

# Practical Identity and Forms of Life: An Attempt at Clarifying Wittgenstein's Ethics

Christopher King  
Grinnell College

## Abstract

This paper offers an account of the possibility for a system of normative ethics in a later Wittgensteinian epistemological context. By adopting a viewpoint of ethics as fundamentally grounded in 'practical identities' as the source of normative obligations in a manner expressed by thinkers such as Christine Korsgaard, the paper attempts to clarify and surpass the quietist and unanalyzable ethical account given by Wittgenstein himself. Such an approach based on identity largely mirrors the normative possibilities in speech offered by 'forms of life' in *Philosophical Investigations* by offering in-context, normatively rich frameworks in which ethical statements can be adequately and normatively assessed. Such a viewpoint accounts for the accepted disagreement in Wittgenstein's ethical thoughts by showing the in-context, identity-based 'form of life' differences that lead to acceptable ethical divergence, while also opening up room for semi-universal bedrock ethical statements that all humans in a given social community necessarily are subject to due to the basic identities implied in being a human being for their community. Such an account introduces more clarity to the way that ethical deliberation and disagreement takes shape from a Wittgensteinian perspective.

## Introduction

In *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein destroys the determinacy of meaning in language that was and seemingly still is taken as a given by most people when thinking philosophically, creating a great skeptical problem for anyone wanting to adequately communicate with those around them. Luckily for anyone who wants to use language, Wittgenstein believes that there is a social solution to this problem and

seems to claim that normative standards for meaning in language do exist. There are various interpretations of exactly what Wittgenstein's solution involves, but at its base it goes something like this: "Although there may not be a deeply philosophically analyzable absolute meaning of any given sentence, when used in practice by members of a shared social community, the terms gain normative meaning." Thus, the members of a community can communicate with each-other, and in those contexts, there are normative standards of correct and incorrect usages of language.

Although Wittgenstein believed in limited normativity in the meaning of language, he never gave a clear account of his ethical beliefs and specifically opposed any attempts to create systems of ethics. Creating a system of ethics seems to be an attempt to apply a rigid, constricting lens onto a linguistic landscape incapable of handling such rigidity. Thus, Wittgenstein only ever comments on ethics as being an extremely personal subject, and a subject about which great variation is to be accepted. As Anne-Marie Christensen describes it, to Wittgenstein, a person's "ethical attitude" is "a form of personal worldview." These personal ethical worldviews may differ, and they may even differ fundamentally. If they do differ, there is no sure way to resolve the difference, as there is no shared standard to which they can appeal; it is simply a clash between worldviews.

This account of moral disagreement leaves Wittgenstein's account of ethical disagreement in a position somewhat similar to his account of the interactions between separate linguistic communities. To Wittgenstein, determinacy in language use only exists within the bounds of a specific community. Thus, the way in which what is true and untrue about the world is decided necessarily resides within communities as well. There is no external measure to appeal to. Nevertheless, when two linguistic communities meet, it is possible that one community might critique the beliefs of the other as inaccurate. It is even possible that a group would internally critique itself, as has happened numerous times in scientific and cultural revolutions. In these revolutions, core assumptions about the way that things work have been challenged and flipped on their heads. It seems that ethical disagreement between two individuals for Wittgenstein lies in a similar position. The disagreeing people simply have disparate worldviews.

From these disparate worldviews, meaningful

critique can happen. Wittgenstein even gives examples of such discussions in an ethical context. That said, how such meaningful critique is resolved goes unanswered, despite the fact that it *does*, in fact, often resolve itself. There is nothing in Wittgenstein's philosophical arsenal (ethical or linguistic) that can help us understand what might happen when two members of separate linguistic communities or two people with different ethical worldviews interact. There is no separate, crystalline fact of the matter that they could appeal to in order to resolve their disagreement. This lack is already worrying to what we intuitively feel should be the case in interactions between communities about scientific matters of fact, but in the ethical scenario between two members of the *same* community such a conclusion feels almost unacceptable. To have ethical disagreement between two very close people shrouded in such epistemic fog seems like it might be giving up more than is needed and obscuring what is a coherent, if a bit difficult, process for those involved.

