foucault. I will dwell for a moment on the contrast between Taylor's and Foucault's work here, because it is helpful for articulating the role of affirmative accounts of values in the context of a descriptive ethics. Wittgenstein and Wittgensteinian philosophers have, as we saw, insisted that philosophy has no role in issuing recommendations and that mere description should take their place (Wittgenstein 1998a, Winch 1989). But the practice of post-Wittgensteinian moral philosophy speaks of a rather specific understanding of this injunction: On the one hand, surely the philosopher as philosopher has no business in issuing normative commands or postulating evaluative hierarchies, but on the other hand (as Murdoch too constantly

reminds us), all accounts of human life contain deep moral commitments, in their choices of words, emphases, and subject matter and concerns. Foucault too, as we saw, was adamant on a morally noncommittal philosophy, perhaps seemingly at odds with the strong moral energy that drives it. (I will come back to this soon.)

On the question of the role of normativity in a philosophy concerned with moral matters, Taylor stands close to those analytic philosophers who in moral philosophy seek clarifying and consistently argued guidance for the moral life, but he realizes this ideal in a historically vigilant style which has much in common with critical theory. In this role Taylor (1984) both candidly and eloquently voices some of the central worries that a philosopher of the analytic bent are likely to have in relation to Foucault's work. The critical review article in which these issues are discussed was published five years before *The Sources of the Self* and can thus perhaps be read as part of the articulation of Taylor's own account of the sources of modern moral personhood. More than 30 years old and prior to both Taylor's later major works and the mass of the posthumous reception of Foucault, this piece is of course not representative of what could be Taylor's mature view on the matters he discusses. But its interest lies elsewhere, in the articulation of a general worry about a philosophy with moral implications, but without an explicit moral standing.

Taylor recognizes here an immediate affinity between Foucault's genealogical work and his own, in the formulation of a genealogy of modern personhood and its complex moral implications. But he finds Foucault's deferral or indeed denial of a normative or affirmative standpoint deeply problematic. Apropos Foucault's analyses of power and personhood in *Discipline and Punishment* and *The History of Sexuality, vol 1*, Taylor expresses the trouble as follows:

> [Foucault] dashes the hope, if we had one, that there is some good we can *affirm* as the result of the understanding these analyses give us. And by the same token he seems to raise a question of whether or not there is such a thing as a way out. This is rather paradoxical, because Foucault's analyses seem to bring evils to light; and yet he wants to distance himself from the suggestion that would seem inescapably to follow, that the negotiation or overcoming of these evils promotes a good. (1984, p. 152)

What troubles Taylor is a kind of paradox in Foucault's work. The kind of genealogical critique he engages in seems to give rise to and call for an affirmative articulation of certain values (freedom, humanitarianism). But he refuses to acknowledge the values inherent in his own critique and furthermore refuses to acknowledge, in the modern liberal order, any changes that would count as advances: "he adopts a Nietzschean-derived stance of neutrality between the different historical systems of power, and thus seems to neutralize the evaluations that arise out of his analyses" (Ibid., p. 162). We get a picture of different orders of coercion, but no means for arbitrating evaluatively between them. Taylor thinks that Foucault's insistence on a neutral stance toward premodern and modern forms of power/governance actually leads him to downplay significant qualitative distinctions between past and present forms of power. Modern forms of increasing self-regulation are not comparable with authoritarian coercion, and they do represent something that we have reason to prefer. In fact they are quite familiar, banal, and necessary and do not carry any previously unidentified form of threat of oppression.

> It is a truism of the civic humanist tradition of political theory that free participatory institutions require some commonly accepted self-disciplines. The free citizen has the "vertu" to give willingly to the contribution that otherwise the despot would coerce from him, perhaps in some other form. Without this free institutions cannot exist. There is a tremendous difference between societies that find their cohesion through such common disciplines grounded on a public identity and that thus permit of and call for the participatory action of equals on one hand and the multiplicity of kinds of society that require chains of command based on unquestionable authority on the other (p. 164).

Interestingly, Taylor here considers it obvious that certain evaluations *do* arise out of Foucault's analyses: that his work in fact affirms an enlightenment narrative of the modern age as an age of increasing freedom and reason. Thus he reads Foucault's refusal to affirm these values as a variety of the modern inarticulacy about values, parallel to the inarticulacy of the analytic philosophers.

Here we could say that it is Taylor's own view (of values in ethics, of articulation) that makes him unable here to see the things that are quite overt in Foucault's thinking: (1) his strong commitment to freedom as a central value (indeed a hypergood) and (2) the partly methodological nature of his refusal to consider modernity as a site of increasing freedom. Where the standard modern narrative sees in modern democratic institutions and

liberal policies a relaxation of coercive power, Foucault sees them instead as novel ways of organizing power, with a complex genealogy which can help us understand them. The initial difference may indeed be one of how Foucault and Taylor have experienced their contemporary world: as coercive or humane, and so on. But the point of Foucault's deferral of judgment is precisely that it can help us see the contemporary world—its institutions and practices—in terms that are not dictated by its overt ideological commitment to liberty: It will help us see our own forms of coercion and government as coercion and government.

The point of this deferral is never to suppress Foucault's own commitment to freedom as a central value: merely to interrogate our picture of our past and present as victorious paths toward its realization. The focus of his philosophy, and the part of it which I find particularly useful for moral philosophy, lies not in the affirmative articulation of a value or a framework of values, but in an exploration of the coming to be and the internal dynamics of our contemporary world of values, institutions, power relations, and regimes of personhood. The space from which Foucault conducts these inquiries is not a site of imaginary, self-deceiving neutrality, but rather a systematically worked out, moving trajectory of cultural, institutional, and indeed moral self-reflection and self-critique.

Nonetheless, Taylor is quite right in raising suspicions concerning what he sees as Foucault's suppression of his own guiding values. What we learn, most centrally, from Taylor and the conflict he stages between himself and Foucault is precisely a kind of vigilance concerning accounts of a moral and social order which attempt to take a "view from nowhere," because we are indeed always somewhere and we need to acknowledge where we are in order to understand what we are claiming. What we learn from Foucault, in contrast, is that discovering where we are (and where we might be going) may demand that we temporally and consciously seek ways to see our own forms of life and forms of valuation from a certain distance.

