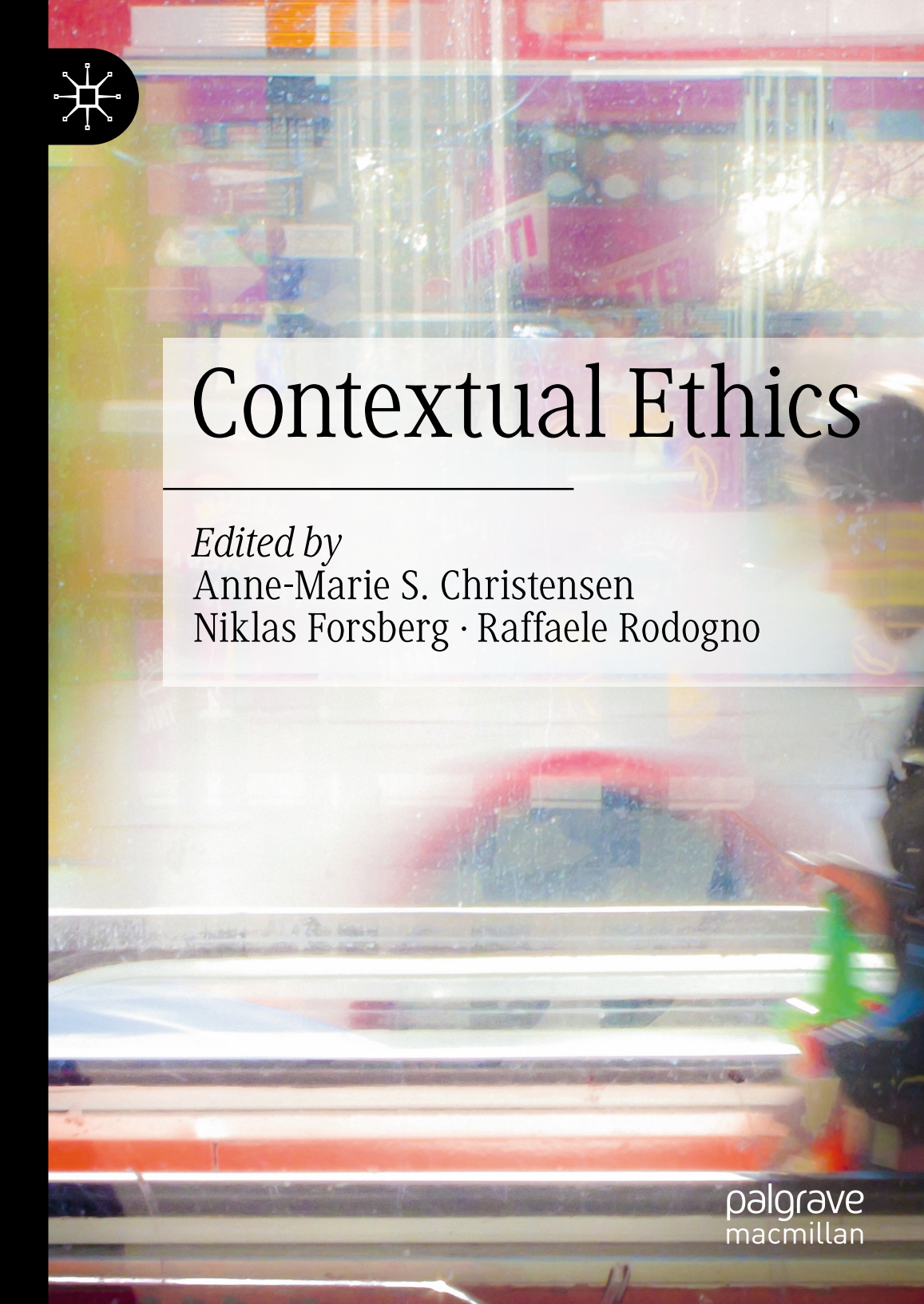
Contextual Ethics
Edited by
Anne-Marie S. Christensen
Niklas Forsberg · Raffaele Rodogno
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Language and Morality in J. L. Austin's Philosophy (New York: Routledge, 2021).

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Nora Hämäläinen is a moral philosopher and researcher at the University of Helsinki. She is the author of *The Making of the Good Person: Self-Help, Ethics and Philosophy* (Routledge 2023), *Descriptive Ethics: What Does Moral Philosophy Know about Morality?* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016) and *Literature and Moral Theory* (Bloomsbury, 2015). Her present work on ethics and social change is represented, for example, by the volume *New Perspectives on Moral Change* (Berghahn Books 2022), coedited with Cecilie Eriksen. In Swedish, for a wider audience, she has written *Är Trump postmodern?* (Förlaget M, 2019) and *Granhäcken: En essä om ensamheter* (Förlaget M, 2024).

