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Introduction

1.1 Moral debates

Morality seems to be a field in which disagreement is pervasive. Debates about moral issues range from disputes about euthanasia and abortion to discussions about how we ought to treat animals.\footnote{I use ‘ethical’ and ‘moral’ interchangeably.} A controversial ethical issue arising in relation to new forms of warfare involves the use of unmanned military airplanes, so-called military drones, which facilitate targeted killing. Drones are attractive as a means of reducing the number of military personnel who lose their life in armed conflict or come back wounded or traumatised. Moreover, they are relatively cheap and achieve a degree of precision that makes it possible to attack more specific targets. However, this last characteristic carries the risk of causing harm to far more innocent victims than conventional forms of warfare, since due to their robotic precision, drones tend to be deployed far more quickly than traditional bombers, and the precisely defined targets which they are deployed to attack tend to be close to civil locations.

Moral arguments in favour of the deployment of drones stand in contrast with arguments against their deployment. People disagree about how the reasons on both sides should be weighed. Does the possibility to protect the life of one’s own soldiers outweigh the presumably higher number of civilian victims? Should we abstain from using drones because once humans can kill from a distance, without putting their own life at risk, they will kill much more easily? There is also disagreement about related non-moral facts such as the likelihood of an increase in innocent victims due to the deployment of drones. These are some of the controversies. Now imagine a person participating in the debate and raising questions...
On Moral Certainty, Justification and Practice

such as the following: Why should an increase in civilian victims be something to worry about? Why is killing innocent civilians in the course of a military operation a bad thing? Why is killing as such morally wrong?

These questions seem entirely out of place. The puzzlement they prompt points to the existence of agreement over moral matters, notwithstanding all the moral issues people disagree about. Were someone to raise such questions in the middle of a debate about the moral status of targeted killing, she would be regarded as making a joke, as lacking moral competence or as simply wanting to shock. There are no good reasons to doubt that killing innocent civilians is bad and that killing as such is wrong.

However, despite our lack of reasons for doubt in these cases, some philosophers try to come up with theories to explain or justify a moral conviction as basic as ‘Killing is wrong’. They mistakenly believe that a conviction as fundamental within any moral theory as this belief has to be supported by reasons which are even more certain, on the grounds that a substantive moral theory ‘cannot ultimately rest on mere convictions’. As I shall argue, these philosophers try ‘to prove a philosophical thesis, the negation of which cannot be taken seriously’.

The claim that the inability to explain why it is wrong to kill people is ‘one of the most notorious scandals of moral philosophy’ echoes Kant’s remark that it ‘remains a scandal to philosophy and to human reason in general that the existence of things outside us [...] must be accepted merely on faith’. However, the assumption that we need to know what it is that makes wrongful acts of killing wrong in order to be able to judge cases in which the wrongness of killing is subject to doubt (for example abortion or euthanasia) is mistaken. Our everyday practices

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reveal that in justifying our moral convictions we sooner or later run out of reasons. At some point we cannot do more than repeat – though this time with stronger emphasis – a moral conviction the truth of which seems to be most obvious to us. I intend to show why this is so, and that it is nothing to be worried about.

In this introductory chapter, I shall present the four main claims of this study, discuss the ethical relevance of Wittgenstein’s later philosophy, present the debate about the right view of justification that lies in the background of this book and provide an outline of the chapters which follow.

1.2 The limits of justification

The limits of reasonable doubt and justification are emphasised by Wittgenstein: ‘Giving grounds, however, justifying the evidence, comes to an end; – but the end is not certain propositions’ striking us immediately as true, that is, it is not a kind of seeing on our part; it is our acting, which lies at the bottom of the language-game’ (OC 204). In this quotation from On Certainty, Wittgenstein notes that at some point we stop justifying our beliefs. He rejects the view that the point where no further reasons are given is one where we reach propositions which we know to be true directly, without requiring any further reasons. In saying that ‘it is not a kind of seeing on our part’, he uses the language of epistemological and mathematical intuitionists, who claim that there are propositions which we know to be true immediately, through

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7 ‘Die Begründung aber, die Rechtfertigung der Evidenz kommt zu einem Ende; – das Ende aber ist nicht daß uns gewisse Sätze unmittelbar als wahr einleuchten, also eine Art Sehen unserseits, sondern unser Handeln, welches am Grunde des Sprachspiels liegt.’