Mediating in the staged conflict between Taylor and Foucault—and investigating its various roots and implications—would be a demanding task for a book in its own right, and I will not attempt to go further into this here. The aim of describing this conflict for present purposes is to represent a central tension in any attempt to do moral philosophy in the descriptive mode. The descriptive task may require that we to some extent step outside (our idea of) our central evaluative commitments in order to investigate our forms of life. But we can never step out of our lives entirely,

in order to describe or assess them. Our concepts and ways or reasoning are imbued with value and worldview. Philosophical reasoning about morals in the descriptive mode is practical reasoning, "reasoning in transitions," aiming at orienting us in a world of evaluative distinctions and demands which are not of our own making. This insight, however, does not compel us, as Taylor would have it, to shaping moral philosophy according to the model of affirmative articulation. It can equally well take the form of a Foucauldian deferral of judgment, to the benefit of a novel conceptualization of our moral past and present. Somewhere between these two philosophical gestures—feeling the attractions as well as the risks of both—seems to me a very good place to begin a moral philosophy in the descriptive mode.

Notes

1. For a defense of Taylor's moral philosophy, but without the idea of sources see Laitinen (2008).
2. When Murdoch talks about "imaginative exploration of the moral life" she means something very similar to Taylor's "articulation" (1997, p. 97).
3. For my account of Murdoch's special brand of Platonism, see Hämäläinen (2013) and (2014).

CHAPTER 10

The "Merely Descriptive" and the "Empirical" Revisited

Abstract Hämäläinen returns to the apparent methodological conflict between the Wittgensteinian conceptual elucidations and the kinds of empirical and archival work suggested by Dewey and Foucault. She (1) discusses Stanley Cavell's defense of the Wittgensteinian procedure, (2) offers a critique of this defense, focused on the somewhat arbitrary rules it places on philosophical study, and (3) provides an analysis of what we can and should save of this analysis under the auspices of a broader descriptive moral philosophy.

Keywords Descriptive ethics · Empirical ethics · Staney Cavell

Having thus discussed the import of these four philosophers for investigating our moral forms of life, we can see a palette of ways of venturing into a philosophical descriptive ethics: (1) Dewey's proposed turn from attention to value toward attention to practices of valuation, (2) Wittgenstein's attentions to "how we live our lives in language," (3) Foucault's attention to historical practices and institutions, and (4) Taylor's historical tracing and articulation of central values.

Each of these philosophers has provided an inspirational model for moral philosophy in a descriptive mode, bringing forth our complex, contingent moral ways of life, rather than attempting to formulate a normative or metaethical theory. Each of these thinkers can be seen as

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N. Hämäläinen, *Descriptive Ethics*,
DOI 10.1057/978-1-137-58617-9_10

contributing to a philosophical anthropology in the realm of morals. They are different but complementary, none of them providing us with a complete recipe for moral inquiry, but each of them giving resources for richer and more self-aware ways of doing moral philosophy.

I will now return to the most central and difficult potential methodological conflict among the four philosophers discussed above: the contrast between the Wittgensteinian conceptual elucidations and the kinds of empirical and archival work suggested by Dewey and Foucault. I talk about this as a potential conflict, because it need not be perceived as a conflict or it may not actualize itself as a conflict in the particular work one sets out to do. Philosophers like Hacking, Taylor, and Michel de Certeau have drawn on Foucault and Wittgenstein simultaneously, and for philosophers like Putnam and Rorty, both Dewey and Wittgenstein are essential. But for our purposes of a descriptive ethics there is something deeply disquieting about the way the Wittgensteinian descriptive investigations are envisioned by himself, and by his followers, as distinct from and opposed to other forms of description of our ethical forms of life.

Wittgenstein, as we remember, was very particular about the nature of philosophical work, which was to be seen as *descriptive but not empirical, not hypothetical, and not theoretical.* Its methods and goals were to be clearly distinguished from those of the sciences. The description of our linguistic practices was not to be the description of a linguist or even of an anthropologist, but the attempts of the speaker himself to come to understand the practices he is involved in, especially where they may turn out to be dysfunctional or misunderstood, as in the case of what Wittgenstein called metaphysical language. When discussing Wittgenstein above I bypassed the peculiarity of this practice, by noting that much of the most vital and widely read work in post-Wittgensteinian ethics does not follow any strict procedure concerning keeping philosophy a purely conceptual enterprise, but takes exactly the freedom it needs. In order to draw a map of contemporary efforts contributing to a descriptive moral philosophy, it is enough that we register this work and its relative freedom in relation to more dogmatic interpretations of what a properly Wittgensteinian moral philosophy would be. We could perhaps forget Wittgenstein's insistence on the peculiar "conceptual" or "grammatical" nature of philosophical inquiries, if it were not for the fact that this insistence can teach us something important about what sets a descriptive moral philosophy apart from other descriptive moral studies.

I will in this chapter (1) provide a discussion of Cavell's defense of the Wittgensteinian procedure; (2) offer a critique of this defense, focused on the somewhat arbitrary rules it places on philosophical study; and (3) provide an analysis of what we can and should save of this analysis under the auspices of a descriptive moral philosophy.

The specificity of the Wittgensteinian practice, in contrast to an empirical study of how we speak in various kinds of situations, was elucidated by Cavell in the early essay "Must We Mean What We Say" (Cavell 1976). The context that prompted this elucidation was an early critique of ordinary language philosophy, following Wittgenstein and Austin, where reference to "what we should say when" (Austin 1956–1957) and how we normally speak were stock items. A worry concerning this practice, articulated by Benson Mates (1958), was that the ordinary language philosophers seemed to make up idiosyncratic rules concerning how we speak in various situations and were hostile to suggestions that people in fact do not speak quite as they claim. Mates was above all concerned with the verification of claims concerning ordinary language. Given the role of "how people speak" as a method for driving out unhelpful or misdirected philosophical questions and theories, the difficulty of agreeing on how we ordinarily speak, and the unclarity concerning the status of claims to ordinariness, seemed to be fatal for the practice, and an embarrassment for the ordinary language philosophers.