Camilla Kronqvist is University Lecturer in Philosophy at Åbo Akademi University in Turku, Finland. She has a long-standing interest in the philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein and how the context-sensitivity he suggests can inform our understanding of ethical questions arising in the context of psychological concepts, especially in relationships of love. Her recent publications include "'The Frightening Thing Is the Uncertainty': Wittgenstein on Love and the Desire for Certainty" (2023), "What Is Changing and What Has Already Changed: Parenthood and Certainty in

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Duncan Richter is the Charles S. Luck III '55 Institute Professor at the Virginia Military Institute in Lexington, Virginia, USA. His publications include *Ethics After Anscombe* (Springer, 1999), *Wittgenstein at His Word* (Continuum, 2004), *Why Be Good?* (Oxford University Press, 2008), *Anscombe's Moral Philosophy* (Lexington Books, 2010), *Historical Dictionary of Wittgenstein's Philosophy* (Rowman & Littlefield, second edition, 2014), *Wittgenstein's* Tractatus*: A Student's Edition* (Lexington Books, 2021), and *Wittgenstein* Versus *Anscombe on How to Live: Linked Philosophical Lives* (Bloomsbury, 2025).

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Hannah Winther is a postdoctoral research fellow at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology. She works on animal ethics, empirical ethics and Wittgensteinian ethics. She wrote her dissertation on the ethics of using genome editing on farmed salmon and is currently writing about the ethical issues of using such technologies in bioconservation.

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Anne-Marie S. Christensen, Niklas Forsberg, and Raffaele Rodogno

Contextual ethics is not a thing, but perhaps it should be? Or, perhaps it should be many? There is, after all, not much sense in stressing the importance of context out of context; so, the idea of there being one sense of, and one importance of, 'context' is, in a way, a thought that goes against the point of the essays in this book. For that reason, it may be better to introduce the term 'contextual ethics' negatively: contextual ethics is rooted in the recognition that a philosophy that seeks one overarching approach, that ought to be relevant for and applicable to any scene of importance for philosophy, runs the risk of distorting the object it seeks to understand. Even though it may be problematic to call contextual ethics

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'a method', there are a number of things that unite the essays here collected. The importance of attending to context is of course the central one. But what that, more precisely, means is not very easy to make clear—for if there's anything one can say at a general level about 'contexts', it is that they vary. These variations and differences are not to be neglected.

Traditionally, cultural, historical, linguistic differences have been seen as a threat to philosophical clarity, which means that the assumption that truth and realism need to be understood and explicated in an ahistorical, non-sociological, and non-psychological manner has served as an ideal for philosophical clarity. (In our contemporary scene, this is particularly true in the so-called analytical tradition, and less so in the continental tradition since themes like historicity, conceptual change, and sociocultural aspects of thinking have been thematized much more, and more centrally, in the continental tradition.) There are some very clear and obvious reasons why philosophy has veered towards these ideals of the non-contextual. There is not much sense in talking about truth or knowledge as something that is very personal or subjective. Likewise, a notion of knowledge that is restricted to a specific culture of historical period sounds fishy. If something is true today, it is true tomorrow. So, the efforts to rise above context are well-motivated.

Still, these generalizing ideals come at a cost, and one of the things that unite the authors' work here presented, is that the quest for singular theoretical models, atemporal perspectives, and ideals about knowledge and truth above the social, entail (or runs the risk of entailing) that precision and accuracy are lost. If the world is changing, and if the concepts we employ truly are *responsive to* the world we word, then accuracy is lost if we assume that the one-size-fits-all model is always the right model for philosophy. It is precisely 'attending to contexts' that enables precision and accuracy. This does not mean that all things are local or punctual. But it means that the links and traces and connections that run between different contexts (cultural, temporal, social, linguistic, and so on) will remain hidden from view if we do not seek precision; and true depth will be lost in the fear that the surface is not enough. In that sense, 'attending to context' is well described as an effort to *deepen* our concepts and our knowledge as well as a struggle to seek precision and adequacy.

In the essays that follow, we will see a large number of different contextual investigations, and even though not all essays explicitly thematize the concept of context (let alone mention 'contextual ethics') directly, they still show ways in which contextual sensitivity is, or ought to be, central to

most ethical inquiries. One thing that unites the texts in this volume is that they all mark out some central limitations to the tendency to focus more or less exclusively on the moral moments—say the moment of action or choice, or the moment when a judgement is, or needs to be, passed. The suggestion is that we run the risk of misunderstanding that moral moment severely, if it is not understood contextually—and this may mean, historically, anthropologically, culturally, socially, linguistically, and so on and so forth. This risk involved in de-contextualisation of the moral is that philosophy may go astray in its descriptive task rather than in poor judgement or lack of clear and precise enough lines of argumentation.