8 I do not strictly distinguish between belief and judgement.

9 Philosophers use the term ‘proposition’ in many different ways. It is sometimes assimilated to the sentence itself; sometimes to the linguistic meaning of a sentence; sometimes to ‘what is said’; sometimes to the contents of beliefs or other ‘propositional’ attitudes’. Pascal Engel, ‘Propositions, Sentences and Statements,’ in Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy, ed. Edward Craig (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), p. 787. I shall use the term ‘proposition’ mostly as a synonym for ‘sentence’, but sometimes also in the sense of that which is expressed by a given sentence. Wittgenstein does not distinguish between the two. By the German term ‘Satz’, he means both the sentence as well as its linguistic meaning. In the original remarks of On Certainty the word ‘Proposition’ does not appear, but the word ‘Satz’ has often been translated with ‘proposition’.
intuition. The propositions concerned are thought to express objective truths, that is truths which are independent of what people believe is true. The metaphor of ‘seeing’ that a certain proposition is true illustrates the view that the intuitive knowledge in question is as immediate as sensual experience. There is no inferential reasoning involved. Going beyond a mere rejection of the intuitionist position, Wittgenstein makes the positive claim that ‘it is our acting, which lies at the bottom of the language-game’.

This quotation sets the stage for the reflections contained in this study. Fascinated by Wittgenstein’s cryptic but powerful remarks about the limits of justification and the primacy of acting, I shall explore their significance for the practice of justifying moral judgements. This exploration will be embedded in the broader enterprise of approaching morality from a Wittgensteinian understanding of language and meaning.

Many moral philosophers adhere to the mistaken assumption that the activities of justifying and evaluating actions and judgements are constitutive of all moral practices. These practices are, by contrast, some of our more sophisticated practices and as such presuppose what Meredith Williams calls ‘bedrock practices’. I shall argue in favour of four main claims: (1) The demand for justification of a moral judgement or norm does not always make sense. (2) Practices of moral justification are grounded in ways of acting and reacting that are themselves unjustified. (3) Moral agency is first and foremost a matter of moral competence. (4) For morally competent agents, some moral beliefs are beyond doubt and not susceptible to justification. I shall call the view developed in this book the ‘practice-based view of morality’.

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10 For the distinction between ‘epistemological intuitionism’ and ‘methodological intuitionism’ see Alan Thomas, *Value and Context: the Nature of Moral and Political Knowledge* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), p. 199 ff. Methodological intuitionists take our shared intuitions as a starting point. Someone like John Rawls, for instance, is a methodological intuitionist, but not an epistemological intuitionist. These two forms of intuitionism tend to be confused. For such a conflation see for example Sabine Roeser, *Moral Emotions and Intuitions* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 99. Roeser’s conflation of the two forms of intuitionism leads her to accuse Rawls of being an intuitionist despite claiming the opposite.

11 The quote will be placed within the context of Wittgenstein’s later philosophy and interpreted in greater detail in Chapter 3.

1.3 Why Wittgenstein?

The later Wittgenstein was relatively silent on questions of morality. Wittgenstein did not address ethical issues in the writings that follow his ‘Lecture on Ethics’. In *On Certainty*, he famously claims that ‘justification comes to an end’ (OC 192), but he is not concerned with *moral* justification. He reflects on the peculiar role of some *empirical* propositions, but not on that of some *moral* propositions. The examples he gives of language-games do not include activities of moral evaluation, morally praising and blaming, holding someone to account, and so on, but things like ‘[g]iving orders, and obeying them’, ‘[d]escribing the appearance of an object, or giving its measurements’, ‘[r]eporting an event’, and ‘[m]aking a joke’ (PI 23).

Nevertheless, Wittgenstein’s later writings are of interest to moral philosophers. They teach us a way of doing philosophy that is equally suitable for reflection on moral questions. However, I disagree with those contemporary philosophers who ascribe a fundamental ethical concern to the later Wittgenstein. My understanding of the relation between Wittgenstein and ethics has to be sharply distinguished from what Nigel Pleasants calls ‘intrinsically-ethical readings’. According to those interpretations, everything Wittgenstein wrote has an ethical point.

