Ethics as a Primary Form of Linguistic Inquiry

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"Traditional"[1] commentaries about the *Tractatus* perceive Wittgenstein's work on language to display a philosophical theory on the relation between language and world as constituting the possibility of meaning. In this sense, we can find a similar attitude towards the ethics of the *Tractatus*, that is, we can reach a correct perspective from which to view the world rightly and still preserve the idea that this attitude cannot be formulated in meaningful sentences. Hence, "traditional" commentaries will usually take the approach of trying to figure out what *it* is that Wittgenstein is really trying to say but cannot, because it cannot be meaningfully uttered.[2]

Other commentaries have created what has become known as the "austere" reading.[3] In this view, Wittgenstein's philosophy, from beginning to end, is animated by an anti-metaphysical vigor, which prohibits any possibility of an external viewpoint on language. In other words, it is not that what is seen from a transcendent perspective cannot be put into words and is instead shown through language; rather, the mere possibility of such transcendence is a fantasy. Seen in this light, Wittgenstein's remarks on ethics are part of the overall disorientation that the *Tractatus* wants us to see as a whole. If there is any ethical guidance, it is not to be found *in* the text, that is, in its content, but rather, in its unique form and procedure.

It seems that the "austere" approach, although inspiring in its vigor and accuracy, has some serious cracks in it. On the one hand it appears that the rigid conception of nonsense is exactly what Wittgenstein had in mind when he wrote of *Unsinn*. On the other hand, it is not clear whether Diamond's imaginative activity or Conant's dissolution of metaphysics demonstrate an *ethical* point for the book. Above all, the "austere" approach demonstrates a harsh criticism of philosophical doctrines and metaphysical systems. But what in these nonsensical remarks attracts our imagination so that these propositions don't lose their attractiveness even when we recognize them to be nonsensical?

Both "traditional" and "austere" readers of the *Tractatus* miss an important distinction between the nonsensicality of philosophical and ethical propositions. Philosophical propositions attempt to explicate the relations between language and world without actually *employing* signs. The philosopher assumes that there is an external perspective from which we can disclose the world, but we cannot substantiate this disclosure in meaningful propositions.

Ethical propositions, on the other hand, are not used to say something about the relation between language and world. On the contrary, they are used to transcend the facts of the world. In this sense, ethical propositions represent an urge to go beyond the world, to disclose it by an attempt to exceed it. Therefore, whereas philosophical propositions fail to draw the limits of language from the outside, ethical propositions draw the limits of language by a *deliberate* attempt to go beyond meaningful language, to evade and break it. Delimiting the ethical from within thus preserves this important distinction, which makes the ethical what it is. "All of that which *many* are *babbling* today"[4] either confuses ethics with factuality or sees ethical propositions as meaningful.

In contrast to philosophical language, which perceives itself in the form of God's *plan*, ethical language takes the form of *praying* to God, of *wanting* a God (God=transcendence). Thus, the *Tractatus* eventually ends with the conclusion that the ethical dimension could only appear on the ruins of metaphysics:

Colloquial language (ordinary talk) > Facts of the world > No value > Averageness

Philosophical language > Beyond the world > Nonsense

Spiritual language (devoted silence) > Beyond the world > Value > Religiousness

Now let us turn to Wittgenstein's later thought. It is almost an acceptable fact that Wittgenstein's quoting Augustine at the beginning of *Philosophical Investigations* is meant to criticize Augustine's conception of language. But the interesting fact is that Wittgenstein admired Augustine's spiritual journey in the *Confessions*, which seems to echo with the *Tractarian* conception of the ethical: the detachment of ethical-religious expression from ordinary talk, the silent commitment to an urge for transcendence, etc. Augustine contends that the rules of grammar are given by those who speak prior to us, whereas the rules of ethics are received from God.[5] Religious understanding seems to share nothing with colloquial language; it is a sort of a spiritual tendency which connects human beings directly to God.

But something is troubling here. Wittgenstein's approval of Augustine's spiritual journey appears to clash with his criticism on Augustine's implicit conception of language. How can we reconcile Wittgenstein's acceptance of Augustine's direct, almost private, language with God to undermining the possibility of private language in general?

