

## **Later Wittgenstein on moral good: realism without the postulation of moral properties or naturalistic reduction**

Oskari Kuusela

Realism but not empiricism in philosophy, that is the hardest thing (MS 164, 67).

In his lectures in 1933 Wittgenstein questions the widely accepted assumption in moral philosophy regarding goodness as a quality or property that is present in all cases where we correctly judge an action as morally good. As I construe the alternative account he proposes, moral concepts do not speak about properties that good actions have in addition to their non-moral properties or features in terms of which they are identified as the actions they are. Relatedly, Wittgenstein rejects the account of the use of ‘good’ as a predicate, conceiving ascriptions of goodness as attributive instead, whereby the sense in which an action is good depends on the action, so that different good actions may be good in different senses. What emerges is an account of the use of moral locutions as intimately bound up with non-moral concepts and descriptions, whereby judgments about the applicability of moral concepts to cases are justified in terms of such non-moral descriptions. This account can be described as realistic, but without the postulation of special non-natural or natural moral properties or a naturalistic reduction. Because Wittgenstein does not assume that there must be something common to all instances of good, his account is also well-suited to do justice to the complex unity of moral concepts. Although he does not develop the point, what Wittgenstein says about good seems to apply to other moral concepts too, including the so-called thick concepts.

## 1. Wittgenstein on goodness

Wittgenstein raises a question about the description of actions as good in a pocket notebook from the early/mid 1930s: ““This action is good” [...]. When an action is completely described, is it then a matter of experience that it is good??! Criteria!” (MS 156a, 43r; 1932-4, dating unclear) This question is discussed in more detail in his lectures in 1933<sup>1</sup>, where he further elaborates it and its motivation as follows:

Suppose you say “Good is a quality of human actions and events”. This is apparently an intelligible sentence. If I ask “How does one know an action has this quality?”, you might tell me to examine it and I would find out. Now am I to investigate the movements making up the action, or are they only symptoms of goodness? If they are a symptom, then there must be some independent verification, otherwise the word “symptom” is meaningless. Now there is an important question which arises about goodness: Can one know an action in all its details and yet not know whether it is good? (AWL, 34)

As in the notebook, Wittgenstein contrasts here two ways of accounting for the use of ‘good’ and the verification of judgments regarding the goodness of ‘human actions and events’. On one account the ‘movements making up the action’, that is, the features or details of the action that make it the action it is<sup>2</sup>, are regarded symptoms of its goodness that indicate the presence of the quality of goodness.

---

<sup>1</sup> Edited notes were published by G.E. Moore (1954 and 1955) and Alice Ambrose (1979). More recently Moore’s complete notes have been published by Stern, Rogers, and Citron eds. (2016). Although the style of Ambrose’s and Moore’s notes is different and Moore’s more detailed, their mutual consistency suggests that they give a reliable account of what Wittgenstein on goodness. (For discussion of the different set of lecture notes, see ‘Editorial Introduction’ in Stern, Rogers, and Citron 2016.) It is possible that Wittgenstein jotted down the remark quoted first as part of his preparation for the lectures, as he sometimes seems to have used his pocket notebooks. In the absence of evidence this remains conjectural, however.

<sup>2</sup> By the features or details of an action I will understand features such as that someone jumped into cold water risking their life to pull out a drowning person, or that they took time off their schedule to go to the pharmacy for another who could not go because of risk to their health. As I articulate the Wittgensteinian account, such features, which in everyday life we use to determine the identity of an action – i.e. what someone did – may also include the agent’s intentions and motives, not just its external features or ‘the movements making up the action’, for example, that the person intended to help or that they were motivated by friendship rather than a reward. Wittgenstein’s question is then to be understood in

But as Wittgenstein explains, if the features of an action are merely symptoms for its goodness, there must be another independent way to identify or verify what goodness is. Otherwise, ‘the word “symptom” is meaningless’. This is because symptoms are connected with whatever they are symptoms of only as a matter of contingent experience. In order to know what counts as a symptom for X one must know what an X is, i.e. what the criteria are for being an X or for the truth of a judgment that something is an X, because what counts as a symptom for X depends on what X is. For example, one must know what rain is in order to be able to take the wetness of streets as a symptom for it, and likewise in order to regard noise as an indication that a party is going on nearby one must know what kind of events parties are. Similarly, in order to regard the features of an action as symptoms that indicate its goodness one must have an independent grasp of goodness. It is also noteworthy that appeal to symptoms cannot definitely verify that an action is good, because symptoms are only associated with goodness by experience. For example, whilst friendly demeanor may generally be a symptom of actions that are morally good by virtue of being helpful, friendly demeanor is not what makes a helpful action helpful and good, and therefore not essentially connected with such actions.