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14 Pleasants, ‘Wittgenstein, Ethics and Basic Moral Certainty.’

15 According to the intrinsically-ethical reading of Stephen Mulhall, for instance, ‘the best way to understand why the later Wittgenstein provided us with only very scattered and unsystematic remark on ethics is [...] to consider the possibility that he took [...] every one of his philosophical remarks [...] to have an ethical point’. Like Alice Crary, Cora Diamond, Yaniv Iczkovits and Paul Johnston, Mulhall conceives of the later Wittgenstein’s view of language as having ‘a pervasive moral dimension – an ethical or spiritual aspect that is not retractable even in principle to certain kinds of words, or certain kinds of uses of words’. Mulhall, ‘Ethics in the light of Wittgenstein,’ pp. 321 and 315. Such a reading of Wittgenstein is ‘closely associated’ with the ‘New Wittgenstein school of exegesis’ whose core principle is that Wittgenstein’s early and late philosophy are much closer than is usually assumed. New Wittgensteinians hold that the
On my view, by contrast, the later Wittgenstein’s remarks on language, meaning, rule-following, training, justification and certainty, which I conceive of as not being ethical in nature, have implications for our thinking about ethical questions. I agree with Pleasants that there is ‘no distinctively moral viewpoint [...] in Wittgenstein’s later philosophy’, but that this philosophy, and On Certainty in particular, ‘can be of help in our thinking about ethics and ethical issues’.16 Similarly, Judith Lichtenberg argues that ‘[a]lthough Wittgenstein never specifically discusses moral judgements, his explorations of the concepts of knowledge, certainty, belief, and justification in the context of non-moral judgements help illuminate the realm of the moral as well’.17

There is no good reason for restricting Wittgenstein’s conception of language to its non-moral uses. If the metaphor of the language-game is illuminating at all, it has to be applicable to that dimension of human life which is characterised by ‘promoting good and avoiding evil’, ‘encouraging virtue and discouraging vice’, and ‘avoiding harm to others and promoting their well-being or welfare’.18 Wittgenstein’s criticism of a particular conception of linguistic meaning and a related conception of rule-following can be applied to the moral dimension of life and language. His reflections on how justifications come to an end with regard to empirical propositions can illuminate the status of moral propositions such as ‘Killing is wrong’. His insight that doubt does not always make sense has implications for the question as to whether every moral belief can be meaningfully doubted. That we do not carry on justifying indefinitely is not only true of empirical justification, but also of moral justification.

However, caution is required when attempting to apply to the moral realm Wittgenstein’s claims relating to empirical propositions, empirical justification, and doubts concerning, for instance, the existence of the external world. Nothing would conflict more with Wittgenstein’s understanding of philosophy than simply translating his view of empirical justification into a view of moral justification. Wittgenstein rejects

generalisations and asks the philosopher to look at the particular practice in order to understand it. I fully agree with Cora Diamond’s warning regarding an application of Wittgenstein’s ideas to a different realm:

His remarks in *On Certainty* have a particular context; they are directed to particular philosophical confusions. He wants to turn our attention to various linguistic activities of which we have (he thinks) a false and over-simple picture; we think they have to be like this or like that. *His remarks are not meant to be substitutes for such attention.* We can indeed ask whether what Wittgenstein says about the possible kinds of room for doubt in science, or the role in it of acceptance of authority, is interestingly applicable to ethics. *But Wittgenstein’s method does not provide shortcuts.*

There are two things that I wish to avoid in this book. First, I seek to avoid the mistake of generalising prematurely, overlooking the particularities of every practice. Second, I do not wish to ascribe to Wittgenstein a particular view of morality. Everything I shall write about moral beliefs, moral justification and moral competence is, if not indicated otherwise, my own position. I do not wish to claim that Wittgenstein would have defended such a view on these matters, had he reflected more upon them, or that it is implied by his later philosophy. Rather, I believe that it is fruitful to apply some of his views to morality, thereby expressing openness towards the particularities of our ‘moral language-games’.

In reading Wittgenstein’s later writings, we can learn a special way of philosophising. Wittgenstein teaches his readers to look at the practice and to be open to the particularities of individual cases. Resisting the strong attempt at over-generalisation is surely one of the hardest things to do in philosophy. However, every philosophical enterprise requires

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20 Similarly, Nigel Pleasants takes himself to ‘show how Wittgenstein’s observations on the manner in which we can neither question nor affirm certain states of affairs that are fundamental to our epistemic practices can be fruitfully extended to ethics’. Pleasants, ‘Wittgenstein, Ethics and Basic Moral Certainty,’ p. 241.