This prompted Cavell to articulate the two central tenets of the practice of ordinary language philosophy: the nature of native speaker competence and the nature of linguistic normativity. The contents of this debate are still a key to understanding post-Wittgensteinian philosophy in this ordinary language philosophy-vein. For our present purposes it provides a path toward negotiating between Wittgensteinian conceptual investigations and the empirical and historical inquiries of others. But before entering into the discussion, it is worth noting that this question concerning the relationship between conceptual and empirical investigations is equally a part of the contemporary controversy around x-phi. This again is due to an idea of philosophy that present-day post-Wittgensteinian philosophy shares with much analytic moral philosophy: the idea of philosophy as conceptual work understood in contrast to empirical work. The respective ideas of what conceptual work is are rather different in these two traditions, and in fact, on a closer view, they both exhibit internal plurality in this respect. For early analytic philosophy it was conceptual analysis in a quite literal sense, a dividing into smaller and more basic parts.

In contemporary analytic moral philosophy conceptual work is done in terms of theory: a theory of love, a theory of intentionality, trying to elicit what "love" or "intentionality" really mean. In ordinary language philosophy it can be the tracing of a concept which is approached as immune to definition or alternatively an attempt to trace the various ways in which we speak about a phenomenon.

The case of analytic ethics and empirical input is under debate in current discussions around x-phi and I will not return to that discussion here. The relationship between conceptual investigations and empirical input in post-Wittgensteinian ethics is a more urgent matter for the purpose of articulating a broad descriptive approach to ethics. Post-Wittgensteinian philosophy is a central part of present-day descriptive work in ethics—in philosophical anthropology and the ethics-literature discussion—but its self-understanding as "conceptual" may dictate a procedure which is not always representative of the best work in this tradition. The idea of philosophy here is narrower than the actual practice at its best, and it is the practice that I want to tap for the purposes of descriptive ethics.

So let us look at the dispute around ordinary language philosophy in practice. As Cavell puts it: "[Speakers of English] do not, in *general*, need evidence for what is said in the language; they are the source of such evidence. It is from them that the descriptive linguist takes the corpus of utterances on the basis of which he will construct a grammar of that language" (Stanley Cavell 1976, p. 4). The distinction between "native speaker" (grammatical and conceptual) competence in a language and empirical knowledge about a language, introduced here, is an obviously useful one. It helps us to keep the spontaneous, practically learned capacity of a native speaker apart from the explicit knowledge that a linguist gathers in his work. The former constitutes the source of the material which the latter is to describe. The former (grammatical competence) is independent from the latter (the linguist's knowledge), although the linguist's data are frequently used to issue official recommendations, which again have an impact on language use. The latter is wholly dependent on the former: At least in the case of natural languages there is no linguistics without native speaker competence; linguists are there to describe the contents of this competence.

Cavell's point is that the native speaker's knowledge of his language is not essentially empirical, not a matter of evidence, but more like a basic capacity, and that consulting this capacity in philosophy is no stranger

than consulting empirical knowledge about language. The philosophical work envisioned by Wittgenstein is mainly directed at the inner workings of this capacity. Wittgenstein believes that many philosophical problems are at least partly caused by entanglements in our linguistic practice. We start using words in ways where they fail to mean, that is, they fail to do any kind of substantial work, fail to communicate. We could suggest that the age-old and supposedly profound question “What is truth?” is a question of this kind. There is no such “thing” in the world as “truth,” and thus any attempt to explain the nature of “truth” is bound to fail. To be rid of this assumed “thingy” character of “truth” we need to pay attention to how we would normally use the word and what kind of work it does in these uses. We need to look at our capacity to use the word in meaningful ways, from our own point of view as speakers, users of language.

Consulting a linguist or “counting noses” in order to sort out this kind of case would be beside the point, in the sense that the linguist’s external knowledge about frequencies of use, and so on, could not bring us back to our own internal grasp of where the word works properly. Thus, insofar as Wittgenstein’s philosophy is about helping us to find our way about in our own native speaker’s competence, we must be able to distinguish this competence from mere “knowledge about” a language and realize that we “know” things about our own language in a way quite different from the way the linguist knows his target language.

So, to illuminate the nature of our linguistic and philosophical entanglements we need to remind us, from the inside, so to say, of how our language works when it works well. We need to describe, as accurately as possible, such unproblematic use. But this “descriptive work,” combined with a prohibition against any “empirical” evidence to the contrary, is precisely what triggers the feeling in the ordinary language philosopher’s interlocutor that he is being taken for a ride. “What do you mean by mere description, when you are actually describing a use of language which is far from ordinary?”

Furthermore, the prohibition against empirical evidence includes not only evidence concerning language use, but typically also evidence concerning the things talked about. Conceptual inquiries are, following Wittgenstein’s lead in § 109, considered as inquiries where what we need to know is already there in our native speaker’s competence. This prohibition invites Raimond Gaita, for example, to postulate that it would be absurd to say that spiders may have a rich inner life, because “rich inner

life" is conceptually not applicable to spiders, and furthermore, that this is not a case to be solved by learning more about spiders (Gaita 2003; Hämäläinen 2012).

It is easy to see how the practice can be misused, precisely to enforce a given, even rather tendentious description of "how we speak," producing Kafkaesque scenes where an innocent interlocutor is bullied into conformity with a judgment about ordinary language use that to him seems just plain wrong. But there is something important missing in these scenes of enforced conformity, and that is the tentativeness of Wittgenstein's appeal to community. If Cavell's discussion shows some naivety concerning the practical implementation of the "what we should say when," it is because he counts on an idea of a philosophical conversation as a *search for a community of judgment*. The philosopher's appeal to ordinary language is, in this view, always to be seen as an appeal to the interlocutor to accept the offered picture of "ordinary" or to help modify it in a way which rings true to the partners in conversation. The practice of referring to how we ordinarily speak relies on the possibility of finding a shared, satisfactory picture of ordinary language use—of what words mean or how they work—that the participants in a conversation can agree upon. It is about finding common ground. Its philosophical power lies in the recognition, by each participant, of a given understanding of ordinariness and a shared understanding of some uses, for example, "metaphysical" ones, as strained or potentially empty. In this view, there is no philosophical gain in enforcing one's own conceptual point of view on an interlocutor. There is no philosophical value in "knowing" ordinary language use, in a conversation where one's conversation partner is recalcitrant. This aspect of the practice is difficult, because it seems to go against the seemingly commonsense idea that philosophy is an argumentative practice, where the target is to convince one's interlocutor of a truth that one holds.

