

# "Facts, Facts, and Facts but No Ethics": a Philosophical Remark on Dethroning

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Philosophy is not destroyed by the remark which dethrones the words 'sense', 'language', 'world', etc., rather the remark itself is a philosophical remark. (F. Waismann)

The end of the 20s and the beginning of the 30s were a transition period in Wittgenstein's thought. As such, this period has rightly served as a kind of laboratory in which one could gain fresh insights into Wittgenstein's ideas by emphasizing either the similarities and continuities within his oeuvre as a whole or the marked differences between "the early" and "the later" Wittgenstein. My own reading focuses on the transition period as revealing some discrepancy between the later Wittgenstein's approach to language and world and his insufficiently-revolutionized approach to ethics. Wittgenstein indeed acknowledged the fact that his new views about language and world must have resulted in abandoning his pure and ascetic conception of ethics; yet his notion of philosophy still obeyed the central dogma that reigned over the early, traditional worldview, and as a result he did not realize that the linkage he had forged between meaning and action must yield a blatantly political attitude to matters ethical.

Wittgenstein gave his lecture on ethics in Cambridge on November 1929. He is reported by Waismann to have conveyed similar thoughts, similarly phrased, a month later in Schlick's house in Vienna. It has convincingly been argued, especially in light of Wittgenstein's famous letter to Ficker, that despite the relatively minor place allocated to the topic in his oeuvre, Wittgenstein's fundamental motivation, at least in writing the *Tractatus* but probably throughout his life, was ethical. The sources just mentioned reinforce this reading; they point at the strong connection between the early Wittgenstein's conception of philosophy and his view of ethics. Indeed, the thoughts expressed in the "Lecture on Ethics" seem to echo, and complement, the following famous tenets of the *Tractatus*:

All propositions are of equal value. (6.4) The sense of the world must lie outside the world. In the world everything is as it is, and everything happens as it does happen: in it no value exists--and if it did exist, it would have no value. If there is any value that does have value, it must lie outside the whole sphere of what happens and is the case. For all that happens and is the case is accidental. What makes it non-accidental cannot lie within the world, since if it did it would itself be accidental. It must lie outside the world. (6.41) So too it is impossible for there to be propositions of ethics. Propositions can express nothing that is higher. (6.42) It is clear that ethics cannot be put into words. Ethics is transcendental. (Ethics and aesthetics are one and the same.) (6.421)

This conclusion about our inherent inability to put ethics into words recurs, in a somewhat melancholic tone, in the "Lecture on Ethics":

My whole tendency and I believe the tendency of all men who ever tried to write or talk Ethics or Religion was to run against the boundaries of language. This running against the walls of our cage is perfectly, absolutely hopeless. (PO: 44)

And although Wittgenstein sympathizes with the human desire to cross these boundaries, to reach in discourse the realm of the ethical, he dims this attempt nonsensical, as he did in the *Tractatus*. Note his particular way of justifying this result here:

I hold that it is truly important that one put an end to all the idle talk about Ethics – whether there be knowledge, whether there be values, whether the Good can be defined, etc. In Ethics one is always making the attempt to say something that does not concern the essence of the matter and never can concern it. It is a priori certain that whatever one might offer as a definition of the Good, it is always simply a misunderstanding to think that it *corresponds in expression to the authentic matter* one actually means (Moore). (WVC: 80, my emphasis)

In his *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein aimed at presenting the metaphysical picture which had governed Western thought with utmost clarity, by exposing the condition of its possibility, i.e., the representational essence of language. It is crucial to see that the conception of ethics in the *Tractatus* cannot be detached from its notions of world and language. That ethics does not offer itself to speech – which can only describe "facts, facts, and facts but no Ethics" (PO: 40) – is no less a consequence of the nature of facts than that of ethical (or metaphysical) discourse; and these "essences" are intimately interwoven with the view of language as aiming at correspondence and the assumed "authenticity" of the intentional content to which linguistic signs must correspond.