In this paper, I will present a potential solution to this problem. This solution will build a conception of moral decision making using the concept of 'practical identity' provided by Christine Korsgaard as an analogue to Wittgenstein's *forms of life* which he employs to understand normativity in general uses of language. Such an approach might help in resolving some of Wittgenstein's ethical indeterminacy. Additionally, it will give a useful analytic lens to understand both personal moral conflicts and ethical disagreement. Using this lens, moral deliberation and disagreement is revealed as not a vague interaction of viewpoints clashing with each other that mysteriously and inexplicably resolves itself, but rather a negotiation of identities for the person/s involved.

### **Practical Identity**

At the core of Korsgaard's ethical theory is the claim that all obligations are fundamentally a response to a threat against one or more of our identities. These identities are what Korsgaard calls "practical identities," meaning that they aren't based on some deep metaphysical claim of identity as a thing existing from a third person perspective and informed by the Scientific World View, but rather a practical account of the way that we experience deliberation from a first person perspective. Regardless and independent of the existence or nonexistence from a third-person perspective of some idealized Cartesian self, the reality of our lived first person decision-making process

is that “it is as if there were something over and above all of your desires, something that is *you*, and that [deliberates and] *chooses* which [desire] to act on.” It is this non-metaphysical, practical you that makes up your overarching practical identity as a person.

Such an approach of establishing practical identities may seem like it does not mesh well with a Wittgensteinian account of things. It may seem like it relies too much on some *a priori* method of speculative reasoning that fails the test of the private language argument (which I will explain shortly) for lacking a criterion of correctness. This, however, is not the case. In this argument, it seems to me that Korsgaard is actually making a somewhat Wittgensteinian argument against the classical Cartesian view of the self while simultaneously maintaining the the deliberative agent self as a practically, although not necessarily metaphysically, existent identity.

Obviously, the classical Cartesian view of the self is flawed from a Wittgensteinian perspective; it posits a dualist account of the world that quite blatantly assumes the existence of a deeply and inherently private view of a self fundamentally inaccessible to others. This conception fails the test presented by Wittgenstein’s private language argument. According to the private language argument, this self could not really communicate with itself in such a private way, as would be no external criterion of correctness it can appeal to. To illustrate this, look at what we might normally do to see whether we’re right or not. Say I want to know what the date is. Since we are currently in a 2020 COVID world and the days all blend together, I’m not 100% sure if my disposition to guess that it’s December 19<sup>th</sup> is correct, so I decide to check the calendar on my phone. After checking the calendar, I realize that I am wrong. It is, in fact, December 20<sup>th</sup>. I needed an external criterion of correctness to compare my internal disposition to, or else I wouldn’t really know what was right. From this base, Wittgenstein argues that such a private definition cannot function. All that such a private definition could possibly give would be a measure of whether the person who gave the definition feels that they are using the term properly. That isn’t much of a standard for truth at all; it’s not verifiable. All real truth claims require an outside criterion of correctness with which they can check. Thus, the metaphysically dualist Cartesian account of selfhood is doomed to fail should we accept Wittgenstein’s critique of private languages.