The central point of comparison for Cavell (1976, pp. 86–96) is what he sees as Kant's idea of aesthetic judgments: These are neither the subjective likings nor dislikings imagined by emotivists, nor the observation of obvious factual features of the world, but rather invitations to a community of judgment. To say before a painting "this dash of red right here is beautiful" is not to ejaculate mere liking, nor to state a fact about the colors on the canvas, but to invite to a shared appreciation of the work.

What is important here is the constitution of a "we" that is inclusive and inviting. We can briefly compare this "we" with Foucault's, which exhibits

both central differences and an interesting similarity. Foucault's central question in relation to the "we" concerns its genealogy: What are the institutions, thought structures, and practices that have come to constitute us as the kinds of creatures we are: modern human beings? This requires an understanding of what it is like to be part of our wide community of modern individuals, but the studies to which Foucault directs his reader are empirical and historical, data and texts. They take a look at us from the outside, so to say, turning our world into an object of historical and empirical observation. But the boundaries of the "we" (as in Wittgenstein's case) are not drawn in advance. The "we" is a form of address, an invitation to those who recognize themselves as children of a certain past and members of a certain present.

Wittgenstein's "we", if we follow Cavell's interpretation, is somewhat differently put together. He relies on the possibility and facticity of a "we" in order to talk about aspects of our shared life that tend to be distorted by theory. There is no story of becoming, no institutional basis for drawing boundaries. But, like in the case of Foucault, there is an appeal to the reader to share: in this case to share a mode of judgment, to unlearn theoretical habits, and to consult one's first-person judgment as speaker of a language and participant in a range of linguistic and moral practices. If we understand the call to philosophical community as a task strictly internal to our competence as (native) speakers, there would supposedly not be a case of learning more about our language or the things it refers to, because we already know, as competent speakers of a language, what we need to know. We may merely, sometimes, need to make it visible for ourselves, insofar as we are not always transparent to ourselves in words and deeds.

But this cannot be right, because our concepts and our linguistic practices are neither homogenous nor stable. They evolve under the pressure of changes in our ways of living and also under the somewhat lighter pressure of constant use. They are, as Wittgenstein put it, part of our natural history, but also part of our history simpliciter. The conceptual absurdity of the claim that man has been on the moon discussed by Wittgenstein in *On Certainty* (1969) is vulnerable to the subsequent fact that man actually has been on the moon. Have our concepts of man, moon, or space travel changed? Or have the concepts remained the same while our knowledge has changed or our world has changed? I think we should not answer these questions with too much confidence. Conceptual change is the reorganization of our worldview, local or global. In this

process we rely on both agreement and disagreement, sameness and heterogeneity of understanding and judgment.

The "conceptual" nature of philosophy does not provide a case for excluding empirical evidence, either about language use or about the objects talked about, because both are natural parts of the negotiation of common ground that is necessary for a working ordinary language philosophy. Empirical evidence concerning language use is called for when the mode of speaking proposed as ordinary is in fact quite idiosyncratic or shaped by the philosopher's theoretical concerns. Empirical evidence concerning the objects of discussion is relevant when a proposed conceptual truth turns out to be problematic on the basis of different knowledge of the object itself. A prohibition against empirical concerns is a specific form of sabotage of the search for a common ground; it is the postulation of conceptual "bedrock" at a stage when not half of the resources for a negotiation of communality have been used.

But the validity of Wittgenstein's insistence on descriptive/conceptual/grammatical investigation is not here ultimately at stake. What I have been concerned with here is the habitual way in which it is contrasted with the (broadly) empirical, and how the empirical is rendered suspicious under its auspices. Philosophy is a conceptual endeavor; it is about working on the ways we think about and articulate the world. Its target is not the accumulation of knowledge, but the articulation of a helpful, functional, and novel way of conceptualizing some aspect of our relation to and view of the world. This work encompasses two distinctive gestures. One is the broadly Wittgensteinian recovering of "what we did not know we knew," which is present in the practice of "what we say when" as well as in the attention to literature as means of getting a grasp of our own form of life. The other is the multifaceted endeavor to complement and alter our understanding of our world through the accumulation of knowledge about our forms of life, institutions, practices, and language. Wittgensteinians have a certain tendency to remain too persistently within the project of recovering what we in some sense already have. My current use of Foucault and Dewey might seem to come with the opposite danger, of doing away with philosophical orientation in the eclectic accumulation of historical and sociological data. But for Foucault, Dewey, and Taylor, as for Wittgenstein, the philosophical question of "where we live" and the difficulty of seeing what is most ordinary, are constantly foregrounded as central to philosophy.

Allowing that philosophical investigations into our forms of life and our lives in language may include empirical considerations, that our

conceptualizations are sensitive to empirical input, is necessary in order to liberate the potentials of Wittgenstein's work for the use of moral philosophy. Nonetheless, we need to have here a very clear understanding of what empirical, experimental, or experiential input does, and what it cannot do. Empirical input, or "facts" of one kind or the other, cannot provide answers to philosophical questions. But empirical, historical, linguistic knowledge can transform the discursive situation in a variety of ways. The modern self, traced back to its various historical roots, gives us a very different philosophical discussion of selfhood than an idea of the human self as ahistorical, universal, and constant. A linguist's perspective on the use of a disputed concept may reveal at the center of a philosophical debate a highly, though unintentionally, idiosyncratic use of a word. Scientific research about animal cognition may fundamentally alter things taken for granted about the human–animal divide in philosophy of mind or ethics. A different set of insights will make different questions interesting and different ideas plausible for the people involved in philosophical inquiry. A given historical account of selfhood may make essentialist ideas of selfhood look problematic. Seeing the idiosyncrasy of one's concepts may prompt a different philosophical analysis of them. Acquiring a better understanding of animals is likely to make some positions concerning their moral claims look tendentious and dishonest. All of this is, of course, a matter of various judgments on the behalf of the reflective communities of philosophers or others engaged in puzzlements that we recognize as philosophical. But we need to be very cautious with the gesture of ruling the empirical out of philosophy, because in this ruling out, intellectual mistakes are easily made, and we end up with an isolated and truncated form of conceptual exercises, instead of philosophy.