21 ‘For if you look at them you will not see something that is common to *all*, but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that. To repeat: don’t think, but look!’ (PI 66).
some level of generalisation. Wittgenstein also generalises. It is a difficult balancing act between looking only at individual cases and constructing a framework to fit all different kinds of practices. While I shall extend some of Wittgenstein’s views to the moral realm, I shall not do so without pointing to possible differences between empirical and moral cases.

One last remark should be made before turning to the philosophical debate that gave rise to my reflections on moral justification and moral competence: the debate between foundationalists and coherence theorists of justification. Wittgenstein’s later writings consist of a number of more or less loosely connected remarks, which have been interpreted in countless ways. Therefore, everything I say about his philosophical positions must be taken as my own interpretation of these remarks. It is never the case that Wittgenstein can be said to have clearly meant something. As all other interpreters, I try to make sense of his writings, believing that it pays off.

1.4 The problem of the justificatory regress

1.4.1 The problem

At the heart of the philosophical debate about the right theory of justification lies an age-old philosophical problem: the problem of the justificatory regress. It is this problem that inspired me to write this book. On my first acquaintance with the problem, I was unsatisfied with the main solutions suggested and thought that Wittgenstein’s later philosophy provided a better answer to it. It took me some time to realise that I had been mistaken, and that instead of solving the alleged problem, Wittgenstein had dissolved it, as he did with so many traditional philosophical problems. The following presentation of the apparent problem and possible solutions to it will end in its dissolution.

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24 Reading Andreas Krebs’ book on *On Certainty* was crucial in this regard. Krebs, *Worauf man sich verlässt*. 

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How is the problem traditionally thought to arise? If a belief $B_1$ is inferentially justified by a belief $B_2$, and $B_2$ by a further belief $B_3$ and so on, then the threat of an infinite justificatory regress seems to be lurking. This does not affect moral justification in particular, but justification in general, and has particularly bothered philosophers interested in the possibility of gaining empirical knowledge. How we deal with the problem depends, first of all, on whether we think that justified beliefs have to rest on beliefs for which a further justification can be given. This is a disputed question. Can beliefs that lack justification confer justification on other beliefs? While the standard view is that the answer must be negative, some philosophers allow for ‘unjustified justifiers’.

The question is complicated by the fact that, as Alan Thomas notes, the claim that a justifying belief has to be justified is ambiguous. It can be understood in two ways: (1) ‘For any belief $B$, if there is a context $C$ in which that belief is justifying, then there is some context $C^*$ in which that belief is justified. [$C$ and $C^*$ may, or may not, be identical.]’ (2) ‘For any belief $B$, if there is a context $C$ in which that belief is justifying, then it is justified in that very same context $C$.’ While I reject the claim on both interpretations (see 1.4.3), Thomas endorses it if it is understood in the first way.

1.4.2 Foundationalism, coherentism and the ‘ordinary language view’

If it is assumed that justification can only be conferred by a belief which is itself justified, there are two ways of responding to the regress problem. First, it can be claimed that the regress ends with beliefs that are somehow immediately justified. Not requiring any inferential warrant, but nevertheless being justified, these beliefs can be claimed to justify other beliefs. The different versions of this position are typically

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classified as ‘foundationalism’. Foundationalists hold that the immediately justified beliefs provide the foundation for all beliefs that are merely inferentially justified.²⁸ It is a theory about the structure of justified belief. *Moral* foundationalism has almost always coincided with intuitionism.²⁹ As Sabine Roeser points out in her analysis of traditional forms of moral intuitionism, foundationalism belongs to the ‘core-theory’ of intuitionism.³⁰

Questions arise in relation to the foundationalist proposal as to how there can be such basic beliefs, what the plausible candidates for such beliefs are and on what basis they are justified.³¹ In response to the question as to how we know the truths expressed by basic beliefs, many 18th century intuitionists refer to a ‘moral faculty’, which is one of the controversial concepts responsible for the widespread rejection of intuitionism.³² Intuitionists are generally thought to assume a mysterious faculty which makes their account implausible. However, as Roeser clarifies, the term ‘moral faculty’, which in fact disappeared from intuitionist writings after Thomas Reid, was not meant to denote anything mysterious.³³ It simply referred to the capacity to make moral judgements. It is