On the contemporary academic philosophical scenes, there are a number of various contextual*isms* in play. There is 'epistemic contextualism' which debates the extent to which our knowledge claims are dependent on the context in which an epistemic judgement is made. The discussions in epistemic contextualism are often intertwined with questions pertaining to the domain known as philosophy of language, and the development of contextual semantics in particular. Thus, the question about context is primarily framed in epistemological and semantical terms. A generic formulation of the central thesis is the claim that 'an epistemic vocabulary is context sensitive' (Preyer and Peter 2005, 1). This thesis is, so it is argued, a 'semantic claim'—and in order to 'evaluate the truth of that claim' we have to go to 'philosophy of language' (Preyer and Peter 2005, 1). Thus, the kinds of questions that are addressed in this discourse are well summarized by Herman Cappelen: 'If you vary the context of utterance enough, i.e. vary the audience, the conversational context, the background knowledge, etc., you can get any sentence to communicate different propositions. One central task for those interested in the semantics–pragmatics distinction is to identify and classify such patterns of inter-contextual variability' (Cappelen 2007, 3).

The opposing view of this kind of contextualism is invariantism, which, in a nutshell, is the idea that the meaning, or the truth conditions, of a sentence or utterance does *not* vary from context to context. Now, contextual ethics, as presented in this collection, has, clearly, very little to do with invariantism. It is possible, however, to draw some lines to the more general discussion about 'conversational context' and 'background conditions'. But the questions asked in this volume are not restricted to questions about how actions, choices, sentences, and judgements (be they moral or not) fit or fail to fit into different contexts, and it is also debatable whether 'contexts' can serve the function of securing meaning in this

sense (as a replacement for 'referent' or 'rule'). So, rather than looking for matching propositions with different 'contexts' many of the chapters in the volume would agree with Cora Diamond when she writes:

> Part of the difficulty here is that we think of learning to use a term as learning to follow the rules for that use; we think of language in terms of rules fixing what can and cannot be done. But the most essential thing about language is that it is *not* fixed in that way. Learning to use a term is coming into life with that term, whose possibilities are to a great extent to be made. (Diamond 1988, 268)

In other words, the idea that we should look for a fit between context and propositional content already assumes a too narrow understanding of context, and it is a strategy that works well only in situations where a general understanding of both propositional content and context is in place. Diamond's point here is that this idea of linguistic solidity (in both meaning and rules) is not true to the facts, and that the actual mastery of any concept, in real life, requires that we are constantly open to projecting a word into new contexts. The context is thus not something that secures meaning for us in the same way that it was assumed that 'rules' or 'referent' do. If there's a loss in meaning, there's also something that amiss in our understanding of our context.

One may say that the claims that we cannot understand actions or judgements in isolation and that moral philosophy may go wrong if it does not have a rich enough understanding of context already at the descriptive level (which means that it runs the risk of not getting the object it seeks to understand clearly in view), is too negative a way of formulating the core of contextual ethics. But there are more positive descriptions that grow out of this recognition. One is that philosophy needs a rich and thick understanding of the *practises* that our moral actions and judgements take part in, and that the normative does not live outside of these. This will also entail a call for a more attentive attunement to the everyday, and that one of the lessons that follows from that is the recognition that things that may not normally be at philosophy's centre of attention could be of immense importance. Sometimes the seemingly insignificant that hides in the background need to be highlighted. Sometimes the background needs to be moved to the foreground. Contexts are relevant, not only to establish criteria for something else.

We have divided the texts of this collection into three parts. Part I is 'theoretical' in its focus; Part II addresses 'methodological' concerns; and Part III is more 'applied'. But it goes to the very nature of the ways of thinking here expressed and explored that the demarcations between theoretical, methodological, and applied are far from sharp (hence the inverted commas). As the notion of context is open-ended, investigations in contextual ethics often lead to theoretical reflections on the influence of context on philosophical work, and/or methodological reflections on how to work with contexts here.

We open Part I 'The Importance and Implications of Context in Ethics' with Chap. 2 co-authored by Anne-Marie Søndergaard Christensen, Cecilie Eriksen, and Nora Hämäläinen. This chapter is of a somewhat programmatic nature. 'Contextual Ethics' did not grow out of nothing, and this text—'What Is Contextual Ethics'—describes the historical roots of this way of thinking; introduces some of its most central themes and stances; brings into view central methodological issues; and describes its relation to different traditions in contemporary ethics. One specific aim is to bring out the 'meta-ethical' commitments that lie in the background of ideas of ethics as being shaped by or embedded in context and thus gives life to much contextualized work in ethics. The contextuality of ethics means that actual ethical relevance often first comes out in descriptions of contexts, and that in many cases, such description work is itself part of the ethical analysis. Since 'Contextual Ethics' is a new tradition of thought, this text serves the purposes of a longer introduction to the book as a whole, while at the same time motivating the kinds of work that are being done in it.

