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Interviu / Interview

On Contemporary Moral Philosophy, Wittgenstein, and P. F. Strawson

Mindaugas Gilaitis in conversation with **Benjamin De Mesel**

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The conversation took place on 29 November 2024, during De Mesel's visit at the Faculty of Philosophy, Vilnius University.

Mindaugas Gilaitis (MG): Your main area of research is contemporary ethics and metaethics. How do you see the current state of moral philosophy?

Benjamin De Mesel (BDM): I don't have a full overview of what is happening in moral philosophy, but I have some idea of what is happening in what are commonly taken to be the major Anglophone journals (*The Philosophical Review*, *Mind*, *The Journal of Philosophy*, *Ethics*, *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, and so on). Today, these journals certainly do not only publish work engaged with thinkers traditionally understood as belonging to the canon of analytic philosophy. If I recall correctly, they recently published on Chinese philosophy and on thinkers such as Friedrich Schelling and Knud Løgstrup. The range of thinkers and traditions getting attention in the major journals seems to have broadened.

In addition, I also believe that the range of topics has expanded. I might be mistaken, but when I think about Anglophone moral philosophy as it was 50 years ago, I think of a rather limited set of main concerns, although there have, of course, always been authors working on less central topics. In metaethics, one would produce arguments for or against cognitivism and non-cognitivism about the semantics of moral judgments, realism and anti-realism about the existence of moral facts, internalism and externalism about the link between moral judgments and motivation. In normative ethics, one would defend or attack utilitarian or Kantian or virtue ethical theories. And, in applied ethics, one would talk about abortion, euthanasia, and so on. There seems to have been a canon of topics, more or less as there was an agreed-upon canon in other domains (think about a canon of books you had to read or records you had to listen to).

My sense is that some of the most interesting work happening today in moral philosophy is work that falls outside of this traditional canon, perhaps partly because discussions about the traditional topics have become increasingly technical and derivative. These issues have been discussed by so many people in so many ways that the only thing you can still do there is replace a comma here and there while the main positions have been carved out. Many people feel that the relevance of doing this is limited. They prefer instead to explore new territory, new topics, new problems. I have not done any systematic research on this, but I see a lot of work on interpersonal relationships such as love relationships, relationships between parents and children, employers and employees, professors and students, which seems to have been much less present about fifty years ago. The body of philosophical literature on emotions has also grown exponentially, the question not just being what emotions are in general but also how to understand specific emotions such as resentment, anger, gratitude, hurt feelings, pride, and so on. In my own field, moral responsibility studies, the traditional focus on free will has not disappeared but is supplemented by debates about interpersonal practices such as praising and blaming. Other relatively new fields include the ethics of artificial intelligence, the literature on structural injustice, feminist ethics and work on the intersection between ethics and epistemology about topics such as epistemic responsibility and epistemic blame. Lastly, I want to mention new work in the history of ethics. You know that I am especially interested in 20th century British moral philosophy, and I see that work written in the second half of the 20th century is now increasingly regarded as belonging to the history of ethics. There is a revival of interest in the ethical thought of thinkers such as Iris Murdoch, Philippa Foot, Mary Midgley, Elizabeth Anscombe, P.F. Strawson and Bernard Williams, and I am very pleased to see that.

Apart from the fact that the range of thinkers and topics being discussed in the major journals is broadening, I observe that, in moral philosophy, as probably in any other field of philosophy, the work being published is increasingly specialized. People no longer identify as moral philosophers in general, or even as metaethicists or normative ethicists or applied ethicists. Instead, they work on blame or moral responsibility or even something more specific such as collective moral responsibility for climate change. There is no longer (if there has ever been) such a thing as 'the moral philosophy literature'. Rather, what we see is a range of interconnected fields, each with their own concerns, accepted starting points, ways of arguing and canonical figures. I do not have problems with increased specialization *per se,* but there are dangers to it. Specialized work must be made as immune as possible against all possible objections from peer-reviewers. Qualities such as being understandable and interesting to a larger audience become less prominent or are relegated to 'outreach' work. Writing a big book attempting to show how many things hang together (I am thinking here of the kind of work published by people such as Alasdair MacIntyre or Charles Taylor) has become immensely risky, and, as a consequence, not so many people do this anymore.