Before proceeding to the second account of the goodness of actions with which Wittgenstein contrasts the account just outlined, a few words regarding his distinction between symptoms and criteria are in order. As this shows, in making the preceding remarks Wittgenstein ought not to be read as assuming or claiming that there is a clear cut or easily establishable distinction between criteria and symptoms. As he explains, this distinction is often not clearly drawn in actual language use, and this need not be a problem as such. His key points regarding this distinction are summarized in the following passage from roughly the same time:

---

this way: knowing the action ‘in all its details’ or possessing ‘a complete description’ of it in this sense, can one ‘yet not know whether it is good’? We might be in such a good epistemic position only rarely in real life, but the question here is a logical or grammatical one, i.e. what it is to judge actions morally, not what people actually do as a matter of empirical fact or how successfully they do it (cf. Kant 1997, 4: 407-408).

Let us introduce two antithetical terms in order to avoid certain elementary confusions: To the question “How do you know that so-and-so is the case?”<sup>3</sup>, we sometimes answer by giving ‘*criterium*’ and sometimes by giving ‘*symptom*’. If medical science calls angina an inflammation caused by a particular bacillus, and we ask in a particular case “why do you say this man has got angina?” then the answer “I have found the bacillus so-and-so in his blood” gives us the criterion, or what we may call the defining criterion of angina. If on the other hand the answer was, “His throat is inflamed”, this might give us a symptom of angina. I call “symptom” a phenomenon of which experience has taught us that it coincided, in some way or other, with the phenomenon which is our defining criterion. Then to say “A man has angina if this bacillus is found in him” is a tautology or it is a loose way of stating the definition of “angina”. But to say, “A man has angina whenever he has an inflamed throat” is to make a hypothesis.

In practice, if you were asked which phenomenon is the defining criterion and which is a symptom, you would in most cases be unable to answer this question except by making an arbitrary decision *ad hoc*. It may be practical to define a word by taking one phenomenon as the defining criterion, but we shall easily be persuaded to define the word by means of what, according to our first use, was a symptom. Doctors will use names of diseases without ever deciding which phenomena are to be taken as criteria and which as symptoms; and this need not be a deplorable lack of clarity. For remember that in general we don’t use language according to strict rules—it hasn’t been taught us by means of strict rules, either. We, in our discussions on the other hand, constantly compare language with a calculus proceeding according to exact rules (BB, 24-25; cf. PI §§79, 354; Z §§438; TS 213, 264v, 489; my footnote).

The distinction between criteria and symptoms is therefore put forward as clarification whose point is to help us avoid philosophical confusions rather than a principle which Wittgenstein claims actual use of language use to be governed by, and to which speakers ought to always adhere to. Nevertheless, the distinction is important, and in philosophy we may sometimes need to draw it sharply even when it is not clearly marked in everyday use (Z §§465-476). In Wittgenstein’s philosophy this distinction corresponds to the distinction between grammatical statements or rules, including definitions, and contingent factual statements. Whilst the expression for a statement about criteria is a grammatical rule that can be used to clarify the meaning of a term, the expression for a

---

<sup>3</sup> Note the correspondence with the question ‘how does one know that an action is good?’

statement about symptoms is a contingent true/false factual statement (cf. Kuusela 2008 113-114 for the distinction between rules and statements of fact). Thus, an explanation of how a proposition is verified or what the criterion for its truth is constitutes a ‘contribution’ (Beitrag) to its grammar that clarifies its meaning or use or an aspect thereof (PI §353; cf. AWL, 27; MS 115, 72; TS 213, 267r). For example, the explanation that a person’s having angina is verified by establishing that she has a certain bacillus in her blood explains the meaning of ‘angina’, and contributes to the grammar of ‘angina’ by establishing the bacillus as the criterion for the truth the statement ‘This person has angina’. (I give examples relating to goodness below.) Let us now return to Wittgenstein’s discussion of goodness:

[...] can one know the action in all of its details and not know whether it is good? That is, is its being good something that is independently experienced? Or does its being good follow from the thing’s properties? [...] The question in ethics, about the goodness of an action, and in aesthetics, about the beauty of a face, is whether the characteristics of the action, the lines and colors of the face, are [...] a *symptom* of goodness, or of beauty. Or do they constitute them? (AWL, 33; cf. MWL, 333)

The second account of goodness with which Wittgenstein contrasts the first one is outlined here. On this account, the features of an action are not merely symptoms of its goodness but constitutive of it. The difference from the first account is that constitution is an internal as opposed to an external contingent relation, and the proper expression for such a relation is a grammatical statement. This is again exemplified by the definition of angina in terms of the presence of a bacillus in the blood, whereby the relation between the bacillus and an angina is treated as an essential internal relation, rather than an external contingent one like the inflammation of throat. Similarly, if doing so and so constitutes a good action, then doing so and so is a criterion for an action being good or for verifying or judging correctly that an action is good. On this account we can then say (cf. the preceding quote) that the goodness of an action follows from its properties or is entailed by them. (If this use of

‘follow’ and ‘entail’ seems objectionable, the point can be put as follows instead: the judgment that the action is good follows from or is entailed by the description of the features of the action.) Thus, if the action has such and such features or properties it counts or qualifies as good. This then is not merely a hypothesis based on something contingently associated with goodness, but it clarifies the grounds on which the action can be judged to be good, and in this sense contributes to the grammar of ‘good’. Accordingly, if one knows the action ‘in all its details’ and the action does meet the criteria of goodness, then it is justifiably judged to be good, because this is what counts for an action of this kind to be good.<sup>4</sup> Notably, although it is contingent that anyone ever did an action of this kind, given the action and its properties, the judgment about its goodness is not merely an empirical contingent statement, but it expresses a necessity. That is, if doing so and so counts as good (meets the criteria for goodness), the action of doing so and so is good by necessity, by virtue of being the action it is.

That we have an independent grasp of the quality of goodness which enables us to identify an action as good is of course the standard view in moral philosophy. Such an independent grasp could be based on the comprehension of, for example, a Platonic form or some other principle, such as the Kantian moral law or the principle of utility. (In the lectures Wittgenstein contrasts his view with Plato (AWL, 34; MWL, 195, 332).) However, Wittgenstein’s suggestion that the particular characteristics of an action *constitute* its goodness questions this assumption. A very important difference between the two accounts is that on the traditional account goodness is a genuine quality or property shared by the instances where it is present. (It might be, for example, the property of action’s having been done out of good will, being virtuous, or that it maximizes utility.) On the

---

<sup>4</sup> The use of ‘verification’ here is meant to be consistent with Stanley Cavell’s criticism of the use of the notion of criterion to do anti-sceptical work. As Cavell emphasizes, criteria tell us what it is for something to be so and so, but cannot guarantee that something actually is so and so (Cavell 1999, Pt.1). Here I will not be concerned with scepticism, however, and assume that it is possible to know what features an action has. But Wittgenstein’s formulation about knowing ‘an action in all its details’ is important (AWL, 34 quoted above). If this is known – which it might not be in many or most actual situations (cf. section 2 below) – the value of the action is settled.

account recommended by Wittgenstein, by contrast, goodness might be something different in different cases. He explains this point with reference to beauty, but it can be taken to apply to goodness too, because ‘Practically everything I say of “beautiful” applies in a slightly different way to “good”’ (MWL, 339; cf. AWL, 36).

a cannot be a symptom of b unless there is a possible independent investigation of b. If no separate investigation is possible, then we mean by “beauty of face” a certain arrangement of colors and spaces. Now no arrangement is beautiful in itself. The word “beauty” is used for a thousand different things. Beauty of face is different from that of flowers and animals. That one is playing utterly different games is evident from the difference that emerges in the discussion of each. We can only ascertain the meaning of the word “beauty” by seeing how we use it (AWL, 35-36; MWL, 333).