In Chap. 3 'The Ethics of Description', Duncan Richter articulates one of the core commitments of Contextual Ethics (as introduced in 'What Is Contextual Ethics') to wit: the importance of description. The idea of applied ethics suggests that ethics, typically in the form of normative theory, can be applied to various facts that are already given. But these facts can only be dealt with in language, and this language is very likely to express attitudes of one kind or another. Describing the facts then can itself be seen to be an ethical task; the descriptive task is not ethically neutral. It is a task that calls for a variety of virtues, including honesty, justice, and, arguably, love. In describing a situation there are many things to consider, including the distance from which it should be described, how it should be framed or re-framed, whose point of view to emphasize, and so on. Deciding what kind of description is most pertinent calls for

judgement, and is therefore itself an ethical task, with ethical repercussions: some descriptions of situations are likely to be so moving or eye-opening that there is no further question (at least for some people) about what to do. To illustrate and explain the approach, Richter works mainly with two examples, one from fiction and one from real life. The first is the case of Bill Furlong from Claire Keegan's *Small Things Like This*. The second is the case of RaDonda Vaught, a nurse who mistakenly administered fatal medication to a patient.

As soon as one stresses the importance of context—especially in ethics—the question of relativism seems to arise. This theme is discussed in Niklas Forsberg's text (Chap. 4) 'Relativity, Relativism—Real, Realism'. Forsberg begins with the observation that it is a fact that people think and act differently in different cultures, circumstances, and epochs. In this sense, ways of thinking and acting *are*, as a matter of fact, relative. It is therefore easy to infer (a philosophical) relativ*ism* from the presence of relativity. Forsberg's chapter shows why it is a mistake to assume that relativism follows from the presence of relativity. Many traditional varieties of realism assume that the presence of relativity needs to be combatted by something atemporal and acontextual, and it is therefore assumed that attention to various varying contexts will fuel relativistic tendencies. This view is wedded to the idea that common practices and everyday discourse, *as* contextual, *as* historically and culturally situated, are surface phenomena. The countermovement suggested in this chapter is that it is through a *deepened* understanding of contextuality (historical, linguistic, sociological, anthropological, cultural etc.) that we can come to terms with relativism; and not by means of an evasive manoeuvre that makes truth and 'realism' into something that supposedly exist over and above situations and contexts. What this chapter aims to show is that there is no reason to assume that realism is to be found by moving away from everything real and hypothesizing a sense-core outside all contexts, and that when we encounter real differences in terms of relativity, the best way to avoid endorsing 'relativism' is to move further *into* the messiness of clashing context, to try to unearth (historical) roots, to trace reasons and causes.

In Chap. 5, 'Contextual Ethics and the New—Reuniting Practical and Normative Ethics', Anne-Marie S. Christensen challenges the common picture that moral philosophy can and should be divided into three different 'subjects'—metaethics, normative ethics, and applied (or practical) ethics. In particular, Christensen suggests that if we approach the relationship between practical ethics and normative moral philosophy through the

lens of contextual ethics, we will see that these demarcations are not as clear as one may assume and that there are central similarities between the two subdisciplines. To make the details of this stance clear, Christensen provides a brief overview of the most influential characterizations of practical ethics and present the core commitments of a Wittgensteinian approach to contextual ethics. Christensen brings out how so-called normative and practical ethics mainly differ by the types of contexts in their interest, with the first focusing on ethics of the everyday and the other on unusual or specialized contexts, while there is no fundamental difference in their aims and approaches. In light of this, Christensen's point is rather complex. On the one hand, she argues that a focus on the context of moral problems brings out these differences between problems in practical ethics and normative moral philosophy; that problems in practical ethics appear to us as new, urgent, and embedded in specialized contexts. On the other hand, she also argues that there is still no fundamental or qualitative difference between problems in the two subdisciplines—normative and practical ethics really make up one discipline.

Camilla Kronqvist's chapter (Chap. 6), 'Listening to Who Is Talking: The Speakers as Context', opens the more methodologically oriented Part II 'How to do Context? Theories, Methodologies and Fieldtrips'. Camilla Kronqvist turns her attention to the vital importance of context when someone say 'I love you'—in particular the ways that speakers in talking about love direct themselves to one another in speech. Based on her own work on how telling someone 'I love you' makes a particular contribution to our ethical understanding of the different contexts of saying these words, she shows how the Wittgensteinian idea that the act of uttering a sentence must be understood in a concrete context has often eluded the formal logical analysis of a sentence. This leaves such analyses incapable of accounting for the meaning of sentences of love as they fail to capture how changes in pronouns change the meaning of words of love. Formal analyses of declarations, affirmations, and acknowledgements of loving and being loved in terms of 'x loves y' leaves out central distinctions in the ethical and spiritual significance of saying 'I love you' and 'You love me', and they notoriously fail to capture the possibility of saying 'we love each other'. Considering some of Wittgenstein's remarks on love in the contexts of formal logic and religion, Kronqvist is able to bring out how saying 'I love you' is embedded in complex relations between two lovers and beloveds. Her analysis reveals the many informal aspects involved in the logic of our language as well as the ethical and existential difficulties of

trying to consider how 'who says what' contributes to our understanding of love's place in our relationships with others.