It may well be that Wittgenstein begins *Philosophical Investigations* with the words of Augustine not only to criticize Augustine's view of meaning, which correlates to Wittgenstein's old way of thinking, but also to preserve the sense in which Augustine's expressions of the ethical are illuminating and authentic. And so, it is only through the realization of how Augustine's spiritual expressions emerged from his life *within* language that we see their depth and profundity. Only by their relation to, in contrast to their detachment from, ordinary language can we see how they spring from life rather than freeze it, as metaphysical theories tend to do.[6] This is why the *Confessions* is such an important book; not merely because it contains illuminating religious insights but because it depicts a whole life. This is the transformation Wittgenstein suggests:

Colloquial language > Value in life > Religiousness

From this point, surveying the themes of *Philosophical Investigations* we begin to see a sort of aspect of our everyday existence which explicates and manifests ethics in its utmost significance. In this sense, the grounds for distinguishing colloquial language and religious expression collapse. There is no colloquial language that is merely based on social conventions and lacks the possibility of individual expression. No average everydayness stands in contrast to the religious life. There is, above all, the possi-

bility to recognize the significance of everydayness and the meaning of sharing a form of life. Even the deepest religious or ethical thought must be expressed in everyday life, and so cannot be explicated in a single moment of revelation or instance of enlightenment. The meaning and significance of everyday life cannot be instantly grasped. It can only be recognized in its complexity, in its endless grammatical relations, logical affinities, and differences.

Therefore, Wittgenstein's teaching, with its ethical inclination, is not meant to bring us to a *certain* understanding in relation to God, religion, the good, etc. Nor is it meant to show us the way to a leap of faith. On the contrary, religious and ethical revelations are expressed by gradual attentiveness to the workings of ordinary language and the exact places where it is *lost and retrieved*. It is not just that this sort of ethics or religiousness must be accessible and open to everyone;[7] we are bound by it.

Philosophical Investigations begins with what seems to be not only an admission of the grave mistakes in the *Tractatus'* view of meaning but also a glance towards the ethical point of Wittgenstein's early thought. This recognition is manifested in realizing that *use* is the foundation of a form of life with language. Wittgenstein recognized the importance of use in his earlier work, but then the differences between several discourses (such as ethical propositions vs. factual propositions) were analyzed in terms of reference to simple objects. When Wittgenstein recognized the redundancy of such metaphysical requirements, he replaced the attempt to devise a general form of propositions with one that conceived the important notion of "form of life."

When Wittgenstein writes that "to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life," he is not merely referring to our praxis as the origin of meaning. He is presenting the notion of a form of life that *identifies the kind* of language it is. In other words, he asks us to realize what aspects of life are opened through this language. When we meet a language in which we cannot identify or imagine a form of life, or perhaps, feel that the life within this language is poor and unsatisfying, we might sense that there is a problem in it. And thus, all the scenes of *Philosophical Investigations* invite us to see and examine our life within language *as an expression* of the ethical. In this sense, as with the *Tractatus*, the point of *Philosophical Investigations* is ethical.[8]

"The limits of language" are actually an inspection of the limits of our form of life we share with our concepts. Instead of seeing these limits as grammatical "places," we *experience* a loss of meaning through realizing the sort of practice they underwrite. I claim that Wittgenstein's unique conception of the ethical not only requires a transformation in the way we see morality: from a system of principles, ethical laws, moral judgments etc., to values that stem from understanding the expansion or reduction of our form of life with concepts. But also, that Wittgenstein's unique conception of the ethical requires a transformation in the way we grasp his thoughts on grammar.

Take the notion of private language for instance. According to this paper's view, interesting in this scene is not necessarily the familiar question of the possibility of such a language, but rather, the question of its nature. Without entering the familiar debates about the problem of criteria, the correctness of memory, Kripke's well-known paradox, etc., it would be best to indicate our difficulty in imagining what this person is doing by denoting a certain sensation for his or her private use. What I wish to emphasize is not the problematic nature of such a reference that contains no criterion for correctness, but rather, *the complete distortion of our common responses towards sensations*. Wittgenstein shows the emptiness of one's denoting his or her sensation without expressing it to others, describing, sharing, or even concealing it. What do we learn of this sensation by privately mentioning it for our own use, how is it accumulated in our life, and what would this life consist of? All these questions remain vague and peculiar. The understanding of such a language is shut not only for us, but also for the person who forms it.

There is, in fact, a very useful source for Wittgenstein's view of ethics that has been ignored throughout Wittgenstein's literature. In *Discussions of Wittgenstein*[9], Rhees presents us with a conversation he shared with Wittgenstein on ethics. To be brief, Rhees suggested a problem facing a man who has concluded that he must either leave his wife or abandon his work on cancer research. Thus, in the context of Rhees' question, instead of arguing what is the right deed for such a man to commit, Wittgenstein claimed that "whatever he *finally* does, the way things then turn out may affect his attitude" (my emphasis), and immediately afterwards he suggests that this is a *solution* of an ethical problem.