²⁸ As mentioned above (note 25), Aristotle argued in favour of foundationalism. The most prominent advocate of such a position is Descartes. A distinction can be drawn between strong, modest and weak foundationalism. Strong foundationalists claim not only that foundational beliefs have to be justified, but also that they need to be infallible, incorrigible or indubitable. Modest foundationalists, by contrast, merely require that those beliefs are non-inferentially justified. Weak foundationalism accepts basic beliefs which are only minimally justified, thus being unable to support other beliefs by themselves. In explaining how it is nevertheless possible to have justified beliefs, weak foundationalists refer to relations of coherence. Weak foundationalism is thus very similar to some versions of coherentism. See BonJour, *The Structure of Empirical Knowledge*: pp. 26 ff. Examples of moral foundationalism are: Henry J. McCloskey, *Meta-Ethics and Normative Ethics* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1969); G.E. Moore, *Principia Ethica* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1903); Harold Arthur Prichard, *Moral Obligation. Essays and Lectures* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1949); Thomas Reid, *Essays on the Active Powers of the Human Mind* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1969 [1788]); David Ross, *The Right and the Good* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1930); Henry Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics* (London and New York: Macmillan, 1901 [1874]).


³³ Ibid., pp. 11 and 101.
through non-mysterious cognitive capacities that we are said to discover moral truths.\textsuperscript{34}

Secondly, it is possible to conceive of justification in a non-linear, holistic manner. When adopting such a viewpoint, the primary unit of justification is the system as a whole, so that the regress terminates in a circular way.\textsuperscript{35} Since all beliefs are thought to support one another and to form a coherent system of beliefs, the justification for singular beliefs must be circular. Varieties of this answer are called ‘coherence theories’. The view that the justification of moral beliefs depends on the relationships between these beliefs, as well as on the way in which they are related to non-moral convictions, is prominent today.\textsuperscript{36} While in empirical epistemology foundationalism is dominant, in moral theory coherence views enjoy greater popularity.\textsuperscript{37} In the absence of an immediately justified foundation, moral (and also non-moral) beliefs are thought to give one another mutual support. Within a fully coherent web of beliefs, so the story goes, all elements are justified.\textsuperscript{38}

The coherentist approach faces the objection that there may be more than one coherent belief system, and that we lack a criterion for choosing between such systems. Moreover, it may be asked why coherence should be an indicator of truth. My main objection to coherence theorists is that


\textsuperscript{35} See BonJour, \textit{The Structure of Empirical Knowledge}, p. 24.


\textsuperscript{37} See ibid.

they over-systematise and over-intellectualise. They demand too much of finite beings like us. If in order to have justified moral beliefs we have to engage in reflections of the sort envisaged by them, this would mean that no one could ever be said to have any justified beliefs.

When we abandon the assumption that a justifying belief has to be justified, a third possible solution to the regress problem becomes conceivable. It can then be argued that the regress terminates with beliefs which are unjustified and yet able to confer justification on other beliefs. This position has been called ‘ordinary language view’ and ascribed to Wittgenstein and Austin. Laurence BonJour characterises it as the position that in the course of the regress we arrive at beliefs for which ‘the issue of justification “does not arise” or “makes no sense”’.

To these common sense approaches it can be objected that it remains unclear how we can identify the beliefs for which the demand for justification does not make sense. If there is a criterion which can be justified, we arrive at a justification of these beliefs. In that case the justification was possible and the regress continues. If there is no such criterion, this is problematic, because it seems that then we can never know whether we are dealing with a belief which can serve as an unjustified justifier. On what basis could we ever claim that in the case of a particular belief the issue of justification does not arise or makes no sense?

As mentioned above, this solution to the regress problem is not correctly ascribed to Wittgenstein, who instead of providing any kind of solution to it dissolved the problem.