In Chap. 7, 'When the World Is Not Directly Given to Us: On Roadblocks, Murder, and Participant Reflection in a Ugandan Warzone', Sverker Finnström discusses some particulars of wartime ethnographic fieldwork in relation to the overall undertaking of anthropological analysis. In that way, Finnström's chapter exemplifies how the promotion of a contextual ethics helps the production of (anthropological) knowledge. Finnström argues, with support from Paul Feyerabend, that any grasp of the world is filtered through whatever competing world views, traditions, beliefs, or theories the observer of this world might hold or encounter. Feyerabend suggests that to understand the ways one understands the world, one needs to combine contemplation with engagement. The philosopher must therefore be a kind of anthropologist (and vice versa), 'both a participant and an observer'. This chapter also argues that knowledge production is ethical when it is contextual—when it unsettles any claim that some traditions or theories, notably those originating from the so-called West, produce knowledge, while others, notably the ones of the non-European, non-Western cultural others, produce only versions of life-earned wisdom. The chapter does not pin knowledge to wisdom or experience, or the other way around, but suggests a contextual research ethics which is unfolding uninterruptedly during anthropological fieldwork or any similar intersubjective practice—a research ethics that can never be set beforehand, outside the enactment of actual research. Such a contextual ethics acknowledges Feyerabend's fundamental argument, namely, that knowledge systems can never be 'universal measures of excellence' in the sense that they are always the outcome of 'particular traditions', also when they are 'unaware of their historical grounding'.

Chapter 8 by Cecilie Eriksen, 'Bias, Blind Spots, and Cherry-picking: Methodological Challenges in Contextual Ethics', is the most experimental chapter of the book, most prominently in terms of its stylistic exploration and play with different styles. Driven by the question about *how* one can write about difficult manners without distorting them, and by asking questions about the limitations of academic or theoretical writing, Eriksen provides a deliberately challenging (but rewarding) read. It is a text that invites its readers to really reflect upon their own role in research, as researchers. This is playfulness, but very serious playfulness. Eriksen's discussion centres on the question about how awareness of two classical methodological challenges, which arise in the use of historical case studies

in philosophy of science—'construction bias' and 'selection bias'—can be relevant for contextual ethics. Biases are, evidently and naturally, a difficulty for most, if not all, forms of science. But these difficulties are heightened in areas where it is more or less impossible to place oneself outside of the study. Eriksen elegantly explores, in a text that moves between personal reflections, scientific data and tables, and poetry, these themes from personal, scientific, and historical perspectives, allowing each perspective's voice to come to its own expression stylistically as well.

In Chap. 9, 'The Tragedyof Alzheimer's Disease', Ylva Gustafsson asks the question of the relevant context for understanding illness. In contemporary work there is a strong focus on patients' illness narratives, highlighting the personal context of illness, and how it affects the lives of individuals, insights that have become central in medical ethics and the development of person-centred care. Still, looking especially at narratives on Alzheimer's disease, Gustafsson argues that illness narratives often only convey specific types of experiences as they are primarily written by patients from privileged social and economic backgrounds and thus create a too unitary conception of experiences of illness. Gustafsson contrasts recent films about Alzheimer's disease aligning with these prevailing narratives of Alzheimer's as a loss of personhood that challenges self-sufficiency and individuality with a Swedish biography of a daughter to a patient with Alzheimer's disease from a different and more precarious social background. The biography brings out how Alzheimer's disease is not just a tragedy, but also opens possibilities of change and development. In a second critical move, Gustafsson engages with Samuel Beckett's *Endgame* to bring out special vulnerabilities of older people from precarious backgrounds, subjected to changes in social and economic structures.

Is there such a thing as philosophical advice? Ondřej Beran asks in Chap. 10, 'The Difficulties of Philosophical Advice'. Beginning from a certain uneasiness about the idea of philosophers serving as advisors, Beran reviews some philosophical notions of 'advice' showing that they do not easily translate into an understanding of specifically 'philosophical advice'. As a case study, Beran looks at whether philosophy may advice about the possibility and role of hope in light of the climate crises, bringing out the difficulties in saying that there is some such thing as specifically philosophical advice in relation to this question. Beran further argues that his difficulties with 'philosophical advice' cannot be alleviated with reference to some specific philosophical expertise or authority. The main problem, as Beran sees it, is that when philosophical assessment is presented outside

of a person-to-person context, it is disconnected from the possibility of elaboration that could serve to develop such open assessments into advice. By looking at the possibility of holding grudges against someone who offered bad advice, Beran brings out how such grudges are aimed at bad advice for *a particular person* in *a specific context*. Philosophical claims, however, are not developed with such an aim in mind. Therefore, a grudge held against an ill-suited philosophical advice cannot concern the *philosophical* part of the advice, even if it can of course concern the presentation of this claim as advice in a specific situation. What emerges is the insight that even if philosophical claims can play a role in advising, a claim cannot at the same time be presented as both a philosophical claim and an advice to another person.

