

# Morals in the World-Picture

Tobias Matzner, Karlsruhe, Germany

tobias.matzner@rechnerpost.net

1. In *On Certainty* Wittgenstein has illustrated that what we are most certain of are “norm[s] of description” (OC 167). As Michael Kober (1996, sec. IV) argues, the basic sentences Wittgenstein analyses in his text are “constitutive norms” that form our “world-picture”. So particularly what we usually do not describe as normative, an expression of “what is the case” can also be an expression of “what should be the case”, for then it “prescribes the true or correct use of the word” (Kober 1996, 426). What then follows for the “traditionally” normative? Can we extend the concept of the world-picture to include moral beliefs?

Let us recall what we have learned about “world-pictures” in *On Certainty*: Whatever we say and do we rely on a world-picture, i.e. that which stands fast for us and enables us to speak and act sensibly. However, these contents of the world-picture have not always stood fast and might lose this status in the future. This is illustrated by Wittgenstein’s famous picture of beliefs becoming solid and forming a “bedrock” for less solid beliefs but the movement of the latter might in turn dissolve the former again (OC 96). Furthermore, that which stands fast has nothing in itself that makes it so, only being intertwined in a web of beliefs gives its “solidity”—here Wittgenstein uses the image of a “nest” (OC 225) where the straws fixate each other without hierarchic structure. However, *relying* on these beliefs does not mean “mere” reliance, or establishing that one can rely on them before doing so, but it is simply what we do in relation to the world-picture (OC 509)<sup>1</sup>. These world-pictures cannot be private, they are shared, commonly held beliefs (Schulte 1990, 116; Kober 1996, 419-20). And finally a world picture is nowhere to be seen nor does it simply exist, instead it only becomes manifest in the actions of those who share it. So the inherent dynamics of the world-picture, the constant movement of solidifying and dissolving happens because every action of a person might enforce or challenge a belief that she shares. Generally, this paper is based on a rather coherentist than foundationalist reading of *On Certainty*, informed particularly by thoughts of Kober’s (1993) and Andreas Krebs’ (2007) interpretations.

All of this applies quite well to moral beliefs: they change with time and region, practices once deemed wrong can become accepted, they are intertwined and make sense only as a web of beliefs that “hinges” on the common practice in a community or society. However, here we deal with *mores*, mere customs and beliefs, and ethics usually has higher aims than only describing what people do. Of course, the *Witz* of moral “world-pictures” would be to transfer to ethics Wittgenstein’s result, that the relative certainty we have is all we can have but also all that we need.

So, let us consider the analogy: If somebody acts *contra* our world-picture, we either deem her or him wrong, not willing to partake, stupid, even mentally ill—more abstract: we exclude—or we change our world-picture, which may be done sensibly and not arbitrarily because “the other straws of the nest” still can give stability, even if we move some of them. This also shows that beliefs can be changed only when relying on other aspects of the world-picture. By

the same mechanism, assuming a moral world-picture, we can deem a deed wrong or evil, or adjust. (Here, but as well in Wittgenstein’s text, a certain idea of spontaneity or event is moving in the background, for without actions that contradict a world-picture it would never change.)

Dealing with morals, however, we have to cope with a more instable quality. A scientific discovery or technical development that might lead to behavior contradicting and eventually changing a world-picture usually has material references that can make it intelligible. The moral perpetrator instead can talk of e.g. intentions, or refer to a set of values. Moreover, Foucault and others have shown how evil the mechanisms of exclusion that are applied to non-standard behavior can look if seen from an ethical standpoint. After all, the person contradicting the world picture could be interested in doing so, or could want us to rely on something. This critique would vanish if morals were only a matter of conformity. Thomas Wachtendorf (2008, 230) has shown in his book on Wittgenstein and ethics that already on the level of conformity value judgements exist, but only pertaining to *behavior*, whereas humans are also capable of *action*, where the acting person must be sure whether she could take responsibility for the act, and not only rely on its conformity with the world-picture. However, where do the standards of this judgment come from? Again, from the moral world-picture. Admitting anything else would undermine Wittgenstein’s concept and thus our endeavor. Yet, we have glimpsed a new element in the discussion: the acting persons and their relation to the world-picture. For example, in many views or beliefs that could be part of a moral world-picture, these relations figure as intentions of an act. To include them in our view, we need a much more refined concept of the others than that which we get from *On Certainty*, were the others are almost objectively there, they do things and these acts establish a world. (Cf. for example OC 476, where Wittgenstein explains that a child does not learn that there are books and armchairs, but to fetch books and to sit in armchairs.) The others seem to rely smoothly on the world-picture, one could almost say execute it. They do not appear as subjects with needs and desires, let alone intentions or virtues.

2. To get a more refined view on the others, I want to argue for combining Wittgenstein’s views with Hannah Arendt’s conception of subjects and their common world in *The Human Condition* (1998). She as well is convinced that last certainties cannot be had, and moreover, that even our human-made certainty, namely tradition, eventually fell apart. In our vocabulary this would be seen as the demise of a well and widely established world-picture.