Regardless of the different methods and materials suggested by our four philosophers, there is one central idea that they share regarding the role and nature of philosophy. For each of them philosophy is an activity which proceeds from where we stand in thinking, and proceed from there in a reflective and self-critical manner, to bring order, depth, and clarity to our understanding of the various issues in which we are engaged. This means that philosophy for them is an essentially nondogmatic endeavor, in the sense that its aim is not systematic doctrine or the fixation of the best theoretical perspective. It is rather a continuous activity to accompany our changing lives: Philosophical questions change when our lives and concepts and practical problems change. These philosophers are of course not alone with this idea: It is shared by philosophers of many persuasions.

But the way they combine this point of view with a vigilant investigation of our forms of life—the conceptual, moral, metaphysical, social, historical, existential place in which our questions present themselves as pressing—gives us a good idea of what moral philosophical inquiry can be when it is not the pursuit of normative or metaethical theory, or some of the activities derived from these. Moral philosophy in this sense is a fundamentally self-critical activity, not one where we seek to convince our interlocutors of the rightness of our theory, but one where our own moral concepts, certainties and uncertainties, and valuations are under scrutiny. It is always fundamentally preliminary, incomplete, and in progress.

Here I want to quote Mary Midgley, who notes that "philosophy, in spite of all its tiresome features, is not a luxury but a necessity, because we always have to use it when things get difficult" (Midgley 2005, p. xii). Philosophy, in this sense, is not an exclusive domain for philosophers, but a dimension of thinking: a work that the thinker brings to bear on his own thinking, its presuppositions, its conditions, and its subject, the thinker himself.

CHAPTER 11

Descriptive Ethics and the Philosopher

Abstract Hämäläinen discusses the philosopher's distinctive role in the furtherance of a descriptive ethics. Drawing on Max Weber she argues that the current academic specialization and compartmentalization is a natural consequence of a certain idea of expertise and scientific work. But the kind of specialization that may well be in place in the sciences is ill suited to philosophy, because it severs the philosophical work from the real-life intelligence and concerns of the philosopher. In contrast to this, the descriptive moral philosopher must often relinquish the benefits of scholarly and technical expertise, and be a dilettante and an intellectual.

Keywords Specialization · Max Weber · Expertise in ethics

Moving toward the stage in this text where a conclusion should be drawn from these reflections, we may want to ask two things: What are the specific tasks of moral philosophy in the descriptive mode? And how are they to be distinguished from the tasks that belong to anyone reflectively engaged in an inquiry on morality and the good? The answer should be short enough, but it cannot be formulated without taking us back to the idea of the moral life and the limitations of analytic moral philosophy, which was formulated in Chaps. 3 and 4: the idea of the moral life as a present, contingent weave of practices, ideas, language, emotions—and

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N. Hämäläinen, *Descriptive Ethics*,
DOI 10.1057/978-1-137-58617-9_11

the predicament of a moral philosophy which places our attempts to understand this weave in a subsidiary position.

Every moral philosopher is throughout his life implicated in the incessant talk and activity of a human society, which through life continues to influence and remake his real-life judgments and evaluations. Yet, like people in general, the moral philosophers of our time have only a limited understanding of the practices they (we) are implicated in and are only to a limited degree able to see them, as it were, from the outside. Moral philosophers often have no more than average educated knowledge of common moral beliefs, moral conflicts, moral education, or moral history. And thus they often have little more than an average understanding of the complex backgrounds of their own judgments. There are of course great exceptions to this rule: philosophers who have taken special interest in the varieties of lived morality in human societies. But these types of interest are more or less seen as optional paths of academic specialization, not essential issues for any philosopher interested in the workings of morality or normativity more widely. This kind of specialization may indeed be necessary—considering the mass of academic writing that is produced today—but it comes at a certain cost: selective sight, partial blindness, inability to learn from others.

The contemporary ethics/literature discussion, mentioned earlier as one of philosophy's windows to the outside world, came about through the efforts of people who just started including narrative literature, in a range of ways, into their philosophical discussions. A number of individual philosophers, most notably Nussbaum, have explicitly argued for the inclusion of literature into ethics and attempted to lay down the terms and conditions for such an inclusion. But the real force of literature in ethics has nothing to do with a settled methodology for the use of literature in moral philosophy. What is important is (1) that the use of literature has been made ok and (2) that this "ok" occasionally produces writings that make a real difference to how we think, open up new possibilities, and help us reconnect our philosophical work to our sprouting, everyday vernacular thinking. (Which texts make a difference in this sense can vary from reader to reader.)

Similarly, attention to the various nonliterary, nonphilosophical texts, that carry and express our everyday normative practices, does not require that we can provide definite answers to our various methodological questions. (I talk about texts here, because they present an easily available kind of material for the philosopher, of whom we should perhaps not expect actual fieldwork.) There are of course a number of questions that can be

asked: How do these texts reflect or affect actual moral understanding? How should they be considered: as examples, as thinking in their own right, as conglomerates of oppressive norms? What do we seek in them: reality, psychology, guidance? What is a good way to analyze them? Do women's magazines and popular self-help books require different ways of reading? And how about more "serious" documents like, say, information brochures for new parents, alcoholics, people with eating disorders? Or peer-to-peer texts, blogs, and web discussions? Such questions are important, to keep us aware of the variety of concerns that may form our inquiries.

Yet a meaningful attention to morally interesting texts, contexts, and everyday practices will not be brought about through answering these questions in the abstract. One answer to the question how to make these texts more available is rather simple: Write about them, include them, take an interest. Methodology, as much of one as we need, will ensue. I think this is true, but we must also see that it is a simplification, because the difficulty is a structural one and this structure is kept in place by certain structures on a larger scale: the structures of academic expertise. Let me explain.