In contrast, Korsgaard’s account treats our decision

making process as a fundamentally public and practical matter. Korsgaard points out that we do, in fact, experience a deliberative process as agents, one that is unified by our identity and fundamentally relies on language as a tool for representing our reasons. We do, in fact, order, encourage, blame, obey, and punish ourselves, as Wittgenstein points out. Our inner monologue is not simply real: it is also public. If we were to share the language that we use with ourselves in our deliberative process with others, they would be able to understand it. Such a process is not a private one in the sense of a private language, but merely in the sense that it is a negotiation between parts of ourselves. We may or may not choose to share this process with other people, but it happens nonetheless using a publicly available language and employs publicly shareable reasons. To deny that this account of identity and agency is resting on an inherently public base would be to deny that the reasons we use to justify our decisions are public as well, which is blatantly false when further considered. The deliberative process is inherently one of negotiation with ourselves, and we can all explain our reasons as to why we make the decisions we deliberated over. The results of this personal deliberation provides us with reasons that we can and do regularly share. I can explain my reasoning for a decision I make to anyone, and although they might not agree with me, we can certainly expect that they will understand me.

### **Identities of Obligation**

In addition to having a single overarching practical identity as a given individual, each individual also has many smaller identities. Contingent practical identities such as 'sister,' 'doctor,' or 'Austrian citizen' each come with their own socially-determined reasons to do certain things and not do others. A good doctor ought to spend time developing their medical knowledge and ought not to harm their patient, for example.

Everyone also necessarily shares their identity as deliberative and social beings who need the social context provided by their contingent identities to motivate their decisions and live a meaningful life. In our specific case, this identity can be referred to as our human identity. This human identity, being the base upon which our other identities stand, also provides normative force to our other, contingent identities. Additionally, it can not be given up without dire consequences, as to give it up would be to give up our capability for identity and thus deprive us of our reasons for action. This is why

we might say that someone “lost themselves” in rage if they kill someone in a murder of passion; they have temporarily snapped out of their identity as human. Other identities can also approach a similar level of importance in our lives when we become very attached to them. Someone might choose to die rather than betray their country’s interests because to do so would be to forsake a national identity that they’ve made so core to their being that dying is preferable to betraying it. Ethical decision-making then involves the deliberative negotiation between our identities and the situations and urges we face in living our lives. For example, a man might face a conflict of identity when his family refuses to invite his boyfriend to a family gathering due to their bigoted beliefs around sexuality. In this situation, the man must decide between an obligation from his identity as a member of his family and an obligation from his identity as a lover and a gay man (among others).

If someone makes decisions that clash with one of their identities, then that identity is threatened. If they either make enough decisions against that identity, or a decision that directly rules out that identity, then they lose the identity completely. For an example of losing the identity through making enough decisions against it, imagine someone who identifies as a tea enthusiast. If that person suddenly starts choosing coffee over tea every morning for a week, then their identity as a tea enthusiast is threatened, and they and the people around them might start questioning it. “Hey,” a friend might say, “Why did you stop drinking tea all of the sudden? You drank it every morning before last week!” If such behavior continues for six months, then calling that person a tea enthusiast seems to no longer be applicable, and a friend might call them out on it if they still insist that they are. “I haven’t seen you drink tea in half a year with no good excuse! How can you still claim to be a tea enthusiast!” An example of a decision that instantly destroys an identity might be one of someone identifying as a member of their school’s board game club. If they quit the club, then that identity is instantly destroyed. In almost all cases, it would be incorrect to continue claiming that you’re a part of board game club if you’ve formally quit, and the people around them could also call them out on that. “Stop saying you’re a part of the board game club! You told everyone you quit!”

As you can see by these examples, identities are fundamentally public entities. In the social contexts where a given set of identities is used, they have their meaning by

dint of the standards set within that social context, and there are normative standards one must achieve in order to claim membership in those identity groups. In a society without music, you cannot identify as a musician. Similarly, the honor code of a knight during the Middle Ages will be different than the honor code of a baseball player in our modern day, even though they would likely both identify as honorable. The existence of these identities is determined by the shared social world in which they're used. The contents of these identities (i.e. the reasons and obligations they give you), as well as the criterion under which you can claim ownership to them is mediated through this inherently public social lens as well.