These assumptions reflect a host of distinctions: between accidental and necessary, relative and absolute, fact and value; between what is internal to language and world and what lies beyond their boundaries, between utterances that are factual and those that do not represent any state of affairs, and also between literal and metaphorical meaning, genuine and parasitic discourse. All these are crucial rungs in the ladder that leads to the silencing of the ethical discourse, not only in the *Tractatus* but also in the "Lecture on Ethics":

Thus in ethical and religious language we seem constantly to be using similes. But a simile must be the simile for *something*. And if I can describe a fact by means of a simile I must also be able to drop the simile and to describe the facts without it. Now in our case as soon as we try to drop the simile and simply to state the facts which stand behind it, we find that there are no such facts. And so, what at first appeared to be a simile now seems to be mere nonsense. (PO 43)

While Wittgenstein's thought as expressed at the end of 1929 is still totally governed by Tractarian assumptions, the writings of the early 30s already manifest the emergence of the later conceptions of language and world. It is interesting to examine, then, whether and to what extent the notion of ethics changes accordingly. We find several occurrences of the words 'ethics' and 'good' in some sources dating from that period, such as Wittgenstein's lectures as reported by Moore and others. We also find relevant paragraphs from Wittgenstein's remarks on Fra-

zer's *Golden Bough* connected to these. After that period, in the later writings, these words hardly ever appear, and when they do, it is never in relation with the "transcendental" or the "ineffable", but rather in the context of a comparison of the new way of thinking about concepts versus the old one. Upon introducing the notion of family resemblance, the pinnacle of Wittgenstein's new approach to meaning, where the quest for definition is exposed as often inadequate, the paramount example is that of ethical discourse. Although it is still inconceivable to think of a definition of the good that would "correspond in expression to the authentic matter one actually means", as Wittgenstein said in his conversation with Schlick and Waismann on December 1929, the reason for this inconceivability has now nothing to do with the distinction between internal and external, accidental and absolute. Wittgenstein equates the attempt to draw a sharp picture corresponding to a blurred one with "the position you are in if you look for definitions corresponding to our concepts in ethics or aesthetics" (PI 77). He continues by urging us to dethrone the words we used to think of as representing pure essences:

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. (ibid.)

Thus it is not, any longer, the external or absolute essence of ethics that frustrates any effort of talking analytically about it, but its being intrinsically blurred and interwoven with other discourses, practices and learning procedures. The new conception of language, world and the relations between them is no longer representational, and consequently the dividing lines between internal and external lose their vigor. Instead, we get a picture of meaning that is gained through action, of language and world intertwining; and at least one of the ways to dethrone the relevant concepts and understand their meaning is by tracing their origins in our actual learning procedures. Ethical discourse may thus be regained, albeit in a totally new guise.

But here we should be careful – for not every account of our practices and learning procedures is equally approved by Wittgenstein. This is made clear already in the transition period, in the remarks on Frazer. "The very idea of wanting to explain a practice – for example, the killing of the priest-king – seems wrong to me", Wittgenstein remarks about Frazer's scientific method. When Frazer traces the origins of a habit in order to understand its meaning, he looks for the reason, or motive, which leads people to perform a particular action (PO 104); but Wittgenstein offers an alternative:

The historical explanation... is only one way of assembling the data – of their synopsis. It is just as possible to see the data in their relation to one another and to embrace them in a general picture without putting it in the form of an hypothesis about temporal development. (PO 131)

Or, to be more exact, what may be taken as hypothetical in Wittgenstein's preferred approach does not bear the dogmatic, fixated character of the scientific, historical hypothesis. It is a hypothetical connecting link, and it

should in this case do nothing but direct the attention to the similarity, the relatedness, of the facts. As one might illustrate an internal relation of a circle to an ellipse by gradually converting an ellipse into a circle; but not in order to assert that a certain ellipse actually, historically, had originated from a circle (evolutionary hypothesis),

but only in order to sharpen our eye for a formal connection. (PO 133, original emphases)

This paragraph in the *Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough* comes right after Wittgenstein's famous discussion – repeated later in *Philosophical Investigations* – of the nature of philosophy and the concept of perspicuous representation, which "is of fundamental importance to us". It is clear that Wittgenstein makes a sharp distinction between two forms of investigation: an explanatory, scientific one, which relies on hypotheses and discovers causes, and a descriptive one. The latter is appropriate for philosophy, ethics, aesthetics, and so on; the former *eo ipso* distorts these discourses. "An error arises only when magic is interpreted scientifically" (125), Wittgenstein remarks; and "magic" should certainly include life, language, and world, as the "Lecture on Ethics" suggests.

