

Ethics, Language and the Development of Wittgenstein's Thought in Ms 139a

Deirdre Christine Page Smith, Bergen, Norway

'Lecture on Ethics' was one of Wittgenstein's first tangible products after returning to Cambridge and philosophy in early 1929. The interest it holds for us is thus not only to offer insight into Wittgenstein's views on Ethics, but also into the development of his thought during years spent prioritizing activities other than philosophy. This paper will consider some themes regarding both the development of his thought as well as the relationship between Ethics and language presented in the manuscript version of 'Lecture on Ethics', Ms 139a.

The first thing that strikes one when reading Ms139a as handwritten by Wittgenstein, is its authenticity. Here I do not simply mean something like, "Ah, this is the real McCoy, written in the master's own hand!", but rather that it contains a genuine heartfelt expression. Wittgenstein opens by apologizing in advance for his use of English concerning a matter, Ethics, which even for a native speaker would be difficult to communicate. Although this may simply be a literary device, his honest search for straightforward ways of expressing his thoughts, one I think any of us who have learned and use a foreign language recognize, serves to accentuate his wish to say something which comes from the heart.

To keep himself on the track of the heart rather than that of the mind and knowledge, Wittgenstein employs a number of metaphors, similes and analogies, not to mention a plethora of other examples, throughout Ms 139a. It is in the character of these that we find interesting clues to tension in and the movement of his thought toward his later philosophy.

Galton, composite types and roads hoped travelled

Wittgenstein's first metaphor in Ms 139a is used to capture the last of three challenges met when having something difficult to communicate, one which is in particular connected with or "adheres to" philosophical explanations. And this is

"that it sometimes is almost impossible to explain a matter in such a way that the hearer at once sees the road he is lead & the [end]goal to which it leads". (p. 2-3)

The road metaphor is not only repeated within Ms 139a, it occurs throughout Wittgenstein's writing, also appearing in the form of familiar similes like "A rule stands there like a signpost" in *Philosophical Investigations* §85 (PI). But perhaps more importantly, it represents a thread in Wittgenstein's thought which touches upon a number of important relational themes such as the willing/intending and what is done, a rule and its being followed and the possibility of private language. For our purposes, it represents a belief in the possibility of clearly channelling understanding toward a specific end.

On page 4 of Ms 139a, we meet Francis Galton's work with composite photography as an analogy for what Wittgenstein would like to achieve when he offers several synonyms to replace the word 'valuable' in his working definition "Ethics is the general enquiry into what is valua-

ble". (p. 3) Looking through the synonyms he places one behind the other, will enable us to glimpse those shared features he wants us to see. He writes:

And if you hold all these expressions together "value", "good", "great", "right", "sense of life", "that what makes life worth living", "worth" etc. you will I believe see what it is I am concerned with. (p. 4)

However in addition to acting as an analogy for *what* he hopes to achieve in his Lecture on Ethics, the Galton example acts also as an analogy for *how* he hopes to achieve it. To mix a metaphor, by paving the road of his lecture with synonymous examples, we will see its end more clearly when looking down it through these examples. And it is between this 'what' and 'how' that we find tensions in Wittgenstein's thought signalling movement away from the taunt lines of his early toward the more exploratory courses of his later writings.

Regarding both the what and how of Ms 139a, it is interesting to note that Galton, who otherwise made headway with his endeavours in statistical analysis regarding heredity, historiometry and eugenics, failed to find visual archetypes for certain illnesses and criminality by making composite photographs of faces of the ill and criminal, whereas in the case of human fingerprints he showed the opposite, each is unique. To what extent does Galton's lack of success tell us something about how we should understand what Wittgenstein meant by replicating the 'effect' Galton produced with composite photography? What exactly was this effect? Was it the one Galton sought after, illustrating types of human constitutions, or in line with what he did discover? I think this ambiguity, combined with the fact that Wittgenstein does not follow up this line of thought later in Ms 139a, indicates that he had still not hit upon the concepts of family resemblance¹ and aspect seeing found in his later philosophy. Rather he is still in Galton's world of types, yet no longer wholly comfortable there.

Relative and ethical value²

This tension between the abstract and concrete level is kept alive in Wittgenstein's distinction between the relative vs. absolute or ethical use or value which he spends the rest of Ms 139a discussing. Several pages after introducing this distinction, he writes, "no statement of fact can ever be or imply what we call an absolute that is ethical judgment". (p. 6-7) We cannot abstract from facts like 'he is a good football player, carpenter, diaper changer, cook, dish washer, etc' that 'he is a good father'. Relative judgments of value are made according to an established standard. Wittgenstein uses the example of a "good piano" being one which "comes up to a certain standard of tone etc. which I have fixed & which I conceive as its purpose" (p. 5) The "right road" is right by virtue of getting us literally, not metaphorically, to a predetermined end. Even a big book written by an omniscient author containing a whole description of the world "would not contain anything that

¹ Wittgenstein in fact carried around with him in an album a composite photograph made from pictures of himself and his sisters (Conant lecture).

² As Wittgenstein does, I use ethical value and absolute value interchangeably.

we would call an ethical judgment or anything that would directly imply such a judgment". (p. 7) Yet his own employment of the road metaphor combined with his use of the Galton example, point to the possibility of abstracting a some(one)thing out. However, Wittgenstein continues in this vein, writing on page 8,

Now what I wish to say is that all facts are as it were on the same level that there is no such thing as absolute importance or unimportance in them & that in the same way all propositions are on the same level that there are no propositions which are in any absolute sense sublime, important or on the other hand trivial.