MG: Reflections about the nature, methods and limits of philosophy were central to the formation of analytic philosophy. What in your view is the role of metaphilosophical and methodological questions in contemporary analytic philosophy?

BDM: Because of the increased specialization just mentioned, metaphilosophy has also become very much a field of its own, and methodological questions are often thought to be the business of people working primarily on methodology. This has the advantage that some people are really focusing on these questions and can give most of their attention to them. But it has the disadvantage that the link between methodology and substantive philosophical work is severed. People now say: 'I don't do methodology, I work on collective responsibility for climate change.' This is a problem because, in my view, every philosopher should think hard about the methodological side of what they are doing. What are they aiming for in philosophy, what might an adequate method for achieving that aim look like?

The problem is prevalent in moral philosophy. As I said, I see a lot of very interesting and creative work, and the literature has really become enriched with acute phenomenological insights about, for instance, how relationships work. But there is a certain methodological sloppiness that can be brought out by asking where all this could lead us. What kind of consideration could lead to what kind of conclusion? For instance, if you work on moral responsibility and the emotions, as I do, many people will tell you that "we should take the results of scientific research on the emotions into account". In one sense, this is trivial: of course we should do that. But things immediately become difficult if you then ask *how* these results should be taken into account. Are philosophical claims refutable by empirical claims? What is the nature of philosophical claims and how could empirical claims contribute to arguments in favour of philosophical claims? When it comes to these questions, I sometimes miss reflection and observe that scientific and philosophical claims make for a curious mix. People talk about 'moral psychology' to cover up many difficulties and the relation between philosophical and psychological claims about the emotions. At the same time, I understand why these difficult questions are often not asked: they make things much harder, and there is pressure to publish. We hear a lot of talk about interdisciplinarity, but in my experience *real* interdisciplinarity is very difficult and requires an enormous amount of effort.

MG: You are also interested in the philosophy of Wittgenstein. Why Wittgenstein's work might be of interest to those working on moral questions, or practical philosophy more generally?

BDM: I am not primarily interested in Wittgenstein's moral or political views. At least some of these views were quite idiosyncratic and I don't think they were philosophically very well worked out or thought through. What I like about Wittgenstein is, very broadly speaking, his approach to philosophical problems or his philosophical methodology. And I try to use that approach in relation to philosophical problems Wittgenstein himself did not really work on, mostly problems in metaethics broadly conceived. Let me give some examples.

One task that philosophers have according to Wittgenstein is to somehow unearth or reveal the pictures that underlie certain ways of thinking. Why do people think in this

way? I have been asking that question about the free will problem: why do people think that determinism threatens free will? My Wittgensteinian answer is roughly that they imagine themselves observing the universe as a whole from some kind of outsider position, adopting a view from nowhere as it were. From such a standpoint, free will seems to disappear because everything that happens appears as a function of the past and the laws of nature. This is, very roughly, a picture that skeptics about free will work with, and Wittgensteinian insights helped me to bring this into the open.

An interesting cluster of Wittgensteinian ideas concerns the notions of doubt and certainty. Certainties are basically things that cannot be meaningfully doubted, are not in need of justification, and show themselves in the way we act. Thus, it is a certainty that 2 + 2 = 4, that this is my hand, and that the earth existed long before I was born. There is a debate now that was started about 15 years ago by Nigel Pleasants, among others, about whether there are moral certainties: certainties that form the unquestioned and unquestionable basis of our moral practices. My proposal, developed in collaboration with my colleague prof. Stefan Rummens, is that our being free and morally responsible beings is a moral certainty in this sense.

Let me give another example. Wittgenstein suggests that there is a generalizing tendency in philosophy. Philosophers tend to make general claims on the basis of a few observations. As you know, Wittgenstein was very much opposed to the idea of philosophical theories in which we try to capture the phenomena in as few principles as possible. Now there seems to be a lot of theory in ethics as well. Think about utilitarianism and Kantianism in normative ethics: one principle or a very limited set of principles suffices to tell us what to do in every conceivable case. Think about metaethics and questions about the semantics of moral judgments: what do we do when we judge that meat eating is wrong, for example? Do we express a belief, an emotion, a prescription? The assumption underlying all these positions is that, every time we judge that meat eating is wrong, we do the same thing. But I don't think that that assumption is warranted: sometimes a moral judgment may express a belief, sometimes an emotion, sometimes a prescription. My Wittgensteinian background helped me to see this.

