

Wittgenstein, Ethics and Therapy

Edward Harcourt

Faculty of Philosophy, University of Oxford, and Keble College, Oxford OX1 3PG, UK

edward.harcourt@philosophy.ox.ac.uk

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This paper tries to bring together some thoughts about the ethical meaning of Wittgenstein's work and the nature of psychotherapy. It thus also touches, though indirectly, on the idea, prominent in recent Wittgenstein commentary, that philosophy is 'therapeutic'. The approach taken to Wittgenstein's work may be thought of as literary as well as philosophical, for two reasons: first, it relies in its understanding of Wittgenstein's work partly on ideas – the ideas of allegory and symbol – which have no place in the work itself. Secondly, insofar as it relies on a distinction between the ethical meaning Wittgenstein's work had for Wittgenstein and the ethical meaning it may or may not have *simpliciter*, it sees his work not simply as a set of thoughts or arguments but also as the self-expression of a person.

1. Notwithstanding the 'Lecture on Ethics' (Wittgenstein 1929 (1993a)), Wittgenstein's work is almost never about ethics: ethics is mentioned only rarely in the *Tractatus*, and in *Philosophical Investigations* not at all. Nonetheless it is hard to escape the sense that Wittgenstein's claim about the *Tractatus* that 'the point of the work is an ethical one' (1969, 35) is no less true of the later work than it is of the *Tractatus* itself. Saying why it's true thus requires some care.

The ethical significance of Wittgenstein's work (from whatever period) relates in the first place not to the work's content, but to the fact that it exemplifies the practice of philosophy, no matter which particular problems it is addressing: to put it dogmatically for the moment, Wittgenstein's philosophy had ethical significance at least to him because he saw its practice as a spiritual exercise, that is, as a discipline whose aim is to transform the practitioner's moral being for the better.¹ Locating the work's ethical significance primarily not in what it says but in the practice in which its sayings result is consistent with what little Wittgenstein *does* say about ethics,² because of course what he most famously says is that the ethical is something about which nothing can be said (Wittgenstein 1922 (1974), 6.421).

That Wittgenstein saw philosophy as a spiritual exercise surfaces at various points in his work, for example in the *Big Typescript*, where we find the idea that 'work on philosophy is ...a kind of work on oneself' (Wittgenstein 1936 (1993b), 161). But it's not (I hope) the idea of a spiritual exercise itself, of which there are many different kinds, that needs explaining: what needs explaining is *how* Wittgenstein could come to see the practice of philosophy as one. The answer follows from two thoughts of Wittgenstein's: first, that philosophical confusion is a mark of personal badness and, secondly, that the practice of philosophy remedies confusion. It follows that philosophy when practised successfully makes one better – here to be

¹ 'As strolling, walking and running are bodily exercises, so every way of preparing and disposing the soul to rid itself of all the disordered tendencies, and, after it is rid, to seek and find the Divine Will as to the management of one's life for the salvation of the soul, is called a Spiritual Exercise.' St Ignatius of Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises* 1, tr. E. Mullan SJ, www.nwjesuits.org/JesuitSpirituality/Exercises/SpEx001_020.html.

² And not just about ethics: 'Philosophy is not a body of doctrine but an activity', Wittgenstein 1922 (1974), 4.112.

understood not as 'more healthy' but as 'less bad'. The second of these ideas - that philosophy unravels confusion - is widely (and correctly) seen as a constant in Wittgenstein's work, early and late: 'Philosophy does not result in "philosophical propositions", but in the clarification of propositions', (1922 (1974) 4.112); 'The problems are solved, not by giving new information, but by arranging what we have always known. Philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language' (1958, 98). It's the first idea therefore that requires more by way of comment.