Part III of this collection, 'Trying it Out: Examples of Contextualised Moral Philosophy', gathers texts that address particular problems more or less directly, and it thereby illustrates some of the ways in which contextual ethics is of great importance.

In Chap. 11, 'On Experience in Animal Ethics: Reflective Empiricism and Contextual Ethics', Hannah Winther develops another one of the central commitments of contextual ethics, to wit, the interdependence between descriptive and normative work in moral philosophy. This chapter argues that qualitative research methods can serve as useful tools to gain an insight into our relationships with animals. More in particular, the methods are used to understand and determine whether the use of gene editing technologies is compatible with a respectful treatment of animals. This empirically informed approach is, among others, grounded in Cora Diamond's view that what animals are, is not given to us independently of our ways of thinking about and responding to them.

In Chap. 12, 'Working Values into Practice and Transforming Them on the Way: Some Examples from Environmental Ethics', Nora Hämäläinen and Turo-Kimmo Lehtonen present some co-ordinates for thinking philosophically about morality in conditions where some central valuations guiding action and conceptions of good personhood are undergoing change. The core cases or examples deal with making place for environmental values and moral demands relating to environmental protection in everyday practices at home and at work. As in the previous chapter, the authors draw upon ethnographic and interview studies made with people involved in such practical negotiations: providing for a family, working as an environmental specialist in a municipality, and scavenging for food. Ultimately, Hämäläinen and Lehtonen draw attention to the complex

practice dependency of moral life. Novel ideals and goals engender concern, creativity, and problem solving through often arduous and constant processes. Values feed into practices and get transformed and rearticulated on the way. The discovery of such processes suggests that the very idea of moral life such as one finds it in mainstream moral theory needs thorough reconsideration.

Although love is often viewed as a deeply personal and even sentimental emotion, with little to offer for serious societal and moral thought, in fact many significant figures also in Western philosophy have acknowledged the intricate connections between love, politics, and ethics. For example, Simone Weil and Iris Murdoch have argued that love allows us to understand 'the good', and that its potentially powerful role should be recognized in political and moral thinking. In Chap. 13, 'Universal *and* Contextual Love of the Nonhuman World?', Elisa Aaltola examines different approaches to love, and she shows some of the ways in which the theme of love can be of great value in the context of animal and environmental ethics as well.

The final chapter (Chap. 14), 'Asymmetrical Ethics: Lessons from Pregnancy, Horses, and BDSM', by Jonna Bornemark and Edwin Gold, takes philosophy to contexts where it does not usually go. By paying attention to situations that are inherently asymmetrical, Bornemark and Gold also open the question about some possible limitations of more traditional forms of ethical theorizing that (often) assumes an egalitarian relation between rational subjects as the model for how we are to understand intersubjective relations. Bornemark and Gold explore the possibility of conceptualizing an asymmetrical ethics and expand on previous thinking regarding the importance of the asymmetrical to the ethical. They focus on three concrete examples: pregnancy, horse riding, and BDSM. These are situations in which asymmetry must not only be ethical to be defensible, but, furthermore, ethics must also be asymmetrical if is to be relevant and true to its subject. Bornemark and Gold show how feminist ethics has developed from a project aiming at the dismantling of the unjust asymmetries of the social world into an appeal to not unjustly impose symmetry. They explicate Emanuel Levinas' reconceptualization of the ethical attitude as an asymmetrical attitude of openness to the other and show how Adriana Cavarero develops this openness to the other into a cherishing of the singularity of life. Bornemark and Gold conclude by discussing how the asymmetrical ethical dimension of their examples offer new ways

of conceptualizing responsibility and pleasure in relation to ethical questions in situations and relationships where questions of power cannot, and ought not be, skirted.

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PART I

The Importance and Implications of Context in Ethics

CHAPTER 2

What Is Contextual Ethics?

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2.1 Introducing Two Core Commitments of Contextual Ethics

There are, in our view, two central aspects and core commitments of contextual ethics. One is meta-theoretical and marks out a minimalistic meta-ethical theory about ethics and ethical normativity. In a nutshell, that ethics, what is morally important, relevant, or salient, arises in concrete contexts, and that it can therefore only to a limited extent be captured in idealised moral theories. The other core commitment is to a way of doing work in all areas of moral philosophy that honours this metaethical view by acknowledging that investigating and describing a moral issue in context

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and understanding the normative challenges it poses are two sides of the same coin. Contextual ethics thus involves an integration of philosophical analysis with investigations and considerations of context. Approaches sharing a commitment to the importance of context can thus turn to rich investigations of very different kinds, from studies of the everyday to highly specialised practices and from engagement with literature and film to field work and archive studies. Importantly, however, the understanding of the relevant context cannot be settled independently of investigations in contextual ethics as it depends on the issue of philosophical interest. We thus agree with Margaret Urban Walker that '"Context" is in fact an indispensable, even if a free-floating, placeholder for information crucial to understanding what we or others are doing' (2003, xi) and leave the question of the relevant contexts for contextual ethics open, to be settled in specific investigations.