It is important that that ‘beautiful’ and ‘good’ apply to ‘a thousand different things’, does not mean that the words ‘beautiful’ and ‘good’ are ambiguous or polysemous. Rather, what is in question is the unity of goodness, i.e. whether the cases that fall in the extension of the concept of goodness constitute a simple unity definable with reference to something common to all of them, i.e. the property of goodness, or whether the unity they constitute is more complex, not accountable in terms of an overarching definition. For, as Wittgenstein argues, besides the traditionally assumed mode of simple conceptual unity, there are other more complex modes of conceptual unity, such as family-resemblance (cf. PI §§65 and Kuusela 2020). Hence, even though, for example, a kind action and a courageous action might be good in different ways, and their goodness might not depend on any shared features, this does not prevent them belonging to same unity and belonging in the scope of the concept of moral goodness. It is a false dichotomy that either the moral good is the same quality/property in every case or instances of good do not constitute a unity. As Wittgenstein explains:

One way of looking at Ethics is to say that the meaning of “good” must be what is common to all things we call “good”.  
[...] \\ I said this was far too simple. \\ And also that, though this is wrong, it doesn’t follow that [...] it has several different meanings: for there may be *a* connection, though not that of having anything in common (MWL, 332; cf. AWL, 34; my square brackets).

Nothing would be more astonishing than if “good” had the same meaning always, considering the way we learn it. \\ So it may be very difficult to find anything in common between 2 uses of “good”, but there will be gradual transitions from one to the other, which take the place of something in common (MWL, 325; cf. AWL, 33; cf. PI §77).

[Good] is used in different contexts because there is a transition between similar things called “good”, a transition which continues, it may be, to things which bear no similarity to earlier members of the series. We cannot say “If we want to find out the meaning of ‘good’ let’s find what all cases of good have in common”. They may not have anything in common. The reason for using the word “good” is that there is a continuous transition from one group of things called good to another (AWL, 33; my square brackets).

As I have argued elsewhere, Wittgenstein drops later the explanation of the unity of family-resemblance concepts in terms of transitions between cases, characterizing their unity in terms of criss-crossing similarities and kinships instead, i.e. in terms of more specific similarity-based transitions. Nevertheless, he seems to retain in the *Investigations* the view expressed in the preceding quotes that the instances of moral goodness constitute a family of cases, commenting there on the difficulties this creates for those looking for ‘definitions that correspond to our concepts’ in ethics and aesthetics (PI §77; MS 140, 33/PG, 77). Having discussed Wittgenstein’s account of good as a family-resemblance concept in detail elsewhere, I leave this to the side (Kuusela 2020). However, I maintain that we may regard it as, not only his view in the 1930s, but his mature view that instances of moral good constitute a more complex unity – a family unified by a network of criss-crossing similarities – than moral philosophical theories have traditionally assumed. This allows that instances falling under the same concept may have no common features, but are connected through

intermediate cases. Importantly, if Wittgenstein is right, there is no overarching account of moral good that can be expected to cover all its instances, or even all instances of good actions, contrary to what the virtue ethical, Kantian and utilitarian theories have assumed. Consequently, if we want to understand what moral goodness is, we need to look at a range of cases, and not try to explain those cases in terms of some independent general account of goodness of the kind that Wittgenstein rejects as ‘far too simple’ (MWL, 332, quoted above).

Rather than identifying actions as good in terms of something common to all instances of goodness, and which is independent of any particular cases in this sense, on Wittgenstein’s account an action is identified as good on the basis of its features, and whether the action on this basis meets the criteria for being good. Here the sense in which an action is good partly depends on what action is in question, and thus different actions might be good in different ways. As Wittgenstein explains: ‘The way in which you use “good” in particular case is partly defined by the topic you’re talking of. \\ Each way in which A can convince B that x is good, fixes a meaning in which “good” is used – fixes the grammar of the discussion’ (MWL, 325). What he means by fixing the meaning in which ‘good’ is used or the grammar of the discussion can be understood in terms explained above. This is to explain how the action in question can or must be understood as meeting the criteria for goodness, in other words, how its goodness or the truth of a judgment to this effect can be verified, or on what grounds the action can be recognized as good, which explains what goodness means in this case. Such an explanation then contributes to the grammar of ‘good’ by clarifying how the particular case at hand can be understood as good. This dependence of goodness on the case at hand can be further clarified through a discussion of Wittgenstein’s rejection of goodness as a quality or property.