Korsgaard employs this account of practical identity to offer a compelling Kantian account of what such decision-making necessarily looks like. That said, Korsgaard employs many claims that a Wittgensteinian perspective might reject in constructing her account of morality building off of this base. Regardless, the starting point of practical identity itself is really what has important implications for pulling back a bit at some of the vagueness present in Wittgenstein's account of morality. Non-Kantian approaches could certainly be built from the base of obligation that the conception of practical identity provides.

### **Identities and Forms of Life**

One of the terms often discussed in explanations of Wittgenstein's conception of linguistic normativity is the term *Lebensform*, or "form of life." Although Wittgenstein himself doesn't use the term to any truly great extent, it is an illuminating term for understanding the type of scenarios in which a language has normative meaning. To Wittgenstein, language only gains normative meaning within a given embodied context. Here's how I like to think of it: language cannot be understood in isolation, but requires two levels of context. The first context is a social one. You must be indoctrinated into a community that speaks a shared language in shared contexts before you can adequately understand the language in use. The second context is a teleological one. You must employ the language in a specific context of *use* before it can be adequately understood. Both of these contexts are intertwined, with no hard barrier between them. You cannot understand any given use of language without both.

An example of a form of life can be seen in the institution of a grocery store and the many activities that you engage in within it. For example, imagine a woman bringing

her big cart of items to the checkout lane. In the cart, she has oats from the bulk section, some produce, and tofu. She begins placing her items on the conveyor belt, and eventually the cashier gets to her oats and asks her “What’s the code for that?” The woman replies “GE30.” This situation requires both that the woman buying groceries and the cashier have the cultural knowledge of how supermarkets work, the process of checking out, and the special process of exchanging codes for items from the bulk section in order to understand how the language is to be used in that specific situation. In a different situation with different context, such language would have absolutely no meaning, or a completely different one. Asking “What’s the code for that?” has completely different meaning as a software programmer, or a spy learning how to communicate using a cypher. Without knowing the specific context, you cannot understand the specific utterances and follow the language game properly. These cultural and teleological contexts are what make up forms of life.

Wittgenstein’s example of a language game between two builders in section two of *Philosophical Investigations* can also be analyzed from this form of life perspective. In the example, two people are conversing in a very simple language consisting solely of words of construction materials, such as ‘slab.’ One builder will yell ‘slab!’ at the other, and the other builder will go and fetch them a slab. The language of Wittgenstein’s builders from section two has meaning in part because they’re using it in the context of a specific activity. That said, if you take one of the builders out and replace them with someone without the social conditioning and training to be a member of their construction-worker community, they won’t have the social context to know what’s going on and understand the teleological context they’ve been placed in. If you lack a part of the context required to participate in the form of life that a language is being used in, then you won’t be able to adequately understand the use of language you’re engaging in. For Wittgenstein, language is to be understood *in use*.

In the case of the builders, the fact that they live in a form of life as members in a construction-worker community seems to express nearly the same meaning as saying that they are construction workers. It is their entrance into that community that allows them to *identify* as construction workers, and people who can properly assert that they hold the identity of construction worker can reasonably be expected to understand the language games that construction workers play.



Identity, in the sense of practical identity as given by Korsgaard, seems to bear resemblance to the concept of a form of life. Our practical identities give us structure around which we can shape the contours of our life, they give us reasons to make both mundane and profound decisions in our life, and they give us boundaries within which we must mostly abide unless we want to feel the guilt of losing our sense of self. They give us teleological reasons that we should strive for and a social context in which we live. In a quite real sense, our identities express the literal form that our life takes.

### **Ethical Theories**

As forms of life give normativity to language, so too can identities give normativity to ethical expression and ethical language. Although such a conception of identity as the normative scope through which we can evaluate language would necessarily seem to create a *theory* of ethics, something Wittgenstein was quite blatantly against, the rigidity of the system springing from this theory is not extreme. In many cases, the account offered by Wittgenstein of differing worldviews does not greatly differ from such an identity-based account. That said, the lens of identity can offer more clarity to the situation.