1.4.3 The dissolution of the regress problem

Following Andreas Krebs, I shall argue that an approach along the lines of Wittgenstein’s later philosophy should not aim to provide an answer to the regress problem, but a dissolution of it. The apparent problem is dissolved as follows: it is characteristic of justifying reasons that they always refer to concrete doubts. As was emphasised by Wittgenstein,
and pursued by contemporary moral philosophers referred to as ‘epistemological contextualists’ (hereafter ‘contextualists’), doubt requires reasons (see for example OC 4 and 122). From this it follows that the regress problem does not arise. The process of justifying an assertion comes to an end when either the person defending the assertion or the one uttering doubts run out of reasons. As soon as the doubter has no reason for a further doubt, the asserter does not have to provide any more reasons for his assertion. Wittgenstein unmasks the regress problem as a pseudo problem that can only arise under the assumption that doubts do not have to be based on reasons.

Accordingly, there is no such thing as a class of special beliefs for which the demand for justification does not arise. Rather, it depends on the context which doubts arise and thus for which beliefs justification is required. I take this to imply that the claim that a justifying belief has to be justified even if that claim is understood in the first of the two senses distinguished by Thomas (in the sense that it does not necessarily have to be justified in the same context as the one in which it is justifying, see 1.4.1) is invalid. Whether a belief requires justification in contexts other than those in which it has a justificatory role depends on whether it can reasonably be doubted in those contexts. There may be beliefs that are beyond doubt in any context.

1.4.4 Moral epistemological contextualism

Contextualists criticise both sides of the foundationalist/coherentist dichotomy and suggest an account of moral justification that can be

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45 See Krebs, *Worauf man sich verlässt*, p. 91.

46 See ibid., pp. 90 f. Krebs refers to OC 204, where Wittgenstein says that justifying comes to an end, not that it has to come to an end. Wittgenstein does not have to demand that the process of justifying terminate, because it simply does.
viewed as occupying an intermediate position. Their critique focuses on a view shared by most members of both camps: the view that every belief as such needs to be justified.\(^{47}\) Just like Wittgenstein, contextualists regard justification as being closely related to doubt. They suggest that it be understood as a ‘response to a problem’, as an answer to a question or as a response to a challenge.\(^{48}\) Contextualists advocate the ‘double thesis’ that there is ‘no reasonable doubt without contextually relevant reasons, but also no justification without contextually relevant doubts’.\(^{49}\) It is a disputed matter amongst them whether the beliefs we do not have to justify (or cannot even justify) possess the epistemic status of being justified and what the relevant contexts are.

Charles Larmore, one of the leading contextualists, argues that the point of justification is to remove doubts relating to the truth of a belief. He emphasises that ‘[o]nly what is problematic calls for justification’ and claims that therefore the proper objects of justification are not beliefs as such, but ‘changes in belief’. The core principle of his contextualism is that no belief as such requires justification. Questions of justification arise within a context made up of unjustified beliefs.\(^{50}\)

Larmore holds that for all kinds of beliefs, the ‘need for justification arises only if we have uncovered some positive reason, based on other things we believe, for thinking that the belief might be false’.\(^{51}\) While I agree with him on this point, I do not think it follows that only changes in belief are the proper objects of justification, at least as far as moral justification is concerned. This, I think, would only be the case if moral justification were not directed at others. As a social, communicative practice, moral justification involves more than one person. If, for instance, I have reasons to object to your view that we have no moral obligations towards animals, I may require a justification from you for that view. In such a case it is not a change in beliefs that needs to be justified, but a belief itself. Yet the belief in question

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\(^{47}\) This is with the exception of some moral intuitionists such as Ross and Reid, who also think that ‘we can hold on to our initial beliefs until we have good reason to doubt them’. Roeser, *Moral Emotions and Intuitions*: p. 73.

\(^{48}\) The first of these options is defended by Larmore, the second by Stout and the third by Wellman, who argues that ‘to justify an ethical statement is to meet whatever challenges have actually been made to it’. Larmore, *The Autonomy of Morality*, p. 4; Stout, ‘On Having a Morality in Common’, p. 223; Wellman, *Challenge and Response*. Justification in Ethics, preface.


\(^{50}\) Larmore, *The Autonomy of Morality*, pp. 4 and 11.

\(^{51}\) Larmore, *The Morals of Modernity* p. 11.
is not *as such* in need of justification, but only because I have reasons to object to it.