What we want to do instead is to propose that the metaethical and methodological commitments hang together, and that the connection between the two, in our view, constitutes the core of contextual ethics. Yet, given that the framework of contextual ethics is still developing, it is still very much a matter of discussion how to substantiate these two commitments, especially if one keeps in mind that they can be and have been spelled out in various ways. Also, there is much work to be done to investigate how this family of contextual ethics places itself in relation to other thinkers and positions in the landscape of moral philosophy. The aim of this anthology is to open that discussion by presenting reflections on and work in contextual ethics. The related aim of this introduction is to contribute to a discussion of the core commitments of contextual ethics and how they stand in relation to other, related positions in moral philosophy and empirical ethics. We present our contribution in four steps. First, we give a short history of Western analytical moral philosophy in the twentieth century, motivating the need—felt by an increasing number of moral philosophers—to put context back at the centre of moral philosophical work. We then provide a short overview of some main influences behind contextual ethics, placing it in relation to traditions and people, before we turn to the task of spelling out the core metaethical and methodological commitments introduced above. Most importantly, we aim to provide a framework for contextual ethics that shows the importance, and indeed necessity, of increased attention to context in contemporary philosophy.

2.2 A Short Account of the Relatively Recent History of Western Analytical Moral Philosophy

One way to understand the background for the metaethical stance of contextual ethics is through the shortest possible history of moral philosophy in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. This may seem like a detour, but only if one forgets that the discipline of philosophy and its central concerns are shaped by specific traditions with histories of their own. In one sense, academic philosophers have a far more intimate relationship to their history than most other researchers, as philosophy is one of very few disciplines where most educational programmes involve an intensive study of its history and historical thinkers, and where thinkers of the past may be, and often are, equal partners in philosophical discussions of the present. However, as those working within the history of ideas often point out, this closeness and continuous interaction with past ideas and thinkers sometimes encourages a curiously ahistorical view of the history of philosophy as simply a series of ideas, thoughts, arguments, and theories that are seen as equally available in and potentially relevant for the eternal present of thought: philosophy today. There is something constructive about this way of thinking about the history of philosophy, because drawing on and engaging with past thinkers and ideas have proved one of the best ways to develop our present thinking.[1] Yet, it also easily tempts philosophers to disregard key aspects of their discipline. One aspect sometimes overlooked is that both past and present philosophical discussions have *histories* and arise in contexts that shape the articulation of philosophical ideas and affect what positions come to take prominence. When philosophers lack an awareness of the historicity of their own discipline—that philosophy as a discipline is shaped by a history of changing concerns, ideals, criteria, and aims in philosophy itself and in the societies of which philosophy is a part—it blinds them to the fact that the criteria of what counts as philosophy, and especially what counts as *good* philosophy, changes, and that the perception of the aims of philosophy changes too. It may also blind them to the fact that many of the criteria we have now are quite recent and that they are continuously changing.

To understand the need to reintroduce contextual work to Western analytical moral philosophy, it is helpful to retrace the history of the loss of

[1] For a notable example, the current burgeoning work in virtues ethics to a large part began by reaching back to the work of, first, Aristotle and, later, the stoics and Plato.

awareness and appreciation of context in our discipline. One way to reconstruct the history of analytical moral philosophy in the twentieth century is to note that its development is guided by an aim to live up to ideals of clarity, abstraction, and consistency both greatly influenced by developments in the natural sciences (Walker 1999). In thinking about the nature of the moral, analytical philosophy moved from inquiries into the general meaning of 'good', as exemplified in the work of G.E. Moore (1922), over the new creation of an independent subdiscipline of metaethics meant to give general answers to questions of the objectivity and reality of the moral (Poulsen & Christensen 2023), leading to an ontological banishment of the moral from the domain of the natural or real (through forms of moral non-naturalism to noncognitivism). In thinking about the self, the focus on generality and simplicity led to the construction of the notion of a 'moral agent', endowed with a narrow conception of self-interest, will, and agency but cleared of any particular traits, histories, interests, or relationships (Murdoch 1956). In these various developments, moral philosophers aspired to expose what was general and abstract in moral thinking and action through the medium of idealised metaethical and normative theories.

