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What Makes Life a Lie? Love, Truth and the Question of Context

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Abstract: Wittgenstein suggested that considering the context in which a word or sentence is used may help show the limitations of some ways of setting up a philosophical problem. In this article, I explore the role this suggestion may have in moral (philosophical) reflection, through a consideration of a literary example taken from Jeanette Winterson’s novel, *Written on the Body* (2001). Using the example to elucidate ways of speaking in love that seem to embody an important truth and ways of acting and thinking that appear to be a denial of that truth, I discuss and attempt to show how different ways of attending to context may reveal the moral dimensions of this language use. I also consider one point at which attention to context seems to come to a halt and when acknowledging what is ethically significant seems to demand something different from us.

Keywords: love, truth, context, ethics, Wittgenstein, Winterson

1 Introduction

Why should philosophers be careful to attend to the contexts in which something is said and done to be able to say something that is of philosophical value? Why should moral philosophers be as careful to attend to these contexts to present us with something that is of moral or moral philosophical value? Although my answer to the first question is clear, my answer to the second is less so, partly for the same reasons that motivate my answer to the first. My answer to the first question issues from a Wittgensteinian understanding of the character of philosophical problems, according to which they are born out of a failure to make clear to ourselves the use we make of language in the concrete contexts of our lives. We are confused about the use of some words, such as ‘intention’, ‘action’ and ‘desire’, and the way out of this confusion is to consider how these words are used in varying situations, as well as the specific contribution made to the meaning of these words by particular

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features of the situation we are imagining (e.g., Wittgenstein 2009, §§116, 525, 539, 584, II.75).

What a consideration of the use of these words often shows, especially in the context of the psychological vocabulary mentioned earlier, and more specifically in relation to the concept of love that will be my concern here, is the moral dimensions of its use. Attending to the ordinary contexts in which we speak about and speak out of love leads one to recognise the moral aspects of being speakers of this language or speakers in the first place. One comes to recognise how all psychology is moral psychology to some extent, in that it reveals how we picture and come to make sense of human life and being. In this sense, attention to context will show the possible moral dimension of all thought (cf. Diamond 2010, regarding the philosophy of Iris Murdoch).

When turning to ethics, however, we may ask whether there is any particular question about context to which we need to attend, apart from these more general philosophical considerations? Is there some specific task for moral philosophy to perform after doing the preparatory work that Elizabeth Anscombe envisioned in her *Modern Moral Philosophy* (1981), of clarifying the philosophy of psychology as well as the philosophy of language and philosophy of action working in the background of some of our most prominent ethical ideas? Is it, for example, up to moral philosophy to clarify what is entailed in leading a good life or providing some kind of edifying discourse about ethically significant features of our lives that, in one way or another, would make us either think or live better? What sense of ‘good’ do we, for instance, draw upon when we speak of becoming ‘better’ here?

This concerns not only whether moral philosophy should be normative but also the specific challenges encountered when doing the kind of descriptive work that some philosophers have suggested moral philosophers should do instead of prescribing morally right actions from a position that will always prove wanting when confronted with the rich and varied contexts that make up our lives. What is it, as it were, that constitutes the moral life that moral philosophy seeks to describe, and what happens to our descriptions when we move from considering the ethical role of being language users to the moral significance of our encounters, as well as our relationships with and obligations to each other?

To clarify these issues, I turn to one context of our moral life to show the ways in which different considerations of context may elucidate the moral dimensions of our language use. Then, although quickly, I consider a point where the attention to context seems to come to a halt and when acknowledging what is ethically significant appears to demand something different from us. To aid my discussion, I consider a literary example taken from Jeanette Winterson’s novel, often dubbed as experimental, *Written on the Body* (2001). I investigate the ways in which certain things we say in love seem to embody an important truth and ways of acting and

thinking that appear to be a denial of that truth. I then consider the difference these remarks about truth make in the discernment of what is relevant in moral reflection, in connection with the attention we give to others in our descriptions of language use that, in one respect or another, appear ethical.

2 Love, Lies and Discernment

Jeanette Winterson's novel *Written on the Body* opens with the sentence, 'Why is the measure of love loss?' (2001, 9). As the sentence stands, it appears obvious that loss really is the measure of love, in that it seems to entail the concealed statement, 'The measure of love is loss', only then to enquire 'Why is it so that the measure of love is loss?' In the context of the novel, where this first line stands almost as a motto for the remaining text, it also appears as if this is indeed the perspective, perhaps the only perspective, from which to make sense of the novel.¹ The novel reads as a study of love and loss or of how loss can come to define a person's (here, the narrator's) complete perception of love.