The idea that philosophical confusion is a mark of badness receives different expressions at different phases of Wittgenstein's career. In the *Big Typescript*, the thought that philosophy engages the moral (as opposed to the merely intellectual) aspects of oneself is clear because Wittgenstein points to the 'resistances of the will' that need to be overcome if it is to succeed (1936 (1993b), 161). In the 1914-16 *Notebooks*, by contrast, the organizing idea is that of 'being in agreement with the world', a state of moral goodness, Wittgenstein makes clear, because one can only enjoy it if one has a clear conscience. 'When my conscience upsets my equilibrium, then I am not in agreement with Something. But what is this? Is it *the world?*' (Wittgenstein 1979, 8.7.16). The same thought is expressed in Engelmann's report on a conversation with Wittgenstein from the same year: 'If I am unhappy and know that my unhappiness reflects *a gross discrepancy between myself and life as it is*, I have solved nothing; I shall be on the wrong track and I shall never find a way out of the chaos of my emotions and thoughts so long as I have not achieved the supreme and crucial insight that that discrepancy is not the fault of life as it is, but of myself as I am' (Engelmann 1967, 76-7, my italics). But via its unravelling of misunderstandings - which replaces the complication of the confused philosopher's consciousness with a simplicity borrowed from the world that it's a now unconfused consciousness of - 'agreement with the world' is precisely what the activity of philosophy brings about. 'All the propositions of ordinary language, just as they stand, are in perfect logical order' (Wittgenstein 1922 (1974) 5.5563); '[philosophy's] results must be simple, but its activity is as complicated as the knots it unravels' (1936 (1993b), 183); 'It is the business of philosophy, not to resolve a contradiction by means of a mathematical or logico-mathematical discovery, but to make it possible for us to get a clear view of the state of mathematics that troubles us: the state of affairs *before* the contradiction is resolved. ... The aspects of things that are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity' (1958, 125, 129).

The unfavourable comparison between the simplicity of the world and the complexity of the confused philosophical consciousness connects with the influence on Wittgenstein - which Wittgenstein acknowledged (1980, 16) - of the architect Adolf Loos. In his 1908 essay 'Ornament and Crime' (Loos 1931, 79-91), Loos had argued that - subject to certain conditions - decorative elements with no structural role were a crime in architecture. To work in an undecorated idiom is therefore a distinctively moral requirement. But, allowing for the

differences between philosophy and architecture, working in an undecorated idiom is just what Wittgenstein aspired to do: the theme makes itself felt in the *Investigations* in various ways (most clearly at *Investigations* 217, 'the definition a kind of ornamental coping that supports nothing', but also in disparaging references to redundant parts of mechanisms, e.g. 'a wheel that can be turned though nothing else moves with it', (1958, 271)), and is highly insistent in the *Tractatus*. For example, expressing identity of object by identity of sign rather than by a sign of identity (5.53) is just one example of the way a *perspicuous* notation is also an *undecorated* one (in the example, the decoration is '='). That language 'is in perfect order as it is', and thus that constructing a perspicuous (undecorated) notation is the key to exposing philosophical problems as pseudo-problems is, on its own, nothing to do with Loos, or with ethics. But the Loosian moralization of plainness enables Wittgenstein to read every detail of his philosophizing as satisfying a moral imperative.

Clearly much of the evidence for this understanding of the ethical significance – as Wittgenstein saw it – of his work comes from the philosophical work itself. But the understanding can be reinforced by appeal to biographical material, for here there is abundant evidence that Wittgenstein thought of himself as bad or not 'decent'; thought of his badness as enforcing his separation from a better and simpler and more wholesome world; and craved 'redemption' understood as readmission to such a world. Evidence for the first point is Malcolm's recollection that 'during his service in the First World War, and frequently thereafter, Wittgenstein expressed his need to become 'a different man', 'a decent human being' (Malcolm 1984, xix),³ Wittgenstein himself speaks of his 'impurity' (1980, 35; cp. 1975, Foreword: '[the author] cannot free [the book] of these impurities [specified as 'vanity etc.'] further than he himself is free of them'). Evidence for his craving for readmission to a better and simpler world is surely his abandonment of philosophy in the 1920s to become a gardener and then a village schoolteacher, 'his decision', as his sister Hermine put it, 'to choose a completely ordinary occupation' (H. Wittgenstein, 1984, 4). But the following *circa* 1944 passage is especially telling:

Someone to whom it is given in ['ultimate'] distress to open his heart instead of contracting it, absorbs the remedy into his heart. Someone who in this way opens his heart to God in remorseful confession *opens it for others too*. He thereby loses his dignity as someone special & so becomes like a child. That means without office, dignity & *aloofness from others*. You can open yourself to others only out of a particular kind of love. Which acknowledges as it were that we are all wicked children. It might also be said: hate between human beings comes from our *cutting ourselves off from each other*. Because we don't want anyone else to see inside us, since it's not a pretty sight in there (1980, 52-3; my

³ Cp. letter to Engelmann, 16.1.1918, 'I am now *slightly* more decent. By this I only mean that I am slightly clearer in my own mind about my lack of decency' (Engelmann 1967, 12). Consider also Wittgenstein's 'confessions' to clear 'his oppressive burden of guilt' (Pascal 1984, 34ff). I regard as more significant still Pascal's rhetorical question: 'Did he [Wittgenstein] know how much he inhibited others, while his dearest wish was for them to behave in a natural way?' (1984, 29). I strongly suspect the answer is 'yes', and Wittgenstein's feeling of not being 'decent' stemmed in part from his awareness that it was *he himself* who got in the way of his being able to relate to others in the 'ordinary' way he so idealized.

italics).⁴ □

The passage makes it clear that, to Wittgenstein, what confessing one's own badness specifically remedies is the state of being cut off from others.

Now for all that has so far been said, philosophy could have the kind of ethical significance I've argued it had for Wittgenstein no matter which particular philosophical problems it addressed itself to. But to leave things there would be to miss out something important. A leading topic of Wittgenstein's work is mind's place in the world, and a leading 'thesis' of Wittgenstein's that mentality is an aspect of the totality of our lived relations with the world, and so as 'external' as any part of the world it has as its object - *not* something inner whose relations to the world need to be puzzled over. Another prominent Wittgensteinian topic is the relation between language and world. Here, the 'thesis' is that the *Wortsprache* – something that can be sandwiched between the covers of a dictionary and grammar book – is an abstraction from a complex set of verbal and non-verbal interactions of humans with their environments and with each other, and only if we mistakenly identify the abstraction with language itself will we see language as something whose relation to the world is problematic (1958, 435 ventriloquizes the wrong-headed question: “How do sentences manage to represent?”). Yet another topic is 'other minds': only by mistakenly abstracting 'mind' and 'body' from the totality of embodied human experience can we get so far as to worry that there might be nothing but myself plus automata. The ethical significance Wittgenstein's work had for him extends, I would argue, to his very choice of these topics. As Cavell says, '[T]he correct relation between inner and outer, between the soul and its society, is the theme of the *Investigations* as a whole ... and also its moral' (1979, 329).

A comparison may be helpful in order to spell this connection out further. In his essay 'The Effectiveness of Symbols' (Lévi-Strauss 1977, 186-205), Lévi-Strauss describes the way the shamans of the Panamanian Cuna Indians use a 'long incantation' to help women experiencing difficulties in childbirth. The poem describes a contest between on the one hand the shaman and his spirit helpers and, on the other, 'Muu', meaning the spirit responsible for the baby's getting stuck but also - in line with the poem's increasingly 'rapid oscillation between mythical and physiological themes, as if to abolish in the mind of the sick woman the distinction' between them - the womb itself (1977, 193). The shaman and his helpers enter the woman's body, fighting their way past all manner of obstacles, calling on reinforcements – 'the "clearers of the way", Lords-of-the-burrowing-animals, such as the armadillo' (1977, 196) – and eventually coming back out again (in the poem) with the baby. The goings-on described

⁴ For more on redemption see 1980, 38: 'What inclines even me to believe in Christ's resurrection? ... If he did not rise from the dead, then he decomposed in the grave like every human being ... & we are once more orphaned & alone. And have to make do with wisdom & speculation. ... But if I am to be REALLY redeemed,—I need *certainty*—not wisdom, dreams, speculation—and this certainty is faith. And faith is faith in what my *heart*, my *soul*, needs, not my speculative intellect. For my soul, with its passions, as it were with its flesh & blood, must be redeemed, not my abstract mind.'