## 2. Wittgenstein's rejection of the account of goodness as a quality or property

As part of his discussion of goodness Wittgenstein questions the view that goodness is a quality or (we can also say) property. Evidently, if goodness can be something different in different cases, it follows that it is not a specific quality/property that all instances of good, or even just good actions, share. This still leaves open the possibility that that goodness would be a complex variable property of some kind, but Wittgenstein questions this too. He explains this point with reference to beauty: ‘How do I know that a face is beautiful? [...] \\ If all the shapes & colours are determined, is it determined that it is beautiful? [...] \\ If it must be beautiful, then there’s a great confusion in calling beauty a quality – an indefinable quality. \\ A table has the quality “brown”, only if it might have been “red” instead.’ (MWL, 333) Given Wittgenstein’s view that ‘practically everything’ that he says about beauty applies to good too, he can be interpreted as similarly intending to contrast his account on which the features of an action constitute its goodness with the more usual account of goodness as a property of quality. But what then is the ‘great confusion’ in taking goodness to be a quality or property?<sup>5</sup>

As Wittgenstein notes, offering colours as examples of genuine properties, a table might be brown or red, and so on. Whichever colour it has, however, the object of which the quality/property is predicated has an independently fixed identity just as the property does. Accordingly, on a standard account of properties, the object or subject of predication does not modify the property, but

---

<sup>5</sup> Wittgenstein’s mention indefinable quality may be intended as a reference to Moore’s *Principia Ethica*, although Moore of course talks about goodness not beauty. To comment on this briefly, it seems that Wittgenstein’s objection to Moore would be that nothing is achieved by concluding from the failure to find a definition of goodness that it is indefinable. The problem is that this still leaves us without an overview of the functioning of the concept, and this is what we need for solving philosophical problems relating to it (RPP I §160; cf. PI §182). From this perspective non-cognitivist responses to Moore’s open question argument that conclude from the indefinability of good that the concept does not speak about anything in the world, but expresses a non-truth-evaluable attitude, seem hasty at best.

only the property modifies the object.<sup>6</sup> By contrast and as we have seen, on Wittgenstein's account the sense in which an action is good depends on the case at hand. Consequently, not only does the alleged quality/property of goodness modify the object/subject, but the object/subject also modifies the quality/property, so to speak. Different kinds of good actions (or even more obviously persons or states of affairs in contrast to actions) may therefore not be good in the same sense (even though there will be transitions or criss-crossing similarities between such cases). On this account, the different cases then do not share the quality/property of goodness in the sense of a certain specific quality/property comparable to a certain shade of red which might be shared by more than one object. But if so, 'good' does not function like a predicate, and it is misleading to treat it as such. Relatedly, 'is good' cannot be understood as a function applied to an argument, insofar as a function remains the same when applied to different arguments. Clearly, this is so at least in certain important cases. It would make nonsense of arithmetic if the function of +2 changed depending on which number it is applied to.

It might be possible to introduce a notion of a quality or property to account for cases such as goodness is according to Wittgenstein. The important point nevertheless is that as long as the notions of object-quality, object-property, substance-accident and at the level of language, subject-predicate and function-argument, are understood in their traditional and usual sense, goodness is not a quality, property or an accident, expressible by means of a predicate or a function – or so Wittgenstein maintains. Here a different, positive way to express this point is to say that on Wittgenstein's account 'good' is used, not predicatively, but attributively. This means that when an action is judged for its goodness one needs to take into account the particular action it is. The judgment does not simply connect two things, goodness and the action independently understood, as in the case of predication.

---

<sup>6</sup> There are cases that seem to be exceptions to this, like a red or blue face, and red or white wine which are not red, white or blue in quite the usual sense. However, it is not clear that such cases really constitute exceptions. They might instead be considered as specialized cases in that 'red wine', for example, is used as a name for a particular drink, not a description, where the object modifies the property.

(When redness is predicated of a table the notions of redness and table are independently understood, rather than in relation to one another.) As Peter Geach (1956) explains the notion of attributive use, for example, a big flea is big as a flea, not both big and a flea. Consequently, from something being a big flea we cannot infer that it is big, just as small elephant is still a big animal. In other words, a flea is big for a flea and an elephant is small for an elephant.