In the novel, we are presented with the story of an unnamed and ungendered² narrator who falls in love with Louise. Louise is married, and the novel initially depicts the first shaky stages of their relationship, filtered through the question of whether Louise would be only one in a row of married women who decided to stay with their husbands despite swearing not fealty, but uncontrollable love to her lover, the narrator (cf. Winterson 2001, 14–15). Louise, however, changes the path of the narrative woven out of recollections of the narrator's previous relationships – 'You said, "I love you and my love for you makes any other life a lie"' (Winterson 2001, 19). She leaves her husband, Elgin, for the narrator, and the world is open for the two to speak truly of their love, in other words, to speak words of love without hesitation and enquire into what it means to speak such words truthfully.

You were careful not to say those words that soon became our private altar. I had said them many times before, dropping them like coins into a wishing well, hoping they would make me come true. I had said them many times before but not to you. I had given them as forget-me-nots to girls who should have known better. I had used them as bullets and barter. I don't like to think of myself as an insincere person but if I say I love you and I don't mean it then what else am I? (Winterson 2001, 11)

¹ For example, see Jacobs (2018), who, towards the end, emphasises the role of loss in the truth about love told by the novel.

² See Hansen (2005) for a philosophical reading of the novel that discusses how this use invites us 'to occupy the space of the protagonist ourselves (367)', as well as Smith (2011) for a similar reading focussing on the narrator as transgendered and, thus, the possibility of inhabiting the gaze of the narrator regardless of gender.

Their initial bliss, however, turns into tragedy when Louise falls ill with cancer, and her former husband, who is a cancer researcher, convinces the narrator that only he can help and heal Louise, on the condition that the narrator steps out of the picture. In despair, the narrator then leaves Louise, but not, the story seems to suggest, as the mere act of abandoning her or saving themselves,³ but as an act of love. To strengthen this reading, the novel goes on to reflect on how, after leaving, the narrator learns as much as possible about cancer and what it does to the body to, as it were, love every inch of Louise in her absence.

The novel thus begins with something that appears to be a classical ethical dilemma. The protagonist is faced with two options and is asked to make a choice about what to do. The characterisation of it as a dilemma, and not merely a choice, is reinforced by the fact that either option has some morally undesirable consequences: stay with the beloved to avoid suffering the embodied consequences of the loss entailed in leaving or leave her with the intent of saving her life. This way of presenting the problem does not seem to leave the narrator with any real alternative but to sacrifice their desire to be with Louise for the sake of her continuing to live. Whether the dilemma is construed as a matter of considering the consequences (to give it a utilitarian flair) or as a matter of obligations (for a deontological flair), the only legitimate ethical alternative seems to be to leave. For what is the moral value of those momentary pleasures that could come out of staying, compared to the dreadful consequences of that choice? What is the suffering of the narrator against the dignity or sanctity of life? What, after all, could be more important than the desire stated in the goodbye note, 'I want you to live' (Winterson 2001, 106).

As a good moral philosopher, the narrator thus acts with the best of intentions and with what seems to be good reasons, putting their own desires aside for the sake of the wellbeing of another. At the end of the novel, however, they come to call these well-meaning intentions into question. The narrator came to realise that leaving Louise was a mistake.

³ Although slightly cumbersome, I have chosen to refer to the narrator as 'they' instead of 'he or she'. I do this since it captures the play with gender that is central to Winterson's book better than the binary 'he or she'. (Cf. Weder (2016) for a discussion of the wish to gender the narrator.) The real loss in turning the novel into an example for moral philosophical discussion, however, is shifting from its first person perspective to a third person perspective. Whereas the first person perspective alerts me, as the reader, to what those words would mean if I were to speak them, shifting between being the 'I' narrating the story and reflecting on love and the 'I' reading the story and discussing these questions in relation to someone else makes it another person's problem and not necessarily my own.

Why didn't I hear you when you told me you wouldn't go back to Elgin? Why didn't I see your serious face? I did think I was doing the right thing and I thought it was for the right reasons. [...] What were my heroics and sacrifices really about? Your pig-headedness or my own? [...]