One obstacle to a more inclusive approach to the study of our moral lives is constituted by a cluster of persistent ideas: that the current level and kind of real-life input into moral philosophy is sufficient, that moral philosophers do know a great deal about things moral and can work accordingly, and that what is excluded is excluded for a good reason (as trivial, as nonphilosophical, sociological, historical). Often it is obvious, though, that academic moral philosophers pursue academic inquiries which are hermetically sealed off from their own various, lively and untidy real-life knowledge about morality, moral attitudes, and moral changes. Attention to moral and normative practices in our present time would help philosophers to bridge the gap between their real-life knowledge and their professional knowledge.

The other thing that stands in the way of an inclusive approach is moral philosophy's mode of organization, around the activities of normative theory and metaethics, both of them pursuits which are impervious to input from the study of cultural phenomena and practices. If a moral philosopher recognizes the first encumbrance and seeks to complement his understanding of morality through a descriptive, empirically informed study of society and cultural phenomena, he will immediately be met by the second encumbrance, because his study will place itself at the margins of moral philosophy. For a young scholar it makes much more sense either to move sideways into another discipline (social theory, cultural studies,

science and technology studies, communication studies, comparative literature) than to persist in the margins of analytic moral philosophy. Alternatively he may find an academic home in post-Wittgensteinian philosophy or, say, phenomenology, adopting the paraphernalia for a successful career in these contexts. In either case, his efforts will be largely lost for analytic ethics. And thus this discipline, which parades as moral philosophy simpliciter, will remain largely unaware of its dissident members and their reasons for doing things differently. Unless, that is, they manage to brand themselves, as the x-phi researchers have done. As noted, the relative success of moral x-phi has been made possible by the fact that these researchers have a quite specific research program: the use of experimental methods to test aspects of people's moral thought and behavior. This is not a solution for bringing about the change that I am looking for, because philosophical, descriptive ethics is not a specific kind of study for which a methodology can be formulated. It includes all the ways in which philosophers participate in an empirically informed study of "the moral beliefs and practices of different peoples and cultures in various places and times."[1] It contains many different philosophical projects and gestures, different ideas of the respective roles of empirical study and conceptual inquiry, different ways of understanding the normative/ evaluative dimension of moral philosophy. It is not so much a direction of moral philosophical study as it is a different principle of assembling the philosophical study of morals: one that will allow the moral philosopher to know more about morality.

Am I thus suggesting that the pursuits of moral theory or metaethics are useless and potentially harmful for our understanding of morals? This was indeed the view of late-twentieth-century "anti-theorists," like Annette Baier (1985), Peter Winch (1987), and D. Z. Phillips (1992). It also seems to be the view of some historians of philosophy, although they tend to be politely less vocal about it. But this is not the point that I want to make—or rather, making this point would not be very helpful. R. G. Collingwood notes in *An Essay on Philosophical Method* that a philosopher should always be "confessing his difficulties," because good philosophy is "essentially confession, a search by the mind for its own failings and an attempt to remedy them by recognizing them" (Collingwood 2005, p. 210). Following this very strictly would produce a rather obnoxious kind of philosophy, but I think it is sometimes essential to be very frank about how one sees things, even if the result is not a polished position. My critique of main stream moral philosophy, its

priorities, its internal organization, is a case for confessing difficulty. To me it seems that losing moral theory and metaethics (if such a thing could be imagined in today's philosophy) would be genuine and quite handicapping losses, because these discussions and traditions contain a variety of views, ideas, and insights that would quickly be reinvented ex nihilo if they were erased from the students' curriculum. And they would not be improved by this procedure: I have seen the most ardent anti-theorists invent their own kitchen varieties of monistic, explanatory, normative moral theory, without realizing what they do and how they link to past work. Nonetheless, the contemporary array of technically sophisticated theories of moral conduct, moral ontology, and so on seems to be of quite marginal interest, if we think of the moral philosopher as a person who seeks to understand the phenomenon we call morality or ethics. This does not mean that I would consider them pointless or irrelevant: just that they do not add up to any very helpful picture of the moral life. It is too easy to imagine a student who is philosophically talented and interested in morality above all, but who is forced to turn away from contemporary moral philosophy because it does not feed her interest.

As I emphasized at the beginning, however, the roots of the current situation of moral philosophy are not to be sought in any particular failure on the part of the philosophers, but in a more general problem related to the specialized nature of modern academic endeavors and how the nature of academic research goes together with the nature of philosophy. This is not a new problem. As Max Weber noted concerning academic contributions, in his "Wissenshaft als Beruf" in 1922: "A really definitive and good accomplishment is today always a specialized accomplishment. And whoever lacks the capacity to put on blinders, so to speak, and come up to the idea that the fate of his soul depends upon whether or not he makes the correct conjecture at this passage of his manuscript may as well stay away from science" (Weber 2009, p. 135).

To do science or research in modern times means for Weber to be enthusiastically engaged with details of a whole, which one knows well and handles systematically, but which one does not control and which one may be unable to evaluate or even grasp as a whole. Gone is the time when the man of science could be a universalist, at home in different sciences as well as in the arts. This is the case not only for the natural sciences, but also for the social sciences, which, in Weber's time as in ours, are porous and constantly open up toward other forms of knowledge and inquiry. "All work that overlaps neighboring fields, such as we occasionally undertake

and which sociologists must necessarily undertake again and again, is burdened with the resigned realization that at best one provides the specialist with useful questions upon which he would not so easily hit from his own specialized point of view" (Ibid., pp. 134–135). Weber does not deny a place in the sciences for work which strays from the path of strict expertise; he rather emphasizes that such work must be done as well. What he denies this kind of work is the status of definite contribution. The dilettante, he notes, may well contribute to the furtherance of science, but "he is usually not in the position to control, to estimate, or to exploit the idea in its bearings" (Ibid. p. 136). And we are all dilettantes outside our arduously claimed areas of expertise.