Another example. Wittgenstein emphasizes that our concepts are tailored to the kind of beings that we are and the kind of world that we live in. If our world was very different, if we were very different, then we might have a very different conceptual scheme. So, concepts are, let's say, relative to who we are and the world we live in. And I think that is very much the case as well for concepts that are central to moral philosophy, concepts such as responsibility, freedom and so on. If we were very different beings, if we were for example perfect ethical rule followers who never transgressed any rule, then there would be no need for a concept such as responsibility. We can now ask some very interesting questions, such as how the concept of responsibility relates to who we are, to basic human needs, concerns, purposes and so on? Why do we find it useful to have such a concept?

What else? Well, Wittgenstein is famous for his work on following a rule. Without going into details: a plausible account of what it is to follow rules seems obviously relevant to discussions about ethics, because there is a lot of rule-following going on here.

Yet another example: Wittgenstein has a whole set of remarks on aspect perception and seeing something *as* something. I have used some of these thoughts in discussions about moral perception. And last but not least, there is the idea that meaning is use, which I have used in a debate about objectivity in ethics. Is there objectivity in ethics? A Wittgensteinian approach entails that we should take a close look at how 'objective' is used in these discussions, without assuming that objectivity in ethics must be exactly the same as objectivity in science or in another domain.

MG: You have co-edited a book called *P.F. Strawson and His Philosophical Legacy*. How is Strawson's work received these days? And how do you see his philosophical legacy?

BDM: The book I have edited is about Strawson's legacy in general, not just in moral philosophy. Strawson was active in many fields. His first book was an introduction to logic. One thing he emphasized in his work on logic is that well-known logical connectives do not exactly correspond to their everyday counterparts. Thus, the material conditional works differently from 'if … then …' in ordinary language, and conjunction in logic works differently from 'and' in ordinary language. Compare 'He took off his trousers and went to bed' to 'He went to bed and took off his trousers'. In ordinary language, there seems to be a difference between the two sentences: the first sentence says that he first took off his trousers and then went to bed, in the second sentence the order is reversed. This temporal aspect of 'and' disappears when we use conjunction in logic.

Strawson has made important contributions to the philosophy of perception, metaphysics, the study of Kant. He was a Kant scholar, and in his books *Individuals* and *The Bounds of Sense* he put forward arguments which commentators have characterized as 'transcendental arguments'. In the wake of Strawson's work, there was a lot of discussion about these transcendental arguments and their force, and this discussion is still going on.

Strawson is now the most influential figure in philosophical discussions about moral responsibility, mainly due to his famous paper 'Freedom and Resentment'. This is curious, because, during his lifetime, that paper was not considered to be central to his work. He even said at some point that moral philosophy did not really grip him. So, it's a bit ironic that 'Freedom and Resentment' is now his most influential paper, and the paper only became very influential during the last 20–30 years. Strawson's legacy in debates about moral responsibility is considerable. If you look, for instance, at the *Oxford Handbook of Moral Responsibility*, it starts by stating the impact of Strawson's paper on the field.

I believe that something very interesting is going on here, because, in my own work, I have tried to show that Strawson is often misinterpreted in contemporary debates about moral responsibility. One of the reasons why Strawson is so popular nowadays is that, to many people, 'Freedom and Resentment' somehow holds the promise of being able to bypass the whole free will debate, which has dominated discussions about responsibility for a long time. Many people working on responsibility are fed up with the free will discussion and want to talk about something else: about our practices of holding responsible,

interactions between people and the place of emotions in them. These are certainly elements emphasized by Strawson, and they are important matters for philosophical discussion, but I don't think that the free will debate can be sidestepped. On the contrary, I believe that Strawson was making a contribution to that debate in 'Freedom and Resentment' and later remarks on moral responsibility, which have been sadly neglected. In later replies to commentators of 'Freedom and Resentment', Strawson makes it very clear, to my mind, that he was in many ways a classical compatibilist. I don't think that this makes Strawson's position less interesting, though, because his question was not so much the traditional question of what responsibility *is* and under which conditions we are or are not responsible, but the question of *why we have* the concept or idea of responsibility. What is the role of this idea in our lives, how is it rooted in what we are like as human beings, in how we relate to one another and in the concerns that we have? I have mentioned this kind of thinking when we were talking about Wittgenstein, and I think this is a deeply Wittgensteinian aspect to Strawson's thought about responsibility which has been overlooked. Strawson is dealing with the roots of the idea of responsibility, rather than trying to directly answer the traditional question about the conditions of responsibility.