Louise, stars in your eyes my own constellation. I was following you faithfully but I looked down. You took me out beyond the house, over the roofs, way past commonsense and good behaviour. No compromise. I should have trusted you but I lost my nerve. (Winterson 2001, 187)

What transpires from this realisation is that although the loss of Louise was real and heavily felt, taking on this loss did not primarily reveal the magnitude of the narrator's love, but rather their loss of nerve, as well as their failure to attend to the meaning of their lover's words. This was not merely a failure to register the lover's words or the expression on her face, as in the case where she had been too far away to hear or had momentarily turned her back because, clearly, the words and the facial expressions were there to be both heard and seen, considering that the narrator was able to recollect them. The failure was, instead, one of taking in the significance of these verbal and non-verbal expressions and of feeling their seriousness. It was a failure of allowing the weight of sayings such as 'I love you and my love for you make any other life a lie' (Winterson 2001, 19) to sink in, as well as a failure to recognise the implications of being the recipient of such words. It was a failure to recognise that these words were not just to be considered a dramatic or romantic gesture, something the beloved would say as a mere expression of feeling. They were words that could speak as conveyors of an important truth (that could speak with truth) and raised a demand to be true to the sense of those words, which, in effect, means being true to one's lover.

What this insight tells the narrator is that leaving Louise was not an act of love, a necessary sacrifice for a greater good, but that it constituted a failure to attend to her, to love her in the way they had said they did. It tells them that if they had truly loved Louise, they would not have left (Winterson 2001, 187) and that leaving her, whatever they wanted to call it, was indeed a way of abandoning her. In light of this insight, what was initially thought to be the only option, the right thing to do, appear as a temptation, a failure to show and act out of love. Furthermore, what was perceived as evidence of love in the narrator's obsession with the bodily changes that occur in cancer patients appears to be a fixation, even a fetish, rather than real love.⁴

⁴ Why use the word fetish here? Partly because this 'love', for the narrator, became an obsession with an idea, even focused on inanimate objects, such as books about cancer, which were given almost magical powers, rather than being an animate response to another, a response that, though sometimes characterised as magical (in the sense of wonderful), does not thrive on magic (in the sense of an attempt to control events and influence someone to believe that which you purport to be true).

What is called into question by this insight is not only the narrator's choice, or felt lack of choice or action, but also the perspective of love captured in the first sentence of the story. In light of this realisation, the enigmatic question beginning the novel is silently questioned. Is loss really the measure of love? Is this story, which focuses on loss, really a story about love? In light of this insight, the remembrances of previous relationships, the recollections of words said, and the rehearsals, repetitions and retellings of these in the context of their relationship, with or without each other, which make up the book, become not an expression of love's inevitable relation to loss, but a way of 'trying to find the place to go back to where things went wrong. Where I went wrong' (Winterson 2001, 17). As the narrator puts it in the first 10 pages of the novel, for the reader to notice if one is paying attention, 'You were driving but I was lost in my own navigation' (Winterson 2001, 17).

Indeed, in a column, Winterson returns to this notion with the intention of questioning it. Pondering love and her own relationship to it, she writes,

I have had so many reckless encounters. I have never been a love-rat but I have been a love-pirRATE, jumping ship, avoiding duty, flying under my own flag. When I believed love was loss – and I believed it with poetic fatalism, there could be no genuine attachment. Attachment to another meant a rendezvous with loss. I preferred to fuck with death. (Winterson 2012)

Offering Winterson's later writings as a further context for reading the remark in her previous novel is not simply to be read as the author's refutation of the significance of her earlier writings, although some form of refutation or questioning, as indicated, is already present in the novel. Rather, it introduces another layer to the interpretation of the text by raising a question about the relationship of the author to the text, in two different types of text; one is literary, but fiction, while the other is literary in similar ways, but with an autobiographical element to it.⁵ I cannot deal with these questions properly here, but I want to reject as crude the suggestion that both texts can be said to express the intentions or views of the author. I do not suggest that the narrator speaks with the voice of Winterson or that the literary work is expressive of the author's own view and positioning, in the same way as is the more autobiographical text. The ways in which we are able to stand in relation to the author of these texts is, therefore, dependent on the kind of texts they are.