in the poem are of course an allegory of labour. Reciting it is not an act of magic, but by the labouring mother's imaginative engagement with the labouring spirits and with the poem's imaginary geography of her own body, her labour is made easier, and a baby emerges not just in the poem but in real life. So it is, approximately, with Wittgenstein. His labour is the substantive self-directed moral project, or spiritual exercise, of becoming better. But we can explain our sense that philosophy's ethical significance for Wittgenstein reaches to his very choice of themes if we understand his leading themes as symbols of this labour and of its desired outcome, chosen therefore precisely so that his way to it can be eased by his imaginative engagement with them. There is thus a match between the goal of the practice as I have outlined it – returning the cut-off self to a state of 'agreement' with its world by making it philosophically unpuzzled – and the content of the thoughts winning one's way to which would constitute success in the practice. Wittgenstein becomes (once again) a part of the world by becoming philosophically unpuzzled, but at the same time *what* he (and anyone who follows him) thinks when he is once again philosophically unpuzzled is *that* he is part of it. To win through to a 'clear view' of the 'workings of our language' (Wittgenstein 1958, 109, 122) in such a way that we can 'set our faces against the picture of the "inner process" [here, of remembering]' (1958, 305) is a symbolic 'opening of one's heart for others', but thereby a real remedy for 'aloofness', for the thought that 'we don't want anyone else to see inside us'. The movement of thought from confusion to clarity about the mind's place in the world, or the continuity between the linguistic and the non-linguistic, or the body as 'a picture of the human soul' (1958 II.iv, 179), is an *allegory* of the (ethical, personal) transformation the thinker undergoes in making it - a picture of the process that is constituted by the thinking of it – and (as with the Cuna Indians) the thinker's step-by-step following of the allegory is essential to effecting the transformation.

2. Wittgenstein made various remarks about philosophy and therapy, including that the treatment of a philosophical problem is 'like the treatment of an illness' (1958, 255), but we cannot infer automatically that it was *psychotherapy* that he had in mind. Moreover, if philosophy is a kind of spiritual exercise, can it really be a species of psychotherapy as well? A long-standing part of the self-image of psychotherapy – and the one that influenced an earlier generation of Wittgensteinians, such as Alice Ambrose and Morris Lazerowitz - has been a medical one, so surely it addresses certain kinds of illness, and doesn't mental *illness* begin just where questions of moral good and bad leave off? On this view the very thing that gives Wittgenstein's practice of philosophy ethical meaning would rule it out as psychotherapeutic. Now the story of psychotherapy's confused understanding of its relation to the ethical would take too long to unravel here. But one reason why psychotherapy has been so slow to make anything of its own ethical character is the fact that it has got itself stuck, at least until quite recently, with a very limited idea of what the ethical is about: roughly, the study of the commanded and the forbidden, i.e. a (perhaps) secularized version of an already very narrowly understood religious morality (Anscombe 1981). So even when psychotherapy

has been explicitly concerned with problems of how to live or with ideals of character, it has fought shy of describing its concerns as ethical. Nonetheless the idea that it does address such problems, i.e. that it's guided by ethical notions, has become familiar in recent years – D.W. Winnicott (Winnicott 1965), Peter Lomas (Lomas 1973, 1999) and (from within philosophy) Ilham Dilman (Dilman 1983) are important figures here – and this is so especially in the British Isles, where optimistic Christian or post-Christian notions about man's potential for good have been influential alongside Freudian cynicism: it has been said that the British Left owes 'more to Methodism than it does to Marxism', and something rather similar could be said about British psychotherapy, British expressions of Christianity, and Freud. More specifically, one of the ideals by which thinking in psychotherapy has been guided for some years has been an ideal of *relationship to others*: 'real relating, which implies separateness from the object', as Betty Joseph puts it (2004, 161) - the intended contrast is with thinking of others merely as extensions of oneself, or in a way clouded by fantasy. When we leave out the talk of 'pathologies', we can see a kinship between the ethical ideal of relationship to others which animates much psychotherapy and the preoccupation with relationship to world and to others in which the ethical meaning which philosophy had for Wittgenstein makes itself felt in the grain of his work. So there is after all at least one sense in which philosophy as Wittgenstein conceived it *is* 'like psychotherapy'.