To illuminate this, let's take a look at an example used by Christensen in her account of Wittgenstein's ethics taken from a conversation between Wittgenstein and Rush Rhees. In their conversation, Wittgenstein and Rhees discuss "a man 'who has come to the conclusion that he must either leave his wife or abandon his work within cancer research.'" Wittgenstein responds: "[s]uppose I am his friend, and I say to him 'look, you've taken this girl out of her home, and now, by God, you must stick to her.' This would be called taking up an ethical attitude." He also notes that the man might respond "but what of suffering humanity? how [*sic*] can I abandon my research?" Wittgenstein even notes that the man might consider his wife "'It probably won't be fatal for her. She'll get over it, probably marry again,' and so on." All of these are referring to different 'ethical attitudes' that the man could take up in defending his actions, and Wittgenstein is okay with that.

All of these 'ethical attitudes' are just as easily expressed in terms of identity. In the first case, Wittgenstein is appealing to the man's identity as a husband and the duties that come with marriage. In the second case, the man is responding with the reasons given to him by his identity as a cancer scientist and

someone whose work brings good into the world. In the final case, the man is qualifying the harm done to his wife by arguing that she can handle the destruction of her identity as his wife. To Wittgenstein, all of these responses are theoretically valid, and under an identity-based system they are as well. As we can see here, although a practical-identity based theory of ethics is certainly a theory, its system need not be excessively rigid in its reach. Each of these identities place valid claims on the scientist in question. The 'theory' I offer in this paper is really more a method to add more clarity to the nature of Wittgensteinian ethics than any substantive change in the contents of it.

Nonetheless, there are places where a practical-identity based system of ethics does impose seemingly universal rules upon us, and those cases come into play when our identity as human is threatened by an action that we might take. To give up our identity as human would be to give up our very nature as a social, deliberative animal in need of having socially-defined identities which obligate and motivate us. To give up our human identity would be to give up the base groundwork that enables us to exist and be ethical creatures in the first place. It is thus impossible to give up our human identity without in some moral way dying and losing our membership in our community. The standards set by this identity as human are the ethical standards accepted as so right that to question them would be crazy, and to act against them would be to commit an '*inhuman*' deed.

### **Non-negotiable Obligation**

One example of such a non-negotiable, 'human' obligation would Korsgaard's account of a conflict between one's identity as a soldier and their identity as human. While a good soldier should follow the orders of their superiors, a good human should not murder the innocent. In such a situation, the identity of humanity overrides any contingent identity, as to lose it would be to lose the self.

The identity as human could be considered as giving us a group of unquestionable, certain statements from a Wittgensteinian point of view presented in *On Certainty*. Such certain statements are basic assumptions that we act on in normal life, and it does not make sense to doubt them in almost all contexts. The identity of human comprises obligations so basic and fundamental to our conceptions of morality that they are unquestioned for most people outside of truly exceptional circumstances. For example, behaviors like killing another

human being for fun or causing completely arbitrary harm to a person can be quite simply taken as bedrock immoral actions in our society. These statements *could* be questioned theoretically, but practically are taken as a given. In the process of ethical deliberation with someone who tried to question one of these bedrock statements of ethical life, many would simply dismiss them as insane.

Imagine, for example, two people entering an ethical debate about the permissibility of some hotly debated topic, say the practice of eating meat. Perhaps the argument of the person insisting that people should not eat meat may take Peter Singer's perspective and explain that animals are sentient beings just like us who can experience pain just like we do, and that we have no good reasons to inflict such pain on those other animals. From an identity perspective, this could be seen as appealing to our identity as a sentient being who also avoids pain. If their interlocutor were to simply respond "Well, I don't see anything wrong with causing pain to other human people anyways, why should I care about animals' pain?", then the conversation would be brought to a standstill. Their argument is *inhuman*. It is making a claim so contrary to the base moral assumptions that we share that it becomes almost impossible to engage with them. In these situations, what they're saying is just so absurd that to argue with it no longer makes sense. They seem to not be a member of our linguistic and ethical community. When these statements are questioned, we may have exhausted our justifications and 'reached bedrock with our spades turned.' Perhaps the only answer here is to say "That claim is simply wrong."