However, I also reject as crude any suggestion that would disassociate the author completely from the work with the intention of reading the novel only

⁵ See Morrison (2006) for a different take on how to read the author of the texts in relation to the expectations one has of the text, such as expectations that Winterson should fulfil the role of 'lesbian feminist writer'.

formally, as mere text. Rather, both texts stand to me as explorations of what different perspectives of love amount to in different texts and contexts. They raise a question about what understanding of love *the text* is expressing, which cannot easily be pried apart from the fact that this is an understanding that *someone* is expressing. In this way, my interest is not in saying something specific about love, but rather seeing how these different texts enable us to make sense of some features of our ways of speaking about and living with love. What, I ask, is involved in reading these texts as expressions of love, as teaching us something about how this concept makes sense and may come to make sense to us, as persons who, in our own lives, may attempt to speak the language of love, but also as philosophers interested in what is distinct about that language (if there is something distinct about it).

What interests me, thus, is not whether love is, indeed, to be understood as loss or attachment. In fact, speaking about love primarily as an attachment may, in some situations, be as problematic as only connecting it with loss, in that love is also dependent on the recognition of the separateness of the other (cf. Dilman 1987) or what has been seen by some as the beloved's autonomy (Frankfurt 1999; Velleman 1999). What interests me is the ways in which love involves a form of *discernment*. In other words, I am concerned with the ways in which we, when talking about and thinking about love, are drawn to saying things like 'this is not love' but 'that is', or 'if I do that, I do not really love', and how these ways of speaking relate to what we are able to discern as true in relation to love and to the other. This is the kind of question facing the narrator in recollecting, 'On that day she was asking me whether I would be true to her and I replied, "With all my heart", to then enquire, "Had I been true to her?"' (Winterson 2001, 161).

Now, raising the question of whether one's love is true or whether an act is truly an act of love is a way of engaging in this discernment. It is to consider the ways in which love, as Winterson writes, 'is a quality as well as an emotion', and to question, reflect or even meditate on what is entailed in stating that 'once cultivated, like courage or self-control, love the quality is more durable than love the emotion' (Winterson 2012). Picking up on Winterson's writing about love as a quality, we can perhaps say that to love is to be attentive to and consider the quality of both our actions and our attachments, in the sense that this discernment requires a capacity for making qualitative distinctions, as well as a capacity for feeling the weight of such distinctions. It requires the ability to separate what is 'heroics and sacrifices from pig-headedness', to distinguish an act of love from a 'loss of nerve', the desire to save someone's life from the wish to run away from the emotional bonds of that life, as well as to determine what is fatalistic belief from genuine attachment, what is truth and what is a lie, in a statement such as, 'You said, "I love you and my love for you makes any other life a lie"' (Winterson 2001, 19).

Attending to such distinctions is, again, a way of feeling the weight of those words and how they should matter to the sense one is to make of one's life.

Two initial sets of questions are worth mentioning here. First, what is the nature of truth appealed to in such a statement? Some preliminary considerations. The sense in which any other life would be a lie does not lie in the denial that certain sentences are true. The opposite of what is true, here, is not simply what is false, as the bipolar view of meaningful sentences suggests, but the sense in which certain ways of living are untrue in that they involve a *denial* of that which is truly important.⁶ The truth of the statement, 'I love you and my love for you makes any other life a lie', is, for Louise, connected with the realisation that if she went on being married to Elgin, certain sentences, such as 'I am married', uttered by her, or 'She is married', as a description of her, though not exactly false, would only be true in a limited sense. Furthermore, they are connected with the feeling that although there are some sentences that she might utter as an effect of this limited truth, which would also be true in this limited sense, such as 'this is my husband' to a new acquaintance, they would not allow her to say other things about him truthfully, even if she thinks that both she and the acquaintance should have a right to expect that from her. She may be reluctant to say, 'he's the love of my life', or detect a false note in calling him 'my dear husband'.

Considering the possible uses of the sentence in different contexts, thus, alerts us to an important asymmetry between truth and falsehood and between a (or even *the*) truth and a lie. A lie, as it were, is not just, and not in an important sense, the conveyance of false or incorrect information, for this can happen by mistake, but the concealment of something of importance one knows to be true. Such concealment, furthermore, may also be conveyed by the statement of truths. The past lovers of the narrator could well have listed many true things about and to their husbands without saying the most obvious truth, 'I don't love him'/'I don't love you' (Winterson 2001, 14–15). It is precisely in concealing this truth that they can be accused of being *insincere*. This provides us with another rendition of the narrator's initial statement, 'I don't like to think of myself as an insincere person but if I say I love you and I don't mean it then what else am I' (Winterson 2001, 11).