A lot has been written on the distinction between explanation and description and the role it plays in Wittgenstein's oeuvre. My present interest in it arises from the way it is connected with the later Wittgenstein's attempt – and what I take as his partial failure – at dethroning the word 'ethics'. Wittgenstein's notion of 'description' aims at creating a special sort of discourse, which is open and imaginative, attentive to particularities and "connecting links", and is hence non-theoretic. This new discourse – of philosophy, ethics, aesthetics – is the direct successor of the previous silence, which resulted from the early, representational attitude to language and world. It is certainly a dethroning discourse; it leaves behind the transcendental and absolute purity of the former concepts and their representational motivation. Yet it bears significant similarities with its silent predecessor.

When Wittgenstein introduced his new conception of philosophy, in the 30s, he spoke in his lectures about a "new subject" with a "new method". According to Moore, he said that

[T]he "new subject" consisted in "something like putting in order our notions as to what can be said about the world"... He also said that he was not trying to teach us any new facts: that he would only tell us "trivial" things – "things which we all know already"; but that the difficult thing was to get a "synopsis" of these trivialities... In this connection he said it was misleading to say that what we wanted was an "analysis", since in science to "analyse" water means to discover some new fact about it... whereas in philosophy "we know at the start all the facts we need to know". (PO 114)

"I imagine", Moore comments, "that it was in this respect of needing a 'synopsis' of trivialities that he thought that philosophy was similar to Ethics and Aesthetics" (ibid.)

This text is a "connecting link" between the earlier and the later Wittgenstein and it somehow conveys both views indeed. On the one hand, the rupture from the old notions cannot be ignored – it is explicit, *said*; yet on the other, it reveals Wittgenstein's relentless desire to draw boundaries, to police the realm of facts, either by posing its limits from the outside or, later, by putting it "in order", by splitting it internally between "new facts" and "trivialities".

I mentioned earlier that I find readings of Wittgenstein's motivation as primarily ethical convincing; and indeed I believe that although there is scarcely any mention of the word 'ethics' in the later writings, the point of the "new subject" is ethical. This again is seen clearly in the transition period, e.g., in Moore's emphases of the similarity in Wittgenstein's attitude towards ethics and aesthetics and towards philosophy, and in such dissenting remarks

on Frazer's *Golden Bough* as "here one can only *describe* and say: this is what human life is like" (PO 121, original emphasis). The "new method" endorses sensitivity to the minute details, the similarities and differences that compose human experience – and this particular and novel sensitivity is fundamentally and deliberately moral. As Antonia Soulez has argued, Wittgenstein's emphasis on the procedures in which meaning is developed through action, his appeal to imagination and his insistence on the fragility and contingency of the given circumstances aim at shedding light on the human capacity of changing what seems as fixated. I thus agree with her that Wittgenstein's term 'description' should not be read as a passive and conservative adherence to the given, and that it can open the horizon for alternatives

Yet the insistence on marking sharply the limits between different discourses, despite its indubitable benefits, has its own limitations. When John Austin collapsed the distinction between constative and performative, he realized that it entailed also the collapse of the fact-value distinction – a distinction that Wittgenstein never relinquished. Understanding the inner connection between language and action means also recognizing that "new facts" are necessarily interlaced with "trivialities"; that an internal and formal relation may fuse with a material, historical one; that science, history, sociology, psychology cannot be detached from ethics and philosophy, and all these are always laden with ideology, even with power-relations. Dethroning ethics is thus not merely attending to minute details, refusing dogmas, developing the imagination and opening the horizon for change; it is also realizing that such ethical sensitivity always obfuscates certain traits and emphasizes others and is thus ideologically colored, as is the wish to ignore this very fact and concentrate on "pure" ethics. Dethroning ethics is therefore renouncing the asceticism of ethics altogether and adopting instead the muddiness of the political.

The later Wittgenstein's implicit ethics reveals that he never succeeded in overcoming one fundamental – *hypothetical, fixated* – dogma, regarding the ascetic essence of philosophy. It is as if he feared that philosophy is destroyed when we dethrone – *truly* dethrone – ethics, aesthetics and itself, by acknowledging the fusion of discourses and the softness of their margins. This actually shows that even his more thoroughly revolutionized conceptions – those of language and world – should be conceived more radically. The first step would require the understanding that philosophy is not destroyed by this suggestion – since it is itself a philosophical suggestion.

## Literature

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