### **The Limitations of This View**

When I originally set out to write this article, I had much more lofty goals. I wanted to introduce universally normative statements within Wittgenstein's epistemic framework. Unfortunately, such a goal has proven to be untenable. It seems impossible to push the inherently limited epistemic framework adopted by Wittgenstein to accept any standard of truth that would extend beyond the reach of one language-using community. Such a conclusion is certainly painful for anyone aspiring to universal truth in ethics, especially given how persuasive Wittgenstein's argumentation is. That said, if such a viewpoint is all that a careful and honest analysis of the epistemic situation allows, then we are obligated to adopt it.

The largest reason that I am quite unhappy with this

result is that it maintains the weirdness that is inherent in Wittgenstein's epistemic system. How are we to adequately account for what happens when two completely separate language-using communities meet with each other? The communities have totally separate normative standards of truth, yet supposedly *something* will happen in their interaction, and one view will come out on top. It seems that here we are necessarily forced into one of two directions. The first possible route would be to accept that all truth standards are equally good, and that in such scenarios each community is equally right. This would be taking a relativist perspective. The second option would be to reject the very idea of truth in an absolute sense, claiming that from an outside perspective, to say that either community is really *right* would simply be a misuse of language. There is no criterion of correctness to be had from this outside perspective. This seems to be this position that Wittgenstein takes, rather than the relativist one. Such an account represents the destruction of the 'capital T' Truth. At the very least, it is a claim that argument about such a truth is altogether impossible (how one could adequately argue for the existence of such a truth from this framework is beyond me). Such a conclusion is deeply disappointing, especially in the context of ethics, where it seems to take some of the weight out of an area of life which you are expected to make significant sacrifices for.

### **Conclusion**

Limitations in mind, the framework expressed in this paper does accomplish a somewhat significant step in improving the tools of analysis that we have when discussing ethical disagreement from a Wittgensteinian epistemic perspective. Under Wittgenstein's perspective, differences in worldview are just that: not analyzable in a systematic way and philosophically non-navigable. By offering an account of how practical identities are meaningfully similar in (giving context to moral obligation) to the way that forms of life give context to other linguistic expressions, I have enabled a somewhat comparable level of analysis of ethical statements to other linguistic contexts under a Wittgensteinian framework.

The account offered here is certainly not a complete one. It still has a few rough edges. Specifically, I think that there is still room to improve the account of obligation from our identity as human that is offered in this paper. The claim that our identity as human is in some way basic makes sense even

within a Wittgensteinian framework. To call some person or action inhuman seems to be about the strongest ethical critique we have available. That said, the claims about our human identity being the base upon which all other identities build and the idea of what is essentially a human 'species being' as a social creature in need of identity are perhaps a bit out of place in a Wittgensteinian system. This is despite the fact that ethical bedrock claims do undoubtedly exist. Perhaps the structure they have been fit in within this paper is simply a bit too rigid.

## References

- Christensen, Anne-Marie S. "Wittgenstein and Ethics." In *The Oxford Handbook of Wittgenstein*, edited by Oskari Kuusela and Marie McGinn, 797-817. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.
- Korsgaard, Christine M. "Personal identity and the unity of agency: A Kantian response to parfit." *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 18, no. 2 (1989): 101-132. <http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:3219881>
- , and Onora O'Neill. *The Sources of Normativity*. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2010.
- Rhees, Rush. "Some Developments in Wittgenstein's View of Ethics." *The Philosophical Review* 74, no. 1 (Jan, 1965): 17-26. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2183528?origin=JSTOR-pdf>
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Philosophical Investigations*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1958.
- . *On Certainty*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1975.