Likewise, on Wittgenstein's account, a good action is good in the way that the action it is can be good.<sup>7</sup> For example, a kind action is good in the way in which kind actions are good, and a courageous action in the way that courageous actions are good. Unlike a kind action, a courageous action might involve violence, even killing, and still be good, whilst a kind action presumably could not involve violence or killing and qualify as a kind action and therefore good. This indicates a difference in the way the two kinds of actions are good. (I do not mean to suggest, however, that courageous actions are always good in the same way. For example, the goodness of a Gandhi-style non-violent courageous action might differ from the goodness of a violent courageous action in a relevant way.) As Wittgenstein also notes, ‘The words “beautiful” and “ugly” are bound up with the words they modify, and when applied to a face are not the same as when applied to flowers and trees. We have in the latter a similar “game”’ (AWL, 35). Similarly in the case of two actions, by applying ‘good’ to them we might be playing two similar but not exactly the same language-games. It is also worth noting that although I have in the preceding only spoken about actions, there are even bigger differences between cases where we apply words such as ‘courageous’ or ‘just’ to actions on the one hand, and to persons on the other. Additionally ‘just’ can also be applied to states of affairs, for example, whether a social institution is just. Moral concepts may thus be employed in a variety of

---

<sup>7</sup> As one should expect, there seem to be moral cases corresponding to the inference about flea. For instance, whilst an action of reparation for some damage might be described as good, it also makes sense to deny this on the grounds that it would be better if the damage had not been done and no reparation were needed. Thus, the action is good only relative to its circumstances, not as such. Accordingly, if a person does not feel gratitude towards an action of reparation, this need not be understood as ingratitude.

ways, with different language-games being played with them, depending on what non-moral concepts they qualify.

Here it is also important that the relation between the alleged object of predication and the presumed moral or aesthetic predicates is an internal one, i.e. one of constitution, rather than an external contingent relation. As Wittgenstein explains, if a by knowing the features of a face I also know it is beautiful, then ‘beauty is inherent in an arrangement of colors and shapes’ (AWL, 36). Similarly, we might regard goodness as inherent in an action provided it has features that justify judging it good. This is important because it shows that knowledge of the goodness of the action is not, on Wittgenstein’s account, knowledge of some additional – abstract, perhaps indefinable – property or quality of the action. Rather, it is the usual non-moral features of the action in its circumstances that make it good, such as that the action consisted of jumping into cold water at the risk of one’s life to pull out a drowning person. This is important because it releases us from the need to postulate special non-natural or natural moral properties that actions somehow have in addition to their non-moral features on the basis of which we identify them as the actions they are. Instead, on Wittgenstein’s account we can say that an action is good by virtue its non-moral properties that entail its goodness and justify a judgment about the action as good. Here there is then no need to postulate special moral properties that would make moral judgments true. Nevertheless, Wittgenstein’s account can be described as realist in the sense that here the justification of a judgment concerning the value of an action depends on whether the action in fact does possess relevant non-moral properties. The judgment is in this sense responsive to reality, and objectively so, given that criteria for the use of moral concepts are not something we can simply make up and yet be understood, and that actions objectively possesses certain features, such as whether it involves jumping into cold water at the risk of one’s life.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> Wittgenstein’s account of morality is sometimes interpreted as relativistic. According to Glock, Wittgenstein’s view is that ‘Ethical judgements are not responsible to reality, and do not contradict each other in the way empirical propositions

Now, there may be various detailed characteristics of an action that are relevant (or irrelevant) for judging its goodness, and moral judgment also involves judging what features are relevant for its evaluation. I take this to be part of what Wittgenstein means when he says that the different ways in which someone may convince another about something being good fix the meaning or grammar of ‘good’ in a particular case (MWL, 325; quoted above). Obviously, such an explanation ought to be focused on features of an action that are relevant for morally judging it. Nevertheless, when the action is known in relevant detail, its goodness is settled too – to the extent that it can. I see no reason to maintain that there could not be controversies and indeterminacy about this, and nothing in Wittgenstein indicates that a correct moral judgment should always be obvious and agreed upon. Rather, his view is that moral arguments are inconclusive, because they involve an attempt to make a person see things in a certain way, and there are no conclusive arguments that can change a person’s point of view if they resist it (see Kuusela 2017a and 2017b for discussion). Correspondingly, a typical way to fail to correctly judge a case is to lack knowledge or to ignore some of its details which may also be a matter of focusing on features that are not morally relevant or not the most relevant for morally judging the case.<sup>9</sup> As noted, while such details are contingent genuine properties of actions, Wittgenstein’s view is that once those contingent features are known, it is no longer contingent whether the concept of goodness applies, but the features entail whether it does apply. Here the notion of relevance is important again, however. If the features that are relevant for judging the goodness of an action are ignored or downplayed, the conclusion about the value of