Mark Timmons formulates his contextualist position as a response to the regress problem. He claims that ‘the regress of justification ends with beliefs that, in a given context, are not in need of justification’. This means that they ‘do not need the sort of epistemic status of enjoying positive evidential support (either inherently or from other beliefs and experiences) in order to play a regress-stopping role in the structure of justified belief’. The contexts in which some beliefs do not need to be justified are ‘ordinary’ contexts. There are other contexts in which justification for them is required, but this demand might never be met. Therefore, Timmons allows for beliefs that function as ‘justifiers’ despite not being justified themselves. It is somehow puzzling that as a contextualist he formulates his position as an answer to the apparent regress problem. As argued above, the contextualist claim that it only makes sense to ask for a justification of a judgement if that judgement could be reasonably doubted implies the dissolution of that problem.

1.5 Preliminary remarks

Some preliminary remarks are in order regarding terminological matters. I shall distinguish between a belief being justified and someone being entitled to hold it. As I use the term, a belief is justified if it is supported by reasons that are more certain than the belief they are supposed to justify. This view of justification goes back to Aristotle, and I take Wittgenstein to hold it. It is supported by the function that reasons fulfil. We need reasons in order to assure others or ourselves of an assertion, which would hardly be possible if those reasons were not more certain than the initial assertion. By reason I mean a further belief that counts in favour of the initial belief, one that makes us believe that it is true. That a belief is not justified in this sense does not imply that we


53 Aristotle writes in the *Posterior Analytics* that ‘it is necessary to be better convinced of the principles (either all or some of them) than of the conclusions’. Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics* p. 4 (72a37 f.). Wittgenstein writes: ‘My having two hands is, in normal circumstances, as certain as anything that I could produce in evidence for it. That is why I am not in a position to take the sight of my hand as evidence for it’ (OC 250; see also OC 243). See Stefan Rummens, ‘On the Possibility of a Wittgensteinian Account of Moral Certainty,’ *The Philosophical Forum* 44, no. 2 (2013): p. 130.
hold it illegitimately. Justification is not always needed. Sometimes it
does not even make sense to ask for it.

In English, the phrase ‘not every belief as such has to be justified’ is
ambiguous. It can mean that not every belief has to possess ‘the epistemic status of enjoying positive evidential support’,\textsuperscript{54} or that we do not have to provide a justification for every belief. It is clear that, in his article on moral contextualism, Marcus Willaschek denies that we have to come up with a justification for all our moral beliefs, while holding that those beliefs we do not have to justify due to a lack of contextually relevant doubts possess the epistemic status of being justified (the distinction can be clearly rendered in German, but is difficult to translate succinctly into English!).\textsuperscript{55} But for him this does not mean that they are supported by reasons that are more certain. Timmons argues that justification is not required in either sense, but not all advocates of contextualism writing in English say explicitly what they mean when they say that not every belief needs to be justified. Like Timmons, I do not simply want to claim that we do not have to provide a justification for every moral belief, but that in addition not all the moral beliefs we hold have to possess the epistemic status of being justified. My disagreement with Willaschek in this respect appears to be merely terminological.

In my attempt to call into question some fundamental assumptions made by moral philosophers belonging to different camps, I shall not seek assistance from Wittgenstein alone. Other important reference points will be Aristotle, along with philosophers standing in the Aristotelian tradition, Gilbert Ryle and contextualists.

1.6 Structure of the book

Chapter 2, \textit{Basic Concepts}, provides a short introduction to the later Wittgenstein’s understanding of language and meaning. It explains the concepts that are crucial for the purposes of this study, such as ‘language-game’, ‘rule’, ‘meaning’, and ‘grammatical proposition’. The

\textsuperscript{54} Timmons, \textit{Morality without Foundations: A Defense of Ethical Contextualism} p. 187.

\textsuperscript{55} Willaschek, ‘Moralisches Urteil und begründeter Zweifel. Eine kontextualistische Konzeption moralischer Rechtfertigung,’ p. 634. In German, different formulations are used to say that it is not necessary to engage in the process of justifying every belief (‘nicht jede Überzeugung muss gerechtfertigt \textit{werden}’) and that not every belief has to possess the epistemic status of being justified (‘nicht jede Überzeugung muss gerechtfertigt \textit{sein}’).
concept of a rule is further elucidated by a presentation and discussion of John Searle’s distinction between regulative and constitutive rules. The game-analogy is applied to moral uses of language and different levels of moral practice are distinguished.