There is at least one difference, however. Wittgenstein's thoughts of his own badness often involve the idea of being on the wrong side of a judge, and the 'coercive power of an absolute judge' features in one of the very few explicitly ethical discussions in his philosophical work (1929 (1993a), 40). So one might infer that getting better means coming to be on the *right* side of the same judge – thus Wittgenstein's 'getting better' would be quite close to a Christian sense of 'redemption' as being cleansed of sin. Wittgenstein once quoted JS Bach to capture a thought about his own work: 'Bach wrote on the title page of his *Orgelbüchlein* "To the glory of the most high God, and that my neighbor may be benefited thereby". That is what I would have liked to say about my work' (Drury 1984, 168). To capture this aspect of his ethical sensibility, then, perhaps I can borrow the following:

Mein Wille trachtet nur nach Bösen. □
 Der Geist zwar spricht: ach! wer wird mich erlösen?
 ...
 □ Rechne nicht die Missetat, □ □
 Die dich, Herr, erzürnet hat!⁵

As far as I know, Wittgenstein never questions or criticizes the idea of the judge itself. But it is very black and white: Wittgenstein's is an ethical sensibility that seems incapable of ambivalence.⁶ It's thus not the fact that philosophy, in Wittgenstein's view, is an ethical

⁵ Bach BWV 78.

⁶ His veering between idealization and utter condemnation is nicely exemplified by his dissatisfaction with Maria Schutz am Semmering – where he was sent as part of his training as a schoolteacher – on the grounds that the place wasn't rustic enough ('Hier gibt es Park mit Springbrunnen – ich will aber

enterprise that sets it apart from psychotherapy: on the contrary, *that* is something they have in common. But now remember the Lecture on Ethics, with its insistence on commandment, obedience, absolute authority. If anything sets psychotherapy apart from philosophy as Wittgenstein conceived it, it's rather the fact that the restrictive view of the ethical – as revolving around the ideas of the prohibited and the commanded – which made psychotherapy so slow to become aware of its own ethical character is also Wittgenstein's *own* view.

3. In conclusion I want to touch briefly on the third theme I announced at the beginning, the sense in which in recent commentary Wittgenstein's works have been argued to be 'therapeutic'.

Minimally, I take the claim that Wittgenstein's philosophy is therapeutic to mean that it conceives of philosophical problems as arising out of misunderstandings, and aims to do away with them. So understood, I think it's unarguable that Wittgenstein's philosophy *is* therapeutic. The question is how much this unarguable claim rules in or out. (For example, whether it implies anything as to the methods – for instance *reductio* arguments versus a mixed toolkit of comparisons, jokes and so on - to be used in getting rid of misunderstandings.) But I am not going to address that question here. There is also the question whether Wittgenstein's philosophy is *merely* therapeutic in this sense: that is, whether having got rid of misunderstandings it just stops, or whether it tries to put anything else in their place. This is the territory marked out by the claim that we don't 'advance theses' (Wittgenstein 1958, 128) in philosophy.

What I *do* want to do is to relate the claim either that Wittgenstein's philosophy is therapeutic or (more strongly) merely therapeutic, as just explained, to the claim I explored in section 2 that it is (to the extent that it is) *psychotherapeutic*, and to the account of Wittgenstein's conviction as to its ethical significance which I defended in section 1. I want to argue that *however* strongly we read the claim that Wittgenstein's philosophical method is 'therapeutic' – that is, even if it's true that it contains no arguments and establishes no 'theses' – it is in a sense an accident that Wittgenstein's philosophical practice *both* was 'therapeutic' (in whatever the best sense of that term is to be derived from recent commentary) *and* possessed the ethical meaning for him which it did.

