

You said: Tore Nordenstam's philosophical development from analytic philosophy to his own kind of practical philosophy

ChatGPT said:

Tore Nordenstam's philosophical development can be understood not so much as a rejection of analytic philosophy as a **gradual transformation of its methods**. He retained the analytic concern with clarity, distinctions, language and argument, but increasingly turned these tools toward **ethics, aesthetics, practical knowledge and concrete human practices**.

1. The analytic starting point

Nordenstam's early work belongs substantially to the analytic and philosophy-of-science tradition. His education included studies at Gothenburg, Uppsala and Oxford, and his early publications dealt with questions such as the analytic–synthetic distinction, scientific explanation, and methodological problems in the humanities. His *Empiricism and the Analytic-Synthetic Distinction* (1972), for example, belongs clearly to this phase. But already here there was a tension that would become important later: philosophy was not merely a matter of constructing abstract theories. Nordenstam became increasingly interested in how concepts actually function within human practices.

2. Sudan: philosophy as dialogue and investigation of a way of life

A decisive turning point was his five years in Khartoum during the 1960s. His *Sudanese Ethics* (1968) investigated concepts such as sharaf (honour) and karāma (dignity). Rather than simply imposing a Western ethical theory on Sudanese moral life, Nordenstam tried to understand how his interlocutors themselves used and understood these concepts.

This is important for understanding his later philosophy. The philosopher becomes less like someone who stands outside human life and deduces moral principles, and more like someone who **enters into reflective conversation with people about their practices, values and experiences.**

Nordenstam himself describes this as his first project of this kind: reflective conversations with interested dialogue partners. He says that this approach subsequently became central to his work in ethics, aesthetics, philosophy of the cultural sciences, practical knowledge, working-life studies and development studies.

3. From language to practice

During the 1970s and early 1980s, his interests broadened considerably. He worked on punishment and ethics, the philosophy of art, explanation and understanding in the humanities, scientific practice, and the relationship between science and art. His *Explanation and Understanding in the History of Art* (1978) and his work on aesthetics illustrate this movement.

The crucial change is therefore **from language considered in abstraction to language as embedded in practices.**

This is where Wittgenstein becomes particularly important. Nordenstam's later interpretation of Wittgenstein stresses philosophy as **clarification** rather than as the construction of a comprehensive philosophical theory. He argues that Wittgenstein's philosophical method combines logical clarification with literary form.

That idea provides a bridge between his analytic beginnings and his mature practical philosophy: philosophical work consists in helping us **see something differently**, clarify our concepts and thereby understand a practice more adequately.

4. The pragmatic turn

A particularly explicit transitional work is *Fra "er" til "bør"? Etiske grunnlagsproblemer i et pragmatisk perspektiv* (1984).

The title itself—roughly, “**From ‘is’ to ‘ought’?**”—signals the problem of moving from descriptive facts to ethical evaluation. Instead of solving this through a purely deductive moral theory, Nordenstam increasingly approaches ethics from a **pragmatic and practice-oriented perspective**. This places him in proximity to the broader Scandinavian pragmatic tradition, where Wittgensteinian philosophy, communication and reflection on action were brought together. The important point is that *practical* does not simply mean “useful.” Nordenstam's practical philosophy asks how philosophical reflection can emerge **from and return to actual human activities**.

5. Practical knowledge

This becomes especially clear in his later work on **practical knowledge**. Nordenstam became interested in forms of knowing that are difficult to capture through the traditional model of theoretical knowledge: the knowledge of an actor, craftsman, doctor, teacher, artist or experienced worker. His publications include *Praktisk kunnskap – som erfaring og som forskningsfelt* (2005), *The Power of Example* (2009), and *Etik och praktisk kunnskap* (2012/2013). Here his philosophy acquires a distinctly **Aristotelian** dimension, although filtered through Wittgenstein and modern pragmatism. Practical knowledge is not simply a set of propositions that someone possesses. It is embodied in **experience, judgement, skill, sensitivity and the ability to act appropriately in particular circumstances**. This also explains his interest in examples. In *The Power of Example*, Nordenstam examines how examples can convey understanding in ways that abstract rules cannot. His work on Taylor and scientific management, for instance, connects philosophical reflection with concrete

working practices.

6. Ethics becomes reflection on practice

This produces a distinctive conception of ethics. Nordenstam does not primarily ask:

“What universal moral principle can we derive?”

He is more interested in questions such as: How do people actually learn to distinguish right from wrong? What kinds of judgement are exercised in concrete situations? How can people articulate the knowledge already contained in their practices? How can philosophical reflection improve or deepen those practices?

His later paper “**Practical Knowledge and Ethics**” makes this relationship explicit.

7. The mature position: philosophy as reflective conversation

Nordenstam’s own description of his mature method is perhaps the best key to the whole development: “My preferred way is reflective conversations with interested dialogue partners.”

This is a significant departure from the stereotypical image of analytic philosophy as the solitary analysis of propositions. Yet it preserves something deeply analytic: **attention to how concepts are actually used, careful distinctions, clarity, and resistance to premature theorizing.**

The mature Nordenstam therefore combines several traditions:

- **analytic philosophy**

→ clarity, conceptual analysis, argument

- **Wittgenstein**

→ language in use, clarification, philosophy as an activity rather than a doctrine

- **pragmatism**

→ meaning in practice, action, consequences and human situations

- **hermeneutics/aesthetics**

→ understanding, interpretation and forms of human expression

- **Aristotelian practical philosophy**

→ experience, judgement, virtue and the knowledge involved in acting well

- **Nordenstam's practical philosophy**

→ reflective dialogue with practitioners about the knowledge, values and ethical problems embedded in their practices.

In one sentence

Nordenstam did not simply abandon analytic philosophy for “practical philosophy.” Rather, **the analytic demand for clarity was transformed into a method for making practical knowledge, ethical experience and human practices articulate and intelligible.** His own website presents this continuity quite explicitly: philosophy is something that can be done in many ways, but his preferred way is reflective conversation, which he traces from his early Sudanese work through his contributions to ethics, aesthetics, cultural sciences and practical knowledge.

If you are interested in this as an intellectual-history question, the most illuminating sequence to read would probably be ***Sudanese Ethics* → *Fra “er” til “bør”?* → *The Power of Example* → *Etik och praktisk kunskap*.** That sequence makes the transition from analytic/conceptual philosophy to his mature practice-oriented philosophy particularly visible.