Second, how does this question of truth connect with what we can see as good in life? In particular, what is the relation of love to what we may think of as meaningful in life? How are we to understand the relation of love and the good, as well as the role of love in a good, well-lived life? Is love, as it were, its own good, or

⁶ In this respect, my discussion bears some relation to Diamond (2019) discussion of truth in ethics and their relation to sentences that can only be true as considered by Elizabeth Anscombe in relation to Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*. Indeed, my thinking, here, in many ways, runs parallel with my understanding of that discussion, although I cannot yet make those connections clear.

is it something that (sometimes, perhaps even always) stands in opposition to doing what is good (cf. Christensen 2020 on the relation between ethics and love)? It is, as it were, only by considering the contribution love makes to one's understanding of life, such that a life without love would be a lie that the ethical dilemma I sketched initially appears as a dilemma. If, as many moral theories seem to suggest, life always trumps love, the narrator does not seem to face any real dilemma. It then appears, as Alfred Lord Tennyson put it, 'better to have loved and lost' than to allow one's love to threaten the loved one's life. However, this phrasing neglects the possibility of another question standing in need of being posed, a question of whether there can still be life if there is no love? Citing Cher as a provider of a more contemporary catchphrase, we can ask, whether there is 'life after love', and whether it is something for us to 'believe in'? For Louise's words seem to suggest that a life without this love would not be any real life, a life in its true sense, or, at any rate, a good life. In other words, they indicate that she could not truthfully be said to be living if she allowed herself to let that love go. Another statement by Louise, rehearsed by the narrator, 'I will never let you go' (Winterson 2001, 76, 96, 163), suggests that at least part of the truth that the narrator needs to own up to is that they, by contrast, did let Louise go, although they told themselves that they were holding on to her in the only possible way.

It is easy to feel alarmed at the apparent strength of these claims. We may wonder whether it really is good for another person's love to hold that kind of place in the sense that someone is able to make of their life, and ask how we should make sense of the suggestion to never let someone go. Locking them in is obviously not an option, and trying to hold on to someone's love is clearly different from holding on to one's own love for the other, even if one realises that the only way to love them is, sometimes, to let them go. Regardless of how we continue discussing these questions, they all alert us to the Socratic wisdom, articulated in the *Gorgias*, that the only thing that matters is not that one lives or that one has a long life. What matters is how one lives and that it is a good life. This Socratic insight concerns not only the consequences one's actions and deeds would have for one's afterlife ('pie in the sky when you die') but also the possibility of discerning a qualitative distinction between a life of love in which, say, the concern for treating others justly presents limitations on what we perceive as possible desires and worthy ends and a life in the service of the brute pursuit of power and one's own self-interest, disregarding the damage of one's actions to others.⁷ Why, then, we may ask, did the narrator not question the

7 Cf. Holland (1980, 134–135): 'On Plato's geometrical view, the limits to what you can do include limits that depend on where you are placed, and there are both limits and facilities that arise from special relationships in which you might or might not stand towards other people in the picture.'

character of Elgin's offer for treatment, sensing that by laying down such dubitable conditions for helping, he was not, could not have been, up to any good?

3 Truth, Context and the Best Thing to Do

So far, I have offered these ways of speaking of love as seemingly ordinary ways of speaking about truth and what we may recognise as good in our lives. I have worked with the assumption that they are ways of speaking that anyone could accept as making sense, although the example, as it appears in Winterson's novel, also made clear that they are words, the meanings of which might not be clear to us at first. The contexts of these utterances are, in this way, something we may need to revisit. By going back to the words and the contexts in which they were uttered, we may try to make sense of them, and figure out what we should do with them, how we should go on speaking about them. We may, in that way, raise questions of whether we have, indeed, understood their meaning time and again. Nevertheless, it is clear that these ways of speaking are meaningful and, in the most important ways, may be significant to us. This is reflected in the ruminations of the narrator on another take on the already familiar expression by Louise, 'You said "I'm going to leave him because my love for you makes any other life a lie"' (Winterson 2001, 98). The narrator continues,

I've hidden these words in the lining of my coat. I take them out like a jewel thief when no-one's watching. They haven't faded. Nothing about you has faded. You are still the colour of my blood. You are my blood. (Winterson 2001, 99)