What is the significance of this sociologist's reflections nearly a hundred years later, and for philosophy? Philosophy had in those early decades of the twentieth century shed a few of its branches to new fields of science. What was left of philosophy, too, harbored a hope of entering "der Sicheren gang einer Wissenschaft"—a hope which has now long since been abandoned. Nonetheless, the study of philosophy today is more than ever defined by the demand for definite contributions in relatively narrow fields of expertise. The main reason for this is the sheer quantity and easy availability of research, for anyone who has access to a university library. Peer-reviewed journal publishing, which today is the best supported and most prestigious form of publishing, is a form which strongly encourages small and expert contributions. To make such contributions one had better read the right things, which means that one must figure out what the right things are. And since so many things could be right, there need to be relatively strict rules of relevance that are implicitly or explicitly negotiated within research communities.

Analytic moral philosophers know their own current debates well, but may be completely oblivious of the recent history of their discipline or the ways their questions and themes overlap with work in other traditions of contemporary philosophy, not to speak of other disciplines. The work in analytic philosophy is organized around contemporary professional debates that act as proxies for the perennial questions of Western philosophy. Thus the question of the nature of morals can be translated into a debate over realism, noncognitivism, or quasi-realism, which gives quite a lot to read for any student, but is not unmanageable. Pragmatists, phenomenologists, Wittgensteinians form their own communities which exhibit a strong scholarly emphasis on reading the old and new classics in one's own tradition. In this honorable mode of scholarly philosophizing, one may

choose to work on a big philosophical question through a prominent philosopher: on the nature of language through Wittgenstein, on embodiment through Merleau-Ponty, on love through Murdoch, on skepticism through Cavell. The debate or scholarly context provides thinking with its framework, its trials, and its distinctiveness. The fact that other scholars have mined a text before me enriches my reading indefinitely. Similarly, a thorough acquaintance with the moves that have been made in a field of analytic philosophy will certainly make our contribution more technically sophisticated, definite, and distinctive. But academic specialization has two central drawback that may be fatal to the pursuits of philosophy. The first one is the branching off of discussions that have a very short memory and little knowledge of other ongoing discussions in philosophy. A case in point is the way ordinary language philosophy has been cut away from the general consciousness of analytic philosophers, to the point that rather confused ideas of what it is are circulated as facts.[2] We saw an example of this in the Knobe case, where basically no one seems to be aware (or acknowledge awareness of the fact) that the "radical" musings of Knobe are perfectly unsurprising in branches of philosophy which parted ways with mainstream analytic philosophy no earlier than the 1960s (if they ever did). Academic practice is bolstered by comfort in the boundaries of one's own subfield and a professional, willed ignorance of other things.

The second drawback is the way academic specialization severs the philosophical questions from their place in our everyday lives, from that moment of initial asking, and all the extra-philosophical stuff that this asking is connected to. Murdoch famously noted that "there is a two-way movement in philosophy, a movement towards the building of elaborate theories, and a move back again towards the consideration of simple and obvious facts. McTaggart says that time is unreal, Moore replies that he has just had his breakfast. Both these aspects of philosophy are necessary to it" (2001, p. 1). We could borrow and modify this observation by noting a movement between philosophical contributions made deep within an academic discussion and the consideration of the very same things outside the academic setting. If the movement is arrested and we stay put within the academic discussion, the exercise will lose both its stringency and eventually also its *raison d'être*.

Cavell has in a related spirit talked about some philosophical, theoretical, scholarly pursuits in philosophy as deflections from the initial questions or issues that gave rise to philosophizing (Cavell et al. 2008). The problems of philosophical skepticism are according to Cavell philosophical

transformations of a fundamental doubt and longing for guarantees that may beset us in quite ordinary situations of life (Cavell 2003). Here I do not take a stand on Cavell's discussion of skepticism, but I find the idea that some philosophical problems might be deflections from our ordinary or real-life problems a very useful one. This is something we may often ask when doing philosophy: What are the roots of a given philosophical question in ordinary life? And what does the philosophical work do to the initial problem? Are the things done in and through philosophizing in any way useful for addressing the prior questions and issues? Does the philosophical discussion or account allow us to travel the distance between theoretical discourse and the questions that may have given rise to it? Does the theoretical discourse, in a given situation, have its own role and legitimacy, independent of how it can be brought back to the real or the ordinary? Or is it an activity wholly dependent, for its meaningfulness, on the possibility of bringing it to bear again on questions external to academic philosophy?

The idea of philosophical deflection is useful for making clear how complicated the relationship between philosophical-theoretical discourse and questions in ordinary life may be. Cavell observes that philosophical questions and quandaries are already there in our ordinary experiences. This is certainly the case with morality, where the impulse to question the basis and interconnections of different norms and ideals is close at hand, quite regardless of any familiarity with the practices of philosophy. The relevant untheoretical or pre-theoretical counterpart to moral philosophy is the complex web of real-life morality that we seek to clarify, administer, and even modify by means of theoretical discourse. The question to be posed again and again, necessary for philosophy, is: How does the theoretical discourse relate to our moral lives, frameworks, culture? Also: What are our moral life, frameworks, culture like?

We may think that this is obvious, that we do this kind of questioning all the time, when doing moral philosophy. But the movement back and forth, in and out of theoretical discourse, is not without problems for the professional philosopher, because philosophy, like other areas of academic research, sorts under the specialization and compartmentalization of scientific work, where a definite and distinctive contribution is always a local one. Within academic, theoretical, or scholarly work the philosopher is a scientist of sorts, competent in the literature and methodology relevant for the academic discussion at hand. But the two-way movement, necessary for philosophy, also necessarily thrusts

the philosopher out of the zone of professional expertise, to questions, concerns, and insight in relation to which he is a dilettante, a non-professional, untrained, and unsystematic thinker. Philosophy pursued merely in the professional and theoretical mode may be technically complex and highly challenging, but it quickly loses both its specifically philosophical nature and its capacity to matter to our thinking outside philosophy.

