

Wittgenstein and the Unwritten Part of the *Tractatus*

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1. Problematic

Any attempt to link Wittgenstein's philosophy to ethics seems odd. First of all, it is an open question whether Wittgenstein cares about ethics (as a serious branch of philosophy) at all. It is true that Wittgenstein seldom talks about ethics, except 6.4 through 6.54 of the *Tractatus* and his "Lecture on Ethics"; as for his *Philosophical Investigations*, ethics seems to be out of the picture. It seems legitimate to question any attempt to link his ideas to ethics if he himself does not deal with ethics *directly* in the core of his philosophical work. Secondly, even if he has some scattered comments on ethics, it does not imply that he has *an* ethics of his own. According to a former pupil's recollection, Wittgenstein seems to consider moral problems case by case. (Rhees 1965:17-26) It seems true that Wittgenstein does not think that we can formulate any systematic guidance on our moral behaviors.

Even so, I believe it is wrong to overlook Wittgenstein's relation to ethics, which should be clear if we read his *Tractatus* carefully. In a well-known letter to Ludwig Ficker, Wittgenstein claims that the *Tractatus* is basically an ethical one, and he also mentions that there are two parts of his *Tractatus*, the written part and the unwritten part, and it is the unwritten part that actually matters. (Luckhardt 1979: 94) In this paper, I shall answer the following questions: What is this unwritten part? What does Wittgenstein try to convey in this unwritten part? Why is it unwritten? I argue that this unwritten part is his view on ethics. If we read the *Tractatus* carefully, it would become crystal clear that Wittgenstein does take ethics seriously. But Wittgenstein does hold the view that ethics is ineffable, for our language is limited in nature. I also argue that, to Wittgenstein, it is actually its being unwritten that ethics could be meaningfully being talked about by us.

2. Ethics and the limits of language

The early Wittgenstein has long been regarded having tremendous influence on the logical positivist movement and especially its rejection of metaphysics and nonsensical language, such as ethics, religion and aesthetics. The publication of Ayer's *Language, Truth and Logic* in 1936 epitomizes how the early Wittgenstein was interpreted in that vein. Ayer claims that a metaphysician is a kind of "misplaced poet" and statements of value are not literally significant and are simply "expressions of emotion which can be neither true nor false." (Ayer 1952: 136) In a logical positivist's mindset, ethics is marginalized and is thrust to the periphery of philosophical enterprise, which adds to the impression of Wittgenstein's seemingly indifference to ethics. This interpretation is definitely contrary to the early Wittgenstein's intention. Even Ayer himself later on recognizes his misinterpretation of the early Wittgenstein's intention. (Ayer 1985: 31-33) The early Wittgenstein certainly does not look down on ethics as misplaced poetry or even marginalize its significance. Wittgenstein's intention is made clear in his "Lecture on Ethics." In this lecture, he holds the human tendency to think ethical problems in high esteem and says: "I personally cannot help respecting deeply and I would not for my life ridicule it." (Wittgenstein

1965: 12) This is a clear proof that Wittgenstein does not endorse moral indifferentism.

In the letter to Ficker, Wittgenstein claims that there are two parts in his *Tractatus*, the written one and the unwritten one. What is striking is that he says that the unwritten one is the important one. In understanding Wittgenstein's intention, we should read his early writings carefully, especially the *Tractatus*, mostly from 6.4 through the end of the book as well as his "Lecture on Ethics." These two works demonstrate the influence of his early philosophy of language on his understanding of ethics. It should be noted that Wittgenstein has a broad concept of ethics throughout his life, which is closely related to the ideas of religion, the will, a good life, qualities of an action and even aesthetics. In his mind, ethics is certainly not a fantasy like a unicorn, but he does not think that we can talk meaningfully about ethics, such as the existence of God. There are two reasons for that. First, according to his picture theory of language, we cannot formulate propositions of ethics, for we cannot picture those things to ourselves. When we say the words God or good, our expressions do not correspond to any facts or simple objects. The ethical language we use in our everyday life has no sense at all. It is nonsensical, for it does not picture anything to us. This is what he means by nonsensical, nothing more. In his early years, Wittgenstein holds a very strict correspondence theory of language, and he believes that our language corresponds to simple objects.

Being nonsensical in a Wittgensteinian sense is not the same as being trivial or lacking in significance. This point is quite clear in his "Lecture on Ethics." In his analysis of our ordinary use of the word ethics, it contains two different concepts of ethics: one is in a trivial or relative sense, such as the way that we talk about a "good" pianist and the "right" road to our destination, for they are only "good" or "right" in a relative sense, and this trivial or relative sense of ethics is not what Wittgenstein cares about; and the other concept of ethics is in an ethical or absolute sense, which is what Wittgenstein really means by ethics. Wittgenstein gives us two examples to clarify his point:

Supposing that I could play tennis and one of you saw me playing and said "Well, you play pretty badly" and suppose I answered "I know, I'm playing badly but I don't want to play any better," all the other man could say would be "Ah then that's all right." But suppose I had told one of you a preposterous lie and he came up to me and said "You're behaving like a beast" and then I were to say "I know I behave badly, but then I don't want to behave any better," could he then say "Ah, then that's all right"? Certainly not; he would say "Well, you *ought* to want to behave better." (Wittgenstein 1965: 5)

In the first example, poor tennis skill is "bad" in a trivial or relative sense, which has nothing to do with morality at all, but in the second example, telling someone a lie is "bad" in an ethical or absolute sense. In the case of my telling a lie, I am not going to get away with a simple response, and other people would demand me to behave better. This paragraph shows us that ethics is definitely neither trivial nor insignificant in Wittgenstein's mind. It is unlikely for Wittgenstein to endorse moral indifferentism.