I have offered some preliminary reflections about what it means to think of such words as true and how this truth relates to what we perceive as good. Now, I will consider a possible, even probable, objection to this use of 'truth'. This is that the example only speaks about truth in a derivative sense. What the narrator's behaviour in this last quote shows, it could be argued, is not any sense in which Louise's words could be seen as true, but rather, some ways in which the words become important for the narrator. Of course, nothing prevents us from using the word truth here in the ordinary case, but for the sake of clarity, we should recognise that if we want to use the word in this context, we are using it in a secondary sense (cf. Diamond 1991).⁸

8 Another way of making this objection is to place it within traditional debates about the fact-value distinction. I do not have the space to show why I do not think this clarifies the issues but only imposes an abstract structure on the discussion that detracts from what is at stake in the example.

I do see the point of such an objection, and some of my responses also speak to the meta-ethical debate about the truth-value of ethical statements, whether they can be true and false, and if so, in what sense, objectively or subjectively, or whether they belong to a class of sentences that can only be true (cf. Diamond 2019). It can, as it were, be true in a simple sense that Louise said, 'I love you and that makes any other life a lie'. What is significant to the narrator, however, is not that *it is true* that she said it, but that *this is what she said* and, furthermore, *that she meant it*. What is important is the struggle to recognise that truth. Furthermore, one can confirm that she said it but still deny the truth of what she said, that is its relevance and significance; what it meant that she said it. There are, thus, two senses of truth at play in these sentences: the fact that this is what she said and the meaning – the significance, relevance, importance – of her saying it. This may suggest that we should follow philosophers who have argued that we should only speak of truth in the first case (in relation to empirical facts) and leave other words to take care of the meaning of the others (relating to value, meaning) to keep these two uses apart. There is some merit to this, but since one has often resorted to explicating the latter use with the help of the first, there may be reason to question the precedence usually given to it.

Thus, even if we admit that Louise's words are not true in a sense that appeals to facts that are intersubjectively verifiable, as is almost no declaration of love when we pay more attention to it, the notion of truth may still be necessary to understand their importance. When the narrator is asked at the end of the novel, 'What will you do?' (Winterson 2001, 189), and responds by saying, 'I'd like to be able to tell her the truth' (Winterson 2001, 190), the telling of such truth is not reducible to them retelling the above-depicted ways in which these words became meaningful to them. It requires of the narrator to be as truthful as possible about what had happened, by recognizing, amongst other things, that certain ways of turning away from the kind of significance Louise had to them constituted a denial of an important truth, as well as an acknowledgement of the truth of certain statements, such as 'I know I'm running away [...] I don't want to face facts' (Winterson 2001, 183). This notion of being truthful rests on the realisation that some ways of viewing love are more truthful than others, more responsive, as it were, to the facts. I also introduced the notion of discernment as central to what we are to understand as love to draw attention to the possibility of making such judgements.

This questions the assumption that there are some ways for sentences to be true in the way that we can judge them to be true before considering the context in which they are used. Nevertheless, this still presents us with the question of what 'truth' means in this context and in what ways it ties in with the difficulty of facing certain facts of our life.

Consider again the insight of the narrator that it was wrong to leave Louise. Another way of framing this insight was that the decision about what was best for Louise was not *theirs to make*. Although they were convinced that leaving was the best thing to do and, in this way, gave up on the desire to be with Louise, they still took it upon themselves to judge what would be best for her. The point here is not to argue that only Louise could or should have made the decision of what was best for her. When the older woman, Gail, whom the narrator encounters after leaving and who serves as the main, or only, real-life interlocutor of the narrator's motives in the novel, says, 'You didn't give her a chance to say what she wanted. You left.' (Winterson 2001, 159), there is certainly room for her reproaching the narrator with the words, 'You don't run out on the woman you love. Especially you don't when you think it's for her own good' (Winterson 2001, 160). The point, however, is not that whatever Louise might have said she wanted would have amounted to what was best for her. On the contrary, the narrator's concern for the best for Louise, as expressed in their goodbye letter and in taking it upon themselves to disregard Louise's wishes, was precisely expressive of a worry that Louise would not have chosen what was best for her herself (Winterson 2001, 105–106). Such a worry is quite legitimate in some contexts. It is also not the case that the right decision would necessarily have been reached if only the narrator had conferred with Louise to reach a joint decision. Together, they may also have gotten lost in their navigation.