Another area where Strawson is often mentioned today is in debates about conceptual engineering. Conceptual engineering is very popular nowadays, and was in some sense pioneered by Rudolf Carnap. Strawson had a discussion with Carnap on exactly this topic in a paper published in the 1960s, 'Carnap's Views on Constructed Systems Versus Natural Languages in Analytic Philosophy'. In that paper, Strawson made an objection to Carnap's project sometimes called the 'changing the subject' objection. Carnap proposes no longer to work with our ordinary everyday concepts. Rather, we should work with concepts that are purified, more exact, better suited to the aims of a scientific philosophy. But, Strawson's objection goes, you cannot solve a philosophical problem concerning, say, the ordinary concept of knowledge by changing the concept. To do that is to change the subject, to bypass the original problem. The fact that an adapted concept does not run into the same problem as the original concept does not mean that the original problem has been solved. And this is an objection to the project of conceptual engineering that people in the literature are still trying to deal with.

Thus, some of the main areas of Strawson's contemporary influence are moral responsibility studies and the conceptual engineering literature. But I would also like to say something about where I think he *should* be more influential. And that is, first of all, in methodological and metaphilosophical debates. In his book *Analysis and Metaphysics* (1992), Strawson develops and defends a form of analysis called 'connective analysis'. Analysis is here understood not as breaking down concepts into more fundamental parts, as traditional conceptual analysis à la Moore had it. The question for Strawson is not: how can we break down the concept of x into parts that are more fundamental (think about a traditional analysis of knowledge in terms of truth, belief, and justification). Strawson's suggestion is to conduct *connective* analysis: we make explicit the relations between several concepts within a conceptual landscape. Thus, you explain how knowledge relates or connects to belief, justification, truth, and so on, without assuming that one of these

concepts must be more fundamental or basic than another (but also without precluding that some concepts might turn out to be more fundamental than others). And that is, of course, also a very Wittgensteinian idea: you attempt to give some kind of overview of how concepts hang together.

Apart from his methodological contributions, I believe that the power of Strawson's anti-skeptical arguments, as set out in *Individuals*, *The Bounds of Sense*, and *Scepticism and Naturalism*, has been underestimated. In the latter book, Strawson provides what one might call a 'two standpoint argument' against several forms of skepticism. The core idea is that there are many phenomena (meaning, perception, moral responsibility) which you can approach from both a scientific and a more everyday perspective. For instance, if you approach free will and responsibility from a scientific standpoint, Strawson is happy to admit that, *from that standpoint*, free will and responsibility seem to disappear. His fundamental question is: why would we be rationally required to take up *that* standpoint? There is also another standpoint, a humanistic standpoint that great writers such as Tolstoy and Proust adopted, from which we describe interpersonal relationships and in which responsibility does have a place. Both of these standpoints are available to us, and both are legitimate, but what is the argument for saying that *only* the scientific standpoint counts, that free will and responsibility *really* do not exist only because they do not have a place in a scientific perspective on things? Similar arguments can be made about perception. Take people who are inclined to say that science tells us that the table is not really solid, or that there are no such things as meanings. Strawson's reply is that, indeed, *relative to* a certain standpoint, these claims are true, but there is no super-standpoint from which the scientific standpoint can be seen to be superior to all other standpoints. Which standpoint we should adopt in a given situation depends on practical considerations, such as human purposes or concerns. This is in no way to suggest that science is unimportant, in no way to be dismissive of science. Rather, it is to emphasize that science has a place in human life, but a place among other things, and, as he writes in 'Freedom and Resentment', philosophers have to "take account of the facts in all their bearings". What attracts me in Strawson's philosophy is that it is naturalist, in the sense that it does not invoke any mysterious or supernatural entities, but in no way reductionist. It is very down to earth, but also liberal in its naturalism. It allows a lot of things to exist. The table really exists, and so do free will and moral responsibility.