One aspiration behind the move towards abstraction and focus on the development of ethical theories was *foundational*. Philosophers hoped to identify the source of moral normativity and in this way explain the hold ethics has on human thinking, its authority and central role in human life. They also wanted to display the rationality of normative ethical thought, reliant on a notion of rationality or reason fit for a modern, scientific, disenchanted era. By identifying such an explanatory 'source' of ethics, theorists aimed to justify ethics in a way that would validate the authority and the privileged stance of ethical considerations and secure their objectivity in a way that could withstand threats of relativism and subjectivism. Interestingly, the twentieth-century aspiration to find general and objective foundations of morality was itself shaped by a historical event, World War II. Philosophers as different as R.M. Hare, John Rawls, and Phillippa Foot—who came to pioneer late twentieth-century utilitarianism, deontology, and virtue ethics, respectively—emerged from the war experience with the conviction that philosophy ought to have something to say about why some things are objectively wrong (Krishnan 2021; Lipscomb 2021; MacCumhaill and Wiseman 2022). One striking example of this aspiration appears in the preface to *Moral Thinking*, where Hare introduces his utilitarian theory based on the formal aspects of moral language,

universalizability, and prescriptivism, with the words: 'I offer this book to the public now rather than later, not because I think it needs no improvement, but because of a sense of urgency—a feeling that if these ideas were understood, philosophers might do more to help resolve important practical issues' (Hare 1981, v). Moral philosophers came to see their work as reaching beyond academic philosophy and contributing to the advancement of ethics in society more generally.

This practical, normative orientation was a break with key predecessors, such as G.E. Moore and W.D. Ross, whose work seemed to relegate the modern philosopher's proper role in ethics to the clarification of basic constituent features of ethical language or beliefs. In central respects, it represented a return to a practical aspiration, related to the study of ethics ever since Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics* suggested that 'we are studying not to know what goodness is, but how to become good men' (*Ethics* II.ii, 1103b). The regained practical ethos, combined with the foundational aspiration, contributed to turning the search for moral guidance in late twentieth-century moral philosophy towards the question of the *right* normative ethical theory.

Particular to the development of moral philosophy in the twentieth century was the consolidation of specific expectations to *the form* that ethical theories should take and the functions they should fill. One expectation was that an ethical theory should be able to provide some form of general test of the correctness of basic moral assumptions: it may be that most people tend to assume that it is always wrong to convict a person unjustly, but moral philosophers came to think that it was up to the ethical theory to provide an answer to whether such assumptions really are correct and justified (for a defender of this view Nussbaum 2000, for a critic, see Williams 1985, 72). Another expectation that formed in twentieth-century moral philosophy was that philosophers should formulate theories capable of providing clear, un-ambiguous, and determinate action-guidance in specific cases. This expectation is more rarely voiced—and not universally shared by mainstream moral theorists—but it is still discernible in the way that it has guided many discussions of ethical theory. In consequentialism, the problems connected to using actual evaluation of future consequences, such as complexity and indeterminacy, led some thinkers to abandon act-utilitarianism in favour of more straightforwardly action-guiding versions of the theory such as rule-utilitarianism. The expectation that ethical theories should provide clear action-guidance also surfaced when virtue ethics successively strengthened its position in the field of

ethical theory and was met with the criticisms that it did not provide clear guidance in specific cases, and—to return to the first expectation—was unable to provide a test of general ethical rules or guidelines.[2]

Much discussion in twentieth-century ethics was devoted to challenging and refining ethical theories so that they could address the challenges of providing determinate action-guidance and a general test for basic moral assumptions, while also answering to widely recognised requirements on argumentative form, consistency, and simplicity and withstanding or rejecting counterarguments and counterexamples. One prominent example was the debates on utilitarianism and consequentialism, resulting in an increasingly complicated theoretical landscape made up by various positions of act and rule consequentialism, distinguishing between ex-post and ex-ante evaluations, and so on (Sinnott-Armstrong 2023). Even though these discussions were motivated by the wish that philosophy could contribute to a public understanding of and trust in ethics, their increasing technicality contributed to distancing mainstream moral philosophy from the moral concerns and challenges facing people in their everyday lives. This is not to say that the search for a normative ethical theory, laying out the principles of good action, was a futile endeavour. Ideal theories have proved themselves valuable in bringing out and exploring general moral concerns often at play in moral thinking and judgement (Hämäläinen 2009). But it seems fair to say that the internal disagreement concerning the nature and foundation of ethics challenged the ambition to develop *the* theory of moral life. Moreover, even if the quest for action-guidance and a clear test for ethical assumptions grew from an ambition to make moral philosophy relevant for practical questions, disagreement on the recommendations flowing from ethical theories, and about what decisions and action to be thought of as 'morally right' in specific cases, meant that the ambition to solve actual moral problems was also largely unsuccessful.[3] This enduring disagreement has eventually been one reason why many philosophers—even inside many of these debates in analytical philosophy—have questioned the ambition to develop ideal action-guiding theories.[4]

[2] For an example of a virtue ethicist taking on this challenge, see Hursthouse (1999); for discussion, see Annas (2014).

[3] For disagreement within closely related theories and families of theories, such as forms of consequentialism, see Jackson (2020).

[4] For an overview and critical discussion of the foundational and action-guiding expectations to ethical theories, see Christensen (2020b, chapter 2–3); for a sympathetic discussion, see Chahboun (2019).