The second reason that we cannot talk meaningfully about ethics is that it goes beyond the limits of our language and therefore we cannot put it into words. In Wittgenstein's mind, value is absolute, not relative or trivial. If we try to put a value judgment in a form of a statement of facts, it will immediately lose its status as a value statement in its absolute sense. He describes this situation with a metaphor: "if a man could write a book on ethics which really was a book on ethics, this book would, with an explosion, destroy all the other books in the world," for "[e]thics is supernatural and our words will only express facts; as a teacup will only hold a teacup full of water and if I were to pour out a gallon over it." (Wittgenstein 1965: 7) The metaphor of an ethics book that makes other ordinary books explode and the comparison between a teacup and a gallon once again makes Wittgenstein's point very clear: ethics is absolute and is beyond the limits of our language. Hence it is not ethics' failure for being nonsensical, and on the contrary, it is the problem of our language's impotence to contain ethics.

Having this in mind, we can now adequately understand what Wittgenstein means by "[a]ll propositions are of equal value," for they are equal in the sense that they do not contain any value in its absolute sense, and in other word, we can say that propositions of facts have no value (in an absolute sense); and if we talk about a value in its absolute sense, "it must lie outside the whole sphere of what happens and is the case." (§6.4) Hence Wittgenstein argues that we cannot have propositions of ethics, for "[p]ropositions can express nothing that is higher" (§6.42), and "[i]t is clear that ethics cannot be put into words." (§6.421) This is another proof that Wittgenstein does not view ethics as insignificant or trivial; and much to the contrary, he thinks that ethics is higher and that is exactly the reason why propositions cannot contain it.

3. Ethics and thinking

In order to answer the riddle of the unwritten part of the *Tractatus*, let's follow Wittgenstein's suggestion and start with its preface and conclusion. In the preface, he claims the sense of the book is: "what can be said at all can be said clearly, and what we cannot talk about we must pass over in silence," which is exactly what he concludes in 7. But he points out further:

Thus the aim of the book is to draw a limit to thinking (*Denken*), or rather—not to thinking (*Denken*), but to the expression of thoughts (*Gedanken*): for in order to be able to draw a limit to thinking (*Denken*), we should have to find both sides of the limit thinkable (i.e. we should have to be able to think what cannot be thought). (Wittgenstein 1961:3)

In this passage, I add the original German words *Denken* and *Gedanke* to show the nuance between "thinking" and "thought." In Wittgenstein's original text of this passage, "thinking" is different from "thought." So he claims that the aim of the *Tractatus* is trying to draw a limit, "not to thinking" but "to the expression of thoughts." As we know, a thought is a logical picture of facts, a picture of the world as well as a proposition. In this passage, Wittgenstein seems to claim that we should think beyond the limits of thoughts and language as he says that "we should have to be able to think what cannot be thought." It seems that Wittgenstein does not think that our job should stop at the limit of our language, and "we should have to find both sides of the limit thinkable." In other word, one should not just think inside the limit of language but also think outside the limit (although it might lead us nowhere, for what lies on the other side of the limit will simply be nonsense).

This call for thinking the unthinkable echoes with the famous conclusion of 6.54, the so-called Wittgenstein's ladder: "[m]y propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually recognizes them as nonsensical (*unsinnig*), when he has used them—as steps—to climb up beyond them. (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it.) He must transcend these propositions, and then he will see the world aright."

If we climb up the ladder, we will be able to see the world aright. That is to say: when we are able to see the limit of our language and thoughts, we will be able to think beyond the limit and see the world in a right way. I believe this is the answer to Wittgenstein's riddle. The unwritten part of his *Tractatus* is ethics. It is unwritten because it is not possible to put it in words. *Its being unwritten is actually its being written*. If it is the case, the ladder that Wittgenstein asks us to throw away in the end is not ethics itself but propositions of ethics, not thinking but the expression of thoughts. If it is the way we can see the world aright, the aim of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* is not merely the elimination of metaphysics but also the urge to make room for ethics that is beyond the limit of our language. If that is the case, there is a very interesting similarity with Kant's "making room for faith" in his first *Critique*.

4. Conclusion

Based on these interpretations, I believe I have made Wittgenstein's relation to ethics manifest. The unwritten half of his *Tractatus* and its ambition show how remote it is from the understanding of logical positivists, such as Ayer's. Wittgenstein certainly does not endorse emotivism and moral indifferentism. He seems to believe in a higher order, though the order is ineffable and cannot be put into words. But this does not mean that he endorses cognitivism in its objectivism strain. To be fair, he does not endorse any metaphysical position beyond our ordinary use of language, and this kind of quietism is rather consistent throughout his academic life. He indeed suggests us to think as clearly as we can, and we must pass over in silence regarding things that we cannot talk about; but he does not suggest that our intellect should simply stop at the limits of language, for our thinking always compels us to think the unthinkable and to go beyond the limit of our thoughts. As mentioned earlier, this paper does not attempt to constitute a systematic picture of Wittgensteinian ethics. I only attempt to reveal his profound relation to ethical thinking and his implication to ethics.

Literature

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