But how can it be a solution to an ethical problem? Isn't ethics supposed to tell us what would be the right thing to do? Wittgenstein says that if the man had a certain ethics, e.g., a Christian, it would have been clear to him that he must stay with his wife. He then argues that when someone says that a certain ethics is the right one, it only means that this man had adopted this system. Obviously, this sort of reply might insinuate towards moral relativism. But this would be a completely shallow response to an extremely deep insight.

By claiming that this man's attitude towards the problem is a solution to an ethical problem, Wittgenstein guides us to realize that this man's perspective will manifest his relation to the relevant concepts. It will show the broadness of his thought and the extension of his heart: what things he is considering, what things he is avoiding, on what grounds he conducts his decisions, etc. It will demonstrate how these concepts are intertwined in his life. What things are really important to him and on what basis such importance rests.

I hope it is clear that I'm suggesting here an ethical *inquiry*. I dare to say that this inquiry can be *objective*. Although the form of this inquiry is not scientific, it can show the emergence of moral deformation. And even if this inquiry cannot be formulated in questions, it can deliver many answers. I keep hearing Cavell's voice, from his unique reading of *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*: "Only a master of a science can accept a revolutionary change as a natural extension of the science."[10] In this spirit, to recognize a need for a moral change as a natural extension of morality one must be a complete master of ethics. Hence, by developing a gradual sensitivity to the ethical dimension of language, we can sense whether a certain attitude is a natural extension of morality, or a complete loss. Of course, this method is yet to be explored.

To sum up, *Philosophical Investigations* aims to manifest the nature of a form of life, expanded or narrowed, within language. Most commentators survey Wittgenstein's conception of the ethical *after* realizing his thoughts on language. Ethics is usually perceived by them as a *consequential*, rather than a *foundational*, aspect of his thought.

But we cannot simply bring words back from their metaphysical to their ordinary use by forming a theory. We cannot interpret passages in Wittgenstein's later period by adhering to the use of several propositions in inappropriate contexts. From the perspective of this paper what is most important to realize here is not necessarily the meaningfulness or nonsensicality of such sentences, but rather the complete emptiness of such utterances compared to the variety of possibilities and aspects of life which are opened through the ordinary use we have with concepts. Metaphysics is designated not simply by an inappropriate context or the misuse of an expression but by the depletion of the form of life in which we ordinarily use a certain expression.

Therefore, bringing words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use is, in essence, an ethical journey of identifying the aspects of life which are opened or shut by several uses. In this sense, the avoidance of direct dealing with ethics or religion in *Philosophical Investigations* is a deliberate and intentional choice. It is the answer to the question: whatever happened to ethics?

Endnotes

1 I distinguish "traditional" from "austere" commentaries by their treatment of the saying-showing distinction. In this sense, "traditional" commentaries will think that what cannot be said in meaningful propositions (the propositions of the Tractatus) can be shown through meaningful propositions, and "austere" commentaries will think that what cannot be said cannot be whistled either. Due to the familiarity of these positions I will be very brief in presenting them.
2 Thus, Wittgenstein's ethical position is often assimilated to some themes in Schopenhauer, Eastern philosophy, Tolstoy, Spengler, Kraus, Kierkegaard, Dostoyevsky and Christianity.
3 Some call it "resolute," others call it the "Conant-Diamond" reading.
4 Monk (1991), p. 178
5 Augustine, *Confessions*, book I, chapter XVIII
6 Mulhall (2001) writes: "Rather than accepting the idea of a radical discontinuity in the Confessions between nine autobiographical books and four metaphysical ones, we might argue that Augustine deliberately sited his metaphysical questionings at the end of his text in order to present them as the culmination of the preceding nine books of autobiographical exercises, in order to imply that those questions somehow emerged from (were invited or made unavoidable by) those exercises—as if autobiography necessarily tended towards the metaphysical, or had revealed itself to him as having an ineliminably metaphysical and hence philosophical dimension" (p. 31). It is surely possible, then, that Wittgenstein wants to show the true sense of Augustine's religious expressions without the urge to seek it in the metaphysical realm.
7 In contrast to many existential theories which focus on the possibility for authenticity destined for individuals.
8 Cavell (1995) writes: "As my earlier description of the builders in section 2 was meant to bring out, the clear view we are supposedly initially given is one which not "merely" the language is primitive, but in which the corresponding life of its speakers is clearly expressed in the language … I imagined them alone, and in an otherwise deserted landscape. As though they were building the first building. Was this arbitrary?" (pp. 158-59).
9 Rhees (1970).
10 *The Claim of Reason*, p. 121.

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