Each fact is then on par, even in its uniqueness. Where Wittgenstein's utilization of the Galton example and road metaphor at the beginning of Ms 139 seem to be drifting toward something in either a transcendental or an essentialist region, what comes after his introduction of the distinction between relative and absolute value focuses not on the one image a composite photograph achieves, but rather its illusionary character (more his finger print result – nominal – than his criminal/illness hopes – universal). There is no "right road", only a road "which leads to an arbitrarily predetermined end" (p. 10) A little further down he asks what people (including himself) have in mind when they use expressions like 'absolute good' and 'absolute value' and follows this up by discussing two examples: wondering at the existence of the world, and feeling absolutely safe. Although he concedes that we can wonder at the existence of extraordinary facts, e.g. a very large dog, or that having once had whooping cough we are immune, it is nonsense to wonder literally at the existence of the world itself or feel oneself absolutely immune from all harm.

And this leads on page 14 to the idea that ethical & religious propositions of absolute value are similes, that although "he is a good fellow" is not the same as "he is a good football player" or "the life of this man is valuable" is not the same as "this piece of jewelry is valuable" there is an intended connection. On page 15 he expands the notion with a layer housing God – a kind of metaphor within a metaphor where feeling absolutely same and wondering at the existence of the world stand for God having created the world (God speaks, hears etc. in a metaphorical/allegorical sense). But on page 16 Wittgenstein points out that a simile is a simile for something and thus if we drop it something should remain. Yet with ethical and religious examples "as soon as you drop the simile & try to state simply the facts that stand behind them we find that there are no such facts" only nonsense. For many, I think this is a wholly dissatisfying conclusion since when we wonder at the existence of the world or feel absolutely safe it is not simply a flat experience for us, but a meaningful one (even for agnostics and atheists).

Wittgenstein holds to his distinction between relative and absolute value until the end of Ms 139a which poses a problem for his initial Galton strategy. He has obviously rejected the possibility of abstracting an absolute value 'composite' from relative value. But what about letting absolute value help comprise his composite, i.e. putting the experience of absolute value on the level of relative value instead of assuming that it is an abstraction from the latter? This too he rejects saying it would then be nonsense to call them absolute in the first place, they would rather have to be called relative. That absolute value can thus not avoid nonsense Wittgenstein calls "the paradox that [an experience|a fact] should have an absolute value" in the first place. How can it be both a fact of experience, yet not be reducible to any experience? This leaves Wittgenstein

in a quandary: where does 'absolute value' belong? For it does clearly have meaning for us. He ends the lecture writing simply that one cannot make a science of absolute value, yet recognizes it as "a tendency of the human mind" which he deeply respects and would not ridicule. (p. 21)

Contextual composites

I would like to argue that his problem placing absolute value is parallel to the difficulty of explaining where meaning comes from. This is a problem he resolves much more satisfactorily in his later philosophy by emphasizing the role context plays for how we understand an expression. And Wittgenstein does in Ms 139a throw language into the relative vs. absolute value fray writing:

"Now I am tempted to say that the right expression in language for the miracle of the existence of the world is the miracle of the existence of language but what does it mean to notice this miracle some times & not at other times? For all I have done by shifting the expression of the miraculous from an expression by means of language to the expression by the existence of language, all I have said is again that we can not express what we want to express & that all we say about it [is/remains] nonsense."

But we do indeed, as Wittgenstein does, express experiences of absolute value in language in meaningful ways. I would be so bold as to claim that on the level the playing field of Wittgenstein's relative value, we would have difficulties finding either value or meaning. Both entail distinctions and when he claims that all facts and propositions are on the same level, one wonders what exactly this level might be. To help clarify my point I would first like to give an example from *Philosophical Investigations* where I think Wittgenstein is more alive to the importance contextual differences play for our understanding. Ten paragraphs following where Wittgenstein introduces the notion of family resemblances (§67) to capture what games have in common, Wittgenstein writes:

[...] In such a difficulty always ask yourself: How did we learn the meaning of this word ("good" for instance)? From what sort of examples? In what language-games? Then it will be easier for you to see that the word must have a family of meanings. (PI §77)

He follows this in the next paragraph with an example:

Compare *knowing* and *saying*:

How many feet high Mont Blanc is—

How the word "game" is used—

How a clarinet sounds—

Here we find a family of meanings for a word depending on both the context in which we learned to use it, the examples used to explain it and the language-games in which it is used. And it is clear from the examples Wittgenstein gives, that the playing field is far from level. Different words placed in the same context give different meanings as well as when the same word is put into different contexts. But perhaps even more striking than the significance of context, is the implied import of human experience, "How did we learn the meaning of this word [...]?" By removing absolute value from the equation, even after giving an example of his own personal experience of it, Wittgenstein in Ms 139a removes an element which taken together with context is crucial in shaping meaning.

In the *Tractatus* 6.43 Wittgenstein writes:

If the good or bad exercise of the will does alter the world, it can alter only the limits of the world, not the facts—not what can be expressed by means of language.

I think that Wittgenstein in Ms 139a has yet to recognize the problems connected with making the sharp Tractarian distinction between the world of language and facts vs. the world of value. He does, however, recognize the importance of these issues. In Wittgenstein's use of Galton's composite photography, we can see the seeds of his later more developed notions of family resemblance and aspect seeing. He is still, however, a ways from seeing how the Galton example can be used not only for words themselves (synonyms), but also applied to the contexts in which they are used. Although he does achieve this to some extent through his extensive use of examples to distinguish between relative and absolute value, by leaving absolute value unemployed at the end of Ms 139a, he misses the opportunity to have it work toward giving us a more meaningful description of Ethics.[†]

Literature

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Email: deirdre.cp.smith@gmail.com

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