---

do’ (Glock 1996, 110). Although space does not allow the discussion of this issue, this seems to be in direct conflict with the interpretation outlined here. As I have argued elsewhere, I see no basis for a relativistic interpretation in Wittgenstein’s texts (Kuusela 2017a, 55ff.).

<sup>9</sup> It seems that in moral cases one might be in a bad epistemological position in more than one way: a) One might lack knowledge concerning the facts pertaining to an action. For example, one might see someone slapping another, but not know what happened before, i.e. what might have justified the slap, wrongly concluding that the receiver of the slap was wronged. b) One might have all the relevant information but be prevented by one’s own moral corruptness from piecing the facts together correctly. The two types of failure are not exclusive. For example, jumping to a wrong conclusion in the first case might be due to one’s moralistic attitudes that stop one from finding out about the facts before judging. (The two ways to fail can be regarded as Wittgensteinian centres of variation to be used as objects of comparison to organize our knowledge of relevant facts about moral language use. For the notion of a centre of variation, see Kuusela 2008, 172–174 and 2019, 172.)

an action may be wrong. (Accordingly, downplaying or emphasising specific features of one's action or pretending they were or were not present are typical ways to try to make one's action look better.)

Further, the notion of relevance is also important for seeing that although Wittgenstein explains goodness as dependent on the features of an action or the facts pertaining to it, his account is not an attempt to reduce moral evaluations to statements about such facts or to statements about features of actions. Here it is significant that there may be various ways in which an action meets or fails to meet the criteria of goodness, and it may not be immediately obvious how it does meet those criteria. Understanding how an action does or does not meet the criteria of goodness may thus require clarification (in the preceding sense of contributions to the grammar of goodness or 'fixing the grammar of the discussion'), even changing one's point of view whereby the action appears in different light due to a different emphases on its features. For example, perhaps the most relevant feature of an action is not, after all, that it involved stealing, contrary to what one first thought. This might be eclipsed by its other features, such as that those stolen from did not suffer from the theft, and that stealing served the purpose of preventing children from starving, not the agent's self-interested goals. This illustrates how there may be various characteristics of an action that are relevant – or irrelevant – for judging its goodness. Crucially for the issue of reduction, however, judging which features are relevant or irrelevant is to already engage in moral judgment-making, given that a correct judgment must take into account the actually morally relevant features of an action. Thus, considering facts pertaining to a case in order to morally judge it is an irreducibly moral activity. As one might say, we are here considering the facts in light of goodness, i.e. whether the criteria for the application of the concept of good are met, or whether doing so and so qualifies as doing something good. Clearly, this is not consistent with trying to reduce moral knowledge to supposedly morally neutral knowledge facts.

Finally, it is noteworthy that, although he does not discuss this, Wittgenstein's account seems not only to apply to goodness or the so-called thin moral concepts. Similar considerations seem to

apply to virtue concepts and so-called thick moral concepts more broadly. For example, an action cannot qualify as courageous without having certain kind of more specific characteristics. But then it seems questionable that courage would be a quality or property over and above the genuine features of the action that are the basis of judging the action as courageous. Relatedly, perhaps different kinds of courageous actions are not courageous in exactly the same way (cf. the example of violent vs. non-violent courageous action above). Thick concepts and virtue concepts might thus also be understood on the model proposed by Wittgenstein as relating to internal properties of actions, rather than referring to genuine properties of actions. Consequently, we can also acknowledge that they might have a complex unity.

