

Tore Nordenstam's intellectual development

The intellectual development of the Swedish philosopher **Tore Nordenstam** represents a fascinating journey from mainstream analytical philosophy to a highly specialized form of **practical philosophy centered on practical knowledge, descriptive ethics, and reflective dialogue**. His evolution bridges early humanistic interests in literature and drama with a radical reimagining of how philosophy relates to professional life and human action. [[1](#), [2](#), [3](#), [4](#)]

His intellectual shift can be understood through four key developmental stages:

1. The Humanistic Roots: Literary Studies and Students' Theatre

During his early academic years in Sweden (studying at Gothenburg and Uppsala in the 1950s), Nordenstam was deeply immersed in the humanities. [[1](#), [2](#)]

- **The Role of Text and Drama:** His engagement with literary studies and active involvement in university students' theatre grounded him in a worldview that prioritized human narratives, artistic intent, and situational contexts over rigid scientific abstraction. [[1](#), [2](#), [3](#)]

- **The Spark for "Action" and Performance:** In theater, knowledge is not merely a set of theoretical propositions; it is performed, embodied, and understood through action and example. This perspective deeply seeded his future dissatisfaction with traditional armchair philosophy and heavily influenced his later masterwork, *The Power of Example*. [[1](#), [2](#), [3](#), [5](#)]

2. The Analytical Departure and the Shift to Language

Like most Nordic philosophers of his generation, Nordenstam initially trained in **analytical philosophy** and the **philosophy of language**, completing higher degrees at Gothenburg University by 1961. [[1](#)]

- At this stage, he focused heavily on semantic analysis—how words carry meaning.
- However, rather than remaining in pure logical positivism, Nordenstam became heavily influenced by **Ludwig Wittgenstein's later philosophy**. Wittgenstein's idea of "language games"—the notion that the meaning of words is determined by their use in specific human practices—offered Nordenstam a conceptual bridge. It allowed him to connect his

background in literary/theatrical interpretation with formal philosophical methodology. [, [2](#), [3](#), [4](#), [5](#)]

3. The African Crucible: Descriptive Ethics in Sudan

The turning point in Nordenstam's shift toward a localized, practical philosophy occurred during his tenure at the **University of Khartoum in Sudan (1961–1966)**. [[1](#)]

- **The Method of Dialogue:** Tasked with teaching ethics, Nordenstam realized that Eurocentric, abstract ethical systems failed to explain the lived realities of Sudanese culture. Instead of lecturing, he initiated structured, reflective interviews with his Sudanese students to analyze concepts like *sharaf* (honour) and *karāma* (dignity). [[1](#), [2](#), [3](#)]
- **Descriptive Ethics:** This resulted in his landmark 1965 PhD thesis and subsequent book, *Sudanese Ethics* (1968). This work marked his departure from normative ethics (telling people what is right) toward **descriptive ethics**—investigating how moral values function practically within specific customs and cultural institutions. [[1](#), [2](#), [3](#)]

4. Convergence: "The Bodø Approach" and Practical Philosophy

Upon returning to Scandinavia—eventually becoming a long-serving Professor of Philosophy at the **University of Bergen (1981–1998)**—Nordenstam synthesized his diverse experiences into a distinct branch of practical philosophy known today as the study of **Practical Knowledge** (*praktisk kunnskap*). [[1](#), [2](#), [3](#), [4](#), [5](#)]

- **Philosophy of the Working Life:** Alongside colleagues like Bo Göranson, Nordenstam applied his philosophy to working life, systems development, and professional expertise (even studying internal working dynamics at institutions like Sweden's Royal Dramatic Theatre, *Dramaten*).
- **The Essay as Reflection:** He became a cornerstone of the "Bodø Approach" (at Nord University). This academic framework takes mature professionals (nurses, teachers, police officer, engineers) and teaches them to write reflective, narrative essays about their own experiences.
- **An Aristotelian-Wittgensteinian Hybrid:** Nordenstam's version of practical philosophy fundamentally relies on Aristotle's concept of *phronesis* (practical wisdom) mixed with Wittgensteinian language games. He argues that true professional competence and ethics cannot be codified into rigid rulebooks or digital algorithms. Instead, like a character in a play or a figure in a novel, practical wisdom is developed through **narratives, analogical reasoning, and the power of concrete examples**. [[1](#), [2](#), [3](#), [4](#)]

Through this development, Nordenstam successfully brought philosophy out of academic isolation, transforming it into an active tool for human beings to reflect on their own professional and cultural practices. [[1](#), [2](#), [3](#)]

AI-generated text. 2026/08/03.