A particularly charming passage from Wittgenstein may help us raise the question concerning the value of pure expert contributions in philosophy. "Compare the solution of philosophical problems to the gift in the fairy-tale that magically appears in the enchanted castle and when one looks at it outside in daylight, it is nothing but an ordinary piece of iron (or something similar)" (1998b, p. 11). Whether or not we share Wittgenstein's overall misgivings concerning purported solutions to philosophical problems, most of us can probably think of some cases where the glittering solution to a problem loses all its charms when brought out into daylight. At an interdisciplinary conference we may find ourselves utterly unable to explain why some given problem is so important in our field and why a given answer is so good, not because there are technical details too complex to explain, but because neither question nor answer quite survives the transfer into another setting. I do not evoke the image of the enchanted castle here in order to dismiss specialized philosophical and theoretical work. Expert discourse—technical, theoretical, and scholarly—is necessary for the furtherance of philosophical knowledge, and philosophy, like other academic disciplines, requires a capacity, on behalf of its practitioners, to be captivated by details and small movements within a given body of understanding. It requires its own enchanted castles into which we are introduced, more or less successfully, through arduous study. Without the enclosures, the specialized practices, the magic surrounding them, we would not have science, scholarship, or advanced thinking, which is always necessarily thinking in a tradition. But the more consistently we stay within the enchanted castle of philosophy, the poorer will our ability be to judge and to weigh what we have found. The perfect scientist, at least in the natural sciences, can be a narrow expert through and through, but the perfect philosopher must frequently be a dilettante in Weber's sense, reaching out to think and to judge in areas outside his expertise.

Of course neither "the ordinary" nor "the academic" constitute distinctive, clearly bounded categories. Philosophy can also forge new

habitual ways of traveling the distance between the academic and the ordinary, so that this movement loses its reflective character. We can, in various philosophical discussions, find examples of external insights that have been domesticated into the professional competence and the expected repertoire. The discussion on ethics and literature has domesticated certain ideas about ordinary moral experience, such as the importance of perceptiveness. Reference to the role of perceptiveness in a given literary work, which some 30 years ago worked as a kind of excursion out of the realm of philosophical expertise to "ordinary experience," has now been transformed into a basic tenet of the philosophical discourse around ethics and literature. Similarly, some pieces of psychological research offered in the late twentieth century a window out of the professional tenets of philosophy, but have to a certain extent been domesticated, so that they belong to the basic philosophical repertoire. Such new acquisitions in the bodies of professional philosophical discussions may be beneficial for the discussions to which they are appended. Both narrative literature and insights from cognitive psychology can provide representations of morality that are illuminating in the role of philosophy's "other," as ways of reaching after knowledge about our moral lives. But they do not bring fresh new air to the inquiry, if the same insights are used repetitively. A habitual professionalized movement between, say, ethics and narrative renderings of moral experience does not replace the necessary two-way movement between philosophy and "the ordinary."

Hanna Arendt noted in *The Human Condition* (1998) that it is the task of every great thinker to present an uncompromising original vision of the world. But no matter how attractive we may find this image of originality, we should not be too eager to embrace the insipid role it leaves for the rest of us. It is not a privilege of the great to be occasionally a dilettante dabbling outside the academically known, while the rest of us labor professionally within the given philosophic–scientific discussions. The practice of philosophy does not require philosopher stars who manage to establish new ways of moving beyond the given academic debate (although these may have an important role too), but rather ordinary philosophers who are able and willing to travel the distances between philosophy and ordinary life again and again on their own, in the most lowly and unglamorous manner, seeking philosophical guidance in their own evolving experience.

Let us suppose that we all have a mobile, developing, multifaceted vernacular of thought, which we use when engaging in discussions over

politics or a movie or child rearing, for example. It is not unaffected by what we do and learn professionally, within our scientific persuasions, but more than this it is shaped by the various other forms of life in which we participate. It is the medium of much of our nonprofessional thinking, a medium where we are at home when we are not performing any given scientific belonging. It is the language within language in which we can express disappointment with what academic philosophy as a whole has offered us, or air worries concerning the unemployment rate. If we can localize such a language for ourselves, we are well prepared for the two-way movement of philosophy. Much of the descriptive endeavor of moral philosophy must be pursued in this vernacular; this endeavor must be based on our ordinary ways of negotiating our ordinary concerns. It requires a relaxation of the scientific mindset, if such a thing is possible.

Philosophy as a modern scientific vocation encourages us to make small, distinctive, professional contributions that are easily understandable to our peers, but often impenetrable for others. This is not a bad thing as such, but a tendency in philosophical work that must be kept in place and complemented with a variety of observations that belong to the vernacular, that are extra-scientific, sometimes tentative, and crude. Perhaps the philosopher's distinctive role in a descriptive ethics does not lie in a specific set of philosophical questions, the reading of philosophical texts, or the participation in philosophical debates, but rather in the role that personal, vernacular reflection, personal vision, has even in the most humble research tasks. The philosopher's task in the multidisciplinary endeavor of descriptive ethics is to be the jack of all trades, who does not have a clear methodology, but who vigilantly and self-critically investigates his own concepts, beliefs, and background assumptions whenever "things," in Midgley's phrase, "get difficult."

An attempt to individual and collective self-scrutiny could include the asking of questions such as the following: What does my/our inquiry "know" about morality? What kind of data does my/our system allow for? What did I just feed into that tube? As Murdoch famously noted: "A narrow or partial selection of phenomena may suggest certain particular techniques which will in turn seem to lend support to that particular selection; and then a circle is formed out of which it may be hard to break" (Murdoch 1997, p. 76). I would also like to borrow a methodological injunction from Hacking, who writes that "I help myself to whatever I can, from everywhere."[3] The immediate trouble with this is that we will need to know or figure out what to do with a new selection of

materials and assumptions; we need to be more independent and take both the selections made by others and procedures tried out by others less for granted. There is no proper place for normal science in philosophy. The immediate reward is that we can make moral philosophy matter more for our everyday moral, prudential, and existential concerns.

Notes

1. This is the formulation from the Web-Encyclopaedia Britannica quoted in the introduction.
2. For example, Soames (2010), in an influential introduction to contemporary philosophy of language, seems to hold that ordinary language philosophy is a (failed) theory of language. But as Hacking (1975) notes, language, for the philosophers of the linguistic turn, was not the object of study but a medium which we need to understand in order to get at all the things we use language to talk about.
3. In full: "What role should social studies have in historical ontology? This is precisely the kind of methodological question that I find useless. I help myself to whatever I can, from everywhere" (Hacking 2004, p. 17).

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N. Hämäläinen, *Descriptive Ethics*,
DOI 10.1057/978-1-137-58617-9

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