The sense in which 'the best thing to do' is not reducible to doing what either of them would want to do, in the sense of being spontaneously inclined, is rather connected with the acknowledgement that 'running out on the woman you love', precisely under this description, can never be 'for her own good'. In other words, it involves the recognition that their love placed a limit on how they could think of their further actions and desires, in that certain actions and desires would no longer be expressive of love.

When I say 'I will be true to you' I am drawing a quiet space beyond the reach of other desires. No-one can legislate love; it cannot be given orders or cajoled into service. Love belongs to itself, deaf to pleading and unmoved by violence. Love is not something you can negotiate. Love is the one thing stronger than desire and the only proper reason to resist temptation. (Winterson 2001, 77–78)

Just as it was not up to Louise to judge what the narrator should do to prove their love,⁹ speaking about their love as placing a limit on their desires gives us the idea

⁹ 'I want you to come to me without a past. Those lines you've learned, forget them. Forget that you've been here before in other bedrooms in other places. Come to me new. Never say you love me until that day when you have proved it.' 'How shall I prove it? I can't tell you what to do' (Winterson 2001, 54).

of love as something that ought to guide their thinking about their desires, rather than allowing their desires to guide their perception of what they ought to do. What is truly an act of love is pictured here as independent of them, of what they thought, in the sense that they can recognise the need to be judged by this understanding of what love asks of them, of reaching a limit they cannot pass without their love not being love anymore. It is, as it were, in the light of a certain conception of love – a love that places certain limits on what they can perceive as their desires and reveal some desires, such as fleeing the pain connected with staying, as temptations – that the narrator's walking away shows itself to be not an act of heroism and sacrifice, but an expression of 'pig-headedness', a lack of trust and a loss of nerve.

Now, we may think of the narrator's decision as a betrayal of their love, a betrayal of that which was most important to them. However, something is still lost in this description. Although the narrator's action can be considered a betrayal of their love and how they could understand themselves in the light of that love, it was, first and foremost, a betrayal of Louise. This comes out in the next to the last scene where the narrator, towards the end, after trying to find Louise everywhere but failing, asks Gail, 'Did I invent her?' The reply reads, 'No, but you tried to. She wasn't yours for the making' (Winterson 2001, 189).¹⁰

In this respect, the novel is perhaps most markedly not a story about loss in the sense made available by its initial sentence. It is not a story about losing the love of one's life and the evidence of love provided by such loss. Rather, it is a story of loss in the sense in which one so easily loses oneself in love, by losing oneself in one's own thoughts, feelings, and convictions of what is right, in distancing oneself from the truth of one's love and the truth of the love one is receiving, and the sense in which love can only be lost by letting the other go, by not 'following' her 'faithfully' (Winterson 2001, 187).

This suggests that we need to read the novel against what appears to be its own presuppositions, the loss that is the measure of love. We do this by not only reading the novel in the context of its initial sentence but also by reading this sentence in the context of the succeeding story, by seeing what kind of attitude towards love it expresses, and who is giving expression to this attitude in what situation.

This reading of the novel also suggests that we may need to read this discussion against one of its own grounding presuppositions. That is, against the notion that we can recognise the meaning of a sentence and what makes it meaningful by looking at its context. For, and this is important in this context, the failure of the narrator to attend to the significance of Louise's words was not a failure to attend to context. It was a failure to attend to Louise. It was a failure to

10 Cf. another of Gail's statement 'The trouble with you [...] is that you want to live in a novel' (Winterson 2001, 160).

respond to the fact that *she* said it, and that she stood, in relation to the narrator, as the most important *you*. These, we could say, are the facts that they needed to face. Seeing these facts clearly, in the sense of acknowledging that if they saw them as true, they also made claims on them to approach Louise in a spirit of truth (cf. Weil 1978, 242), also requires of them, for one thing, not trying to extricate the meaning of the words from the fact that she spoke them.