In her analysis of human affairs, the notion of reliance plays a prominent part as well. However, concerning human beings living together, matters are not as easy as in the factual world of *On Certainty* where we cannot but rely on—and thus have—a world picture (OC 509). On the contrary, Arendt warns against the dangers of importing the certainty of “nature” where fact and necessity rule into the realm of human interaction. Some aspects of human life can best be grasped under the paradigm of necessity, Arendt calls them “labor” (HC Ch. 13). The realm of human interactions, however, is the realm of “actions” that have a spontaneous character, and thus all “natural” certainty could only be pre-

<sup>1</sup> Concerning OC 509 I use “to rely on” for the German “verlassen auf”, which is translated as “to trust” in the English edition.

sumptive, and needs mechanisms of exclusion or violence to remain forceful. Yet, even in the “plural” realm of spontaneous human action, a common world is established and we meet other individuals, not only random events. (The following reading is informed mainly by one “side” of what Seyla Benhabib calls the tension between “agonal” and “narrative” respectively “essentialist” and “constructivist” passages in *The human condition* (Benhabib 1996, 125-6). This “side” is prominent in the interpretations of Dana Villa (1996), and Bonnie Honig (1988), whereas Benhabib (1996), and Margaret Canovan (1992) among several others disagree.) That individual, the “who” one is, compared to the “what” that pertains to the realm of nature, is the result of actions. These actions stem neither from an essential “who” nor from a deliberate choice “who” one wants to be. On the contrary, the “who” is established in the “stories” others tell of one’s acts. (HC 184. Although it is not clear in Arendt, I think it is important to note that the actors themselves tell such a story as well. However, this story is by no means privileged. Wittgenstein’s thought on first-person knowledge in the *Philosophical Investigations* can help explaining this.) Of course, one will figure in many such stories that constantly change. However, over time and with relatively coherent actions, an individual emerges, a “person-picture” one could say. The requisite of coherence here is problematic not only because human action is spontaneous, but because every human being from the very beginning lives and acts in a preexisting “web of relations”. Again, this web has no essence, it is established by human action and “overgrows” the “world”, a concept more akin to culture and “world-picture” and distinguished from nature (HC 182-3). The consequences of one’s actions within this web are never fully foreseeable. To cope with this predicament Arendt analyses two basic moral acts: promising and forgiving. The first, to “cast islands in the sea of uncertainty” (HC 244) need not be a formal promise or even a contract. Indeed, speaking and acting would not be possible without interpreting the entry of a person into a community as “promise” to generally continue acting according to the world-picture. Forgiving is necessary because even with the best intentions we are not master of our acts (HC 236-7). Here again the person is the only reference, we have to attribute to her that she did not want what happened or other reasons for forgiving. So we need a quite stable established person whose relation to the act makes the idea intelligible that she will live up to her promise or, respectively, deserves to be forgiven. (Arendt notes that punishment is another mode to relieve a person from the consequences of her deeds. Here as well a relation between person and act is the reference.) So in the end, it is the “person-picture” established in action that enables moral judgement. But of course, this “person-picture” can only be established and “tell” us something about “who” is acting in relation to our world-picture.

3. The others that enact and thus guarantee the world(-picture) have themselves become something quite frail by now. Wittgenstein’s observation still holds that we always act according to a world-picture and that we cannot give it up without having a new one. But it is no longer simply visible in what “people” do, but these “people” themselves can become visible as persons in their acting. These persons and their features “taint” the world-picture held by them, thus relying on a world-picture entails always reliance on persons. The relations that are necessary to enable this reliance are moderated by promising and forgiving. These actions are a support for morals that are in a certain sense “more than the total sum of *mores*” as they help maintain the relation to people and world that makes morality intelligible. Yet promising and forgiving are not applied from a “supposedly higher faculty” outside of action (HC 245-6), because their only reference are the mutually established persons

and world. More generally speaking, with the world and actors thus established, the relying can happen in different modes. Particularly because of the inherent frailty one can deprive the other of possibilities of relation to the world. This is a most wicked thing because the world is established in the very actions of human beings, and thus that means to deprive the other of a part of the world. This “world alienation” is prominent in Arendt’s book (HC Ch. 35), but only with recourse to Wittgenstein can we see, how profound the consequences of such an act are that potentially can destroy the most basic features of one’s world. For example, Arendt talks about the “naturalization” of human existence, i.e. something deemed necessary when it really is the product of a particular world view (Villa 1996, 201). However, for someone sharing this view, this is a real necessity until one can get another view, either by spontaneous action or by contact with another world-picture—a possibility I do not deal with in this paper. Thus, in our combined view of world(-picture) and person, moral beliefs become certain by the same mechanism as those about the world.

As reader of *On Certainty* one could still object that moral views do not belong to the world-picture which only contains beliefs so firmly held that we cannot imagine otherwise and if they change, this happens slowly over long periods of time. Somehow, this is correct, yet the difference here entailed is not supportable: For example, a whole branch of sciences has appeared that struggle with the belief that there “are” men and women or races with particular features. But one need not support post-modern identity theory (I think Arendt would not have done so) to note (as Arendt did, HC 232, cf. also Villa 1996, 123) that the aforementioned frailty is propagated into the very bedrock of our world. Although she maintains the second realm of “nature”, even the factual “truths” of science become “political” as soon as they should have any influence on human life (HC 3-4). So, concerning the aforementioned objection, the problem is not making morals more certain than they are but considering the world-picture more stable than it is. Our combined view shows not only the stability of moral views but also their frailty, which in the end is the frailty of the entire world-picture – insofar as relying on people makes something frail.

## Literature

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