In one sense of course, this conjunction is no accident at all. More precisely, what's no accident is that Wittgenstein's philosophical practice possessed the ethical meaning for him which it did and was *regarded by him* as 'therapeutic', and indeed as merely so (no

ganz ländliche Verhältnisse!' (Monk 1990, 193)), and his subsequent despair at the degraded condition of the inhabitants of the (genuinely *ländlich*) Trattenbach: 'Es ist wahr, daß die Menschen im Durchschnitt nirgends sehr viel wert sind; aber hier sind sie viel mehr als anderswo nichtsnutzig und unverantwortlich', Wittgenstein 2004, letter to Russell 23.10.1921.

arguments, or at least, a mixed toolkit of 'therapies' (*PI* 133) which includes argument as just one technique among many; and certainly no 'theses'). To understand why this is no accident, we need to supplement the familiar Wittgensteinian thought that the practice of philosophy remedies confusion – which I have already discussed - with the further thought that there's no *result* or product of thought that is at once free from confusion and genuinely philosophical. It follows that to get rid of confusion is also to get rid of philosophy. This is certainly a familiar Wittgensteinian idea, both from his philosophical writing ('the real discovery ... is the one that gives philosophy peace', *PI* 133) and from his life (in which a leading ambition of his, though one he constantly failed to live up to, was to live without philosophy). But if – as I argued in section 1 – confusion is the mark of badness, then to *have become* good, and thereby to have come to live 'in agreement with the world', must involve having ceased to philosophize. Now to say that philosophy is merely therapeutic – no arguments, no theses - is a way of saying that it is self-effacing, that a condition of its success is that it write itself out of the scene. But if to remedy philosophical confusion is to strive to be better and there's no such thing as *unconfused* philosophy, then Wittgenstein's conception of the ethical significance of philosophy's practice required him to see its method not only as therapeutic but as merely so.

This requirement, however, is internal to Wittgenstein's own imaginative construction of the meaning of philosophy. Granted his view of the ethical significance of its practice, Wittgenstein was required to *think* of his method as merely therapeutic. But it doesn't follow that his method actually had to *be* merely therapeutic, and that's one way in which the connection between (merely) therapeutic method and ethical meaning *is* an accident. Indeed for those who – myself included – can't help finding 'theses' all over the place in Wittgenstein, it's a puzzle that Wittgenstein seems so steadfastly to deny that there can be any, that is, that he seems so unselfknowing in his description of his own practice. Tracing the denial to the ethical meaning which his philosophical practice had *for him* solves the puzzle.

But even if the method which Wittgenstein's conception of the ethical meaning of philosophical practice forced him to regard as his own really *was* his own, the connection between ethical meaning and 'merely therapeutic' method is an accident for a further reason. What forges the link in Wittgenstein's own thought is his idea that philosophical confusion is a mark of personal badness, or that philosophical consciousness *per se* places us in 'disagreement with the world'. These are powerful and readily intelligible ideas, and they surely help to explain the appeal of Wittgenstein as a writer of philosophy. They also exemplify the way in which themes or topics whose content is not apparently anything to do with ethics can have ethical meaning. But they are nonetheless idiosyncratic ideas. It is no strain on the imagination to think of someone to whom philosophical confusion is merely an intellectual irritant, and who thus might help themselves *without misunderstanding* to Wittgenstein's treatment of the philosophical questions, without seeing their engagement with them as having anything like the significance in their own life that Wittgenstein took them to

have in his. Nor is it any strain to think of someone whose moral practice upon himself takes place in a medium other than philosophy. (Drury, for instance, tried to follow a Wittgensteinian ethic – living simply, learning a skill that can be used to benefit others – while barely touching the philosophical questions (1984).) There thus really might be no such thing as a product of thought that is both unconfused and genuinely philosophical, and so it might really be that philosophy properly conceived must strive to write itself out of the scene, and yet the practice of philosophy so conceived, to a practitioner other than Wittgenstein, have no ethical significance at all.

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