### **3. Wittgenstein and debates in analytic moral philosophy**

By way of conclusion and to connect Wittgenstein's discussion of good with debates in analytic moral philosophy, his account of moral good and the functioning of moral concepts can be helpfully compared how Philippa Foot argued against R.M. Hare in her 'Moral Arguments' (originally published in 1958) where she maintained that the features of an action can constitute *evidence* for its evaluation (for example, rudeness may be evidence for negative value). Foot does also recognize the possibility of the stronger view that 'descriptive or factual premises might *entail* evaluative conclusions', but about this she only wants to point out that Humean considerations regarding the impossibility of deducing is from ought do not prove the impossibility of such an entailment (Foot 2002, 99ff.). Now, if Foot is right, there is a connection between facts and values such that, *pace* Hare, a moral judgment does not simply express a certain kind of prescriptive attitude towards something, whereby the attitude is ultimately independent of any facts, and cannot be justified with reference to facts. As Wittgenstein's discussion of goodness helps to see, however, to regard the features of an action as evidence for its evaluation presupposes that we have a grasp of moral values

independently particular of cases whose features are claimed to constitute evidence for an evaluation. (If there is no such independent understanding, explanations referring to facts as evidence for evaluations are circular.) The question then is whether we can expect there to be such an independent account of moral value or goodness that covers its different instances. As we have seen, this is something that Wittgenstein questions, maintaining that the unity of good is more complex than usually assumed in moral philosophy, and that the concept of good does not have such an independently understood meaning.<sup>10</sup>

Further, Foot's account of the features of actions as evidence for an evaluative judgment also regards moral judgments as genuine knowledge claims, as opposed to Wittgenstein's view of them as judgments about whether criteria for the application of moral concepts to a case have been met. Here an advantage of Wittgenstein's account over Foot's is that it offers a way to explain moral necessity, for instance, that if doing so and so in such and such circumstances is wrong, then it is always wrong without exceptions in such circumstances, not merely as a matter of empirical generality. Thus, if the relation between the features of an action and its evaluation is conceived as one of entailment, we have a way to explain the necessity characteristic of moral judgments.

## Bibliography

Cavell, Stanley. *The Claim of Reason*. New Edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.

Foot Philippa. *Natural Goodness*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.

Foot, Philippa. 'Moral Arguments'. In *Virtues and Vices and Other Essays in Moral Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.

---

<sup>10</sup> Foot sketches a naturalistic account of this kind in her late book *Natural Goodness* (2001). Although she mentions Wittgenstein and Geach's account of ascriptions of goodness as attributive when introducing her discussion, she does not connect the two or discuss the possibility connected with attributive uses that moral good and might have a complex unity.

- Geach, Peter. ‘Good and Evil’. *Analysis*, 17: 2, pp. 33-42, 1956.
- Glock, Hans-Johann. *A Wittgenstein Dictionary*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1996.
- Kant, Immanuel. *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.
- Kuusela, Oskari. *The Struggle against Dogmatism*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008.
- Kuusela, Oskari. ‘Wittgenstein, Ethics and Philosophical Clarification’. In Reshef Agam-Segal and Edmund Dain eds., *Wittgenstein’s Moral Thought*. New York: Routledge, 2017a.
- Kuusela, Oskari. ‘Wittgenstein’s Comparison between Philosophy, Aesthetics and Ethics’. In Stefan Majetschak and Anja Weiberg eds., *Aesthetics Today*. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017b.
- Kuusela, Oskari. *Wittgenstein on Logic as the Method of Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019.
- Kuusela, Oskari. ‘Wittgenstein and the Unity of Good’, *European Journal of Philosophy*, online first publication, February, DOI: 10.1111/ejop.12498, pp. 1-17, 2020.
- Moore, G.E. ‘Wittgenstein’s Lectures in 1930-33’, *Mind* 63: 249, 1-15, 1954.
- Moore, G.E. Wittgenstein’s Lectures in 1930-33’, *Mind* 64: 253, 1-27, 1955.
- Moore, G. E. *Principia Ethica*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Zettel*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1967. (Z)
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Philosophical Grammar*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1974. (PG)
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Wittgenstein’s Lectures, Cambridge 1932-35*, Alice Ambrose, ed. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1979. (AWL)
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology, Vol 1*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1980. (RPP I)
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Wittgenstein’s Nachlass*, The Bergen Electronic Edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000. (References by manuscript/typescript number.)
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Philosophical Investigations*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009. (PI)

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Lectures, Cambridge 1930-1933: From the Notes of G.E. Moore*, David Stern, Brian Rogers and Gabriel Citron eds. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016. (MWL)