Remember this piece of context, ‘*You said*, “I love you and that makes any other life a lie”’ (*my emphasis*). As a philosopher, it is easy to go straight into what was said and to reflect and, perhaps, argue about its meaning, asking about the conditions under which a sentence may be true, whether it is, say, expressive of some more objective or subjective truth. It is easy to lose track of the fact that *someone* is saying something, to think of language as devoid of its speakers and ignore how this fact that we are speakers contributes to the meaning of what is said, is, in other words, an important aspect of the context, and of what it means for us to go on speaking after something like this has been said. These are the facts that all philosophers need to face, and seeing them clearly, in it, makes claims on us, to approach others in a spirit of truth.

4 Concluding Discussion

How, then, does this relate to the question of context in ethics? I began by turning to the context of a literary example and then placing that example in the context of our reflections on what is meaningful in life to show that the ways in which we speak about truth and love do not always speak to many philosophers’ understanding of those words. These contexts may, therefore, help us see what now appears to be a limitation in some philosophical thought. Such as the possibility of there being significant aspects of our lives that we can think of as embodying important truths, which defy the verificationist idea that meaningful sentences must be cashed out in propositions that can be either true or false. Or, that the philosophical focus on what constitutes the right action or the best intention in ethics can serve as a distraction from that to which we need to attend: our relationships to each other and our responsibility to each other in those relationships. In fact, in this view, one could argue that one of the points where the narrator did go wrong was in treating the problem facing them in a standard philosophical way.

This kind of turn to context can be and has been hugely important to question such ideas, as well as divisions within philosophy that uphold them. To name but one example the belief that epistemology tells us what is true (or what it is for something to be true), and ethics tell us how to act (or under what conditions an act can be considered good). Part of my interest was also in showing that ethics

involves us in a form of discernment of what the relevant facts are in a specific context, which questions the idea that ethics could guide action on the basis of facts that we could recognise as true independently from considering their context. This is one lesson to be learned from Wittgenstein's suggestion, explored in *On Certainty* (1977), that the grounds of our practices cannot be provided by individual facts since the facts are reliant on our practices, for us to be able to judge what is true and false and what facts are in the first place. Thus, to do justice to the contexts of our lives, we need to recognise the extent to which we are constantly immersed in them, as well as the sense in which there is no ultimate justification for these lives. This, however, also means that we cannot go to the context in search of justification, with the hope of saying something more substantial, such as that context is what gives meaning to our statements. It is not the context that allows for our ethical discernment of what is important and the recognition of ways in which we need to be truthful to each other.

Nevertheless, within ethics, we may still feel a different kind of pull to say something that appears substantial. Rather than searching for ultimate grounds for saying something, we may experience the need to reflect on what is true and what is just in a way that does not go beyond the context of our lives, but that nevertheless appears both abstract and strangely contextless. The sense in which Louise's words, or the novel's initial statement, seem to speak for themselves, or to us, does not, in this respect; lie in any specific feature of the context of their utterance. This is further strengthened by the observation that when we feel that we have learned something from such sayings in our lives, the most natural expression for this is not, 'I learnt something about the context'. Rather, we say, 'I learnt something about love', or "I learnt something about truth. About life. About what it means to be true to myself".

These considerations do not, in themselves, suggest that we can or should dispense with the concept of context in ethical reflection. It does, however, allow us to rephrase the role attention to context may have in moral thought, as well as articulate an important difference in how and when it matters. Whereas, in the ordinary case, we recognise certain sentences as true or false given the particular context we are in, the kind of discernment that I have suggested is central to ethics is rather a matter of recognising the contexts we are in. These ways of speaking about love and truth can, therefore, be considered ethical in that they give us the context in which to judge what is relevant for us to say and do, as well as what meaning we are to see in certain actions and intentions in a particular situation. Furthermore, this discernment of what is relevant is, itself, dependent on acknowledging what these situations under certain descriptions demand of us. Accepting love as a description of my ways of relating to you, as it were, asks me to consider what it takes of me to live in that light. It asks me to take my own words seriously, in scrutinising what I bring into the different contexts of

my life, and to what extent these contexts change in my taking responsibility for my use of these words in it. More importantly, however, it asks me to consider what is entailed in taking your words seriously and doing justice to you.

Therefore, to do justice to the contexts of these ways of speaking, we need to do justice to the fact that we are speakers and, furthermore, do justice to others. For the ethical question about what the truth is in a life of love appears in a different light when we remind ourselves that what matters to us in this question of truth is not just the truth value of a particular kind of sentence, but the whole question about how we matter to and come to understand ourselves in relation to each other, as well as what we are able to recognise as truthful ways of attending to each other within those relationships.

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