Chapter 3, *Certainty*, considers Wittgenstein’s views on knowledge, doubt and certainty, moving from a focus on propositions to an emphasis on acting. According to the interpretation suggested, propositions such as ‘Here is one hand’ uttered while looking at one’s hand are under normal conditions beyond the realm of reasonable doubt and justification. They lack truth value and do not constitute knowledge. The chapter explores the relationship between these propositions and the actions and reactions that underlie our language-games. The epistemic language-games we participate in are underpinned by shared actions and reactions, including primitive verbal and non-verbal responses, shared ways of making judgements of sameness, common ways of following rules and so on. The chapter provides the basis for the analogy drawn in Chapter 5 between certainty regarding the empirical world and moral certainty.

Chapter 4, *Moral Justification*, considers the role of the justification of moral judgements in everyday practice. It discusses a number of examples in order to point out the conditions that obtain when the demand for justification arises in concrete practical situations. The chapter compares different practices of justification, such as the practice of justifying moral judgements and the practice of justifying empirical judgements, and highlights both their differences and their similarities. It is argued that in the light of the conditions that obtain when a demand for the justification of a moral judgement arises in everyday practice, certain philosophical justificatory demands appear to be senseless. Philosophers who attempt to justify moral judgements as basic as the judgement that killing is wrong disregard the practical role of moral justification, which determines its sense. They attempt to provide an answer where there is no question.

After this consideration of cases where justification is required, Chapter 5, *Moral Certainty*, turns to cases in which to demand justification would appear pointless. Renford Bambrough’s attempt to prove that people have moral knowledge provides a starting point for the analogy between certainty regarding the empirical world and moral certainty. The alleged proof of moral knowledge is criticised in a way that mirrors Wittgenstein’s critique of G. E. Moore’s proof of the external world. It is argued that propositions such as ‘Killing is wrong’ are certain for morally competent agents and function as ‘axes’
within moral reasoning. The moral language-games we participate in are underpinned by primitive responses such as responses to another person’s suffering, and the immediate responses of morally competent agents.

Chapter 6, *Moral Competence*, addresses the notion of moral competence, paying particular attention to the way in which it is acquired. The chapter starts by considering concrete cases in which moral competence is exercised, cases as diverse as raising a child and participating in a rule of law mission. It argues that moral agency is first and foremost a matter of having such competence, which is the result of training. The capacities involved in this complex competence include rational as well as emotional capacities. Drawing on Ryle’s distinction between knowledge-how and knowledge-that, moral competence is compared with certain practical skills such as playing the piano, which are acquired in ways that resemble the ways in which human beings learn to be moral. The account of moral competence and training leads to a refined understanding of the acting that underlies moral language-games. These games are grounded in action in at least three different ways: they are based on primitive reactions that are not specifically human; the acquisition of moral language requires certain natural reactions (for example a parent’s expression of approval and affection in reaction to good behaviour); and sophisticated moral language-games such as justifying and evaluating actions and judgements presuppose moral action that is not accompanied by conscious thought and results from training. The chapter ends with a refutation of the attempt to justify morality as a whole from an external standpoint.

Chapter 7, *Objections*, addresses the two main possible objections to the practice-based view of morality: that it is a form of moral relativism and that it is conservative. The objection of relativism is rejected on the grounds that moral practices transcend cultural boundaries, there is intercultural moral agreement and the possible diversity of moral codes is limited by human nature, physical circumstances and the functions of morality. The related objection of conservatism is refuted by arguing that the proposed account allows for moral critique, change and progress, the

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56 I use the term ‘rational’ instead of ‘cognitive’ because I conceive of emotions as cognitive phenomena. Yet contrasting emotional capacities with rational capacities is problematic as well, since I do not want to claim that emotions are necessarily irrational. The contrast I wish to draw is between emotional capacity and the capacity to engage in forms of reasoning in which emotions do not feature prominently.
latter two being processes which result from a combination of factual changes in the ‘surroundings’ of moral practices, reasoning and genuine moral disagreement.

Chapter 8, Conclusion, summarises the main arguments of the book, points out the limits of these arguments and indicates potential avenues for future research.
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