Wittgenstein, Ludwig

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For a philosopher best known for his work outside ethics and whose best-known view about ethics is that ethics "cannot be put into words" (Wittgenstein 1974 [1922]: 6.421), there is a surprising amount to say about Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951) and ethics. The subject can be divided into two: Wittgenstein's ethics, and developments in ethics under Wittgenstein's influence. The subject of Wittgenstein's ethics itself subdivides into Wittgenstein's explicit writings on ethics, and the ethical significance which his work, even when not explicitly concerned with ethics, has widely been thought to bear.

Ethics is the explicit theme of very little of Wittgenstein's writing. Up to and including 1930, ethics is mentioned chiefly in *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1974 [1922]), his wartime notebooks (1979 [1914–16]), and – the only work he ever devoted to ethics alone – his "Lecture on Ethics" (1993a [1929]). In the huge corpus of Wittgenstein's writings after 1930, ethics receives almost no explicit mention. Understandably, then, Wittgenstein has never had a place on ethics curricula comparable to that of Hume or Kant. Nonetheless, his presence has made itself felt in moral philosophy in a number of ways.

Wittgenstein's remarks on ethics in *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* may be summarized as follows. Ethics is unsayable (6.421). Every proposition – everything expressible by a meaningful sentence – must be capable of being either true or false (4.023). However, any ethical propositions would be about what *has* to be the case, so they would not be capable of being either true or false. Hence, there are no such propositions (6.41, 6.42). The same conclusion is also derived from the familiar thought that ethics is concerned with the will. Together with the (less familiar) idea that the world is independent of my will (6.373), this implies that "the good or bad exercise of the will … can alter only the limits of the world, not the facts" (6.43). However, because only facts can be otherwise, only facts are expressible by language (4.023), so again the ethical is inexpressible.

In his "Lecture on Ethics," Wittgenstein explores similar ideas within a similar framework of views about truth, necessity, and meaning, though here he is much more willing to exemplify ethical utterance, rather than just to talk about it. Among the examples are categorical imperatives (1993a [1929]: 39; cf. 1974 [1922]: 6.422), and reports of certain experiences, such as the feeling that "I am safe, nothing can injure me whatever happens" (1993a [1929]: 41). Nonetheless, in such utterance, we "go … beyond significant language" (1993a [1929]: 44).

Two questions arise about these pre-1930 explicit ethical writings. First, what are we to make of Wittgenstein's claim that they are nonsensical? Second, given how little about ethics his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1974 [1922]) says (or "says"),

what are we to make of Wittgenstein's claim that "the book's point is an ethical one" (Engelmann 1967: 143)?

Any answer to the first question needs to begin with the distinction between what can be said and what can only be shown (Wittgenstein 1974 [1922]: 4.1212), though it is controversial how it is to be applied. On one view, the ethical sentences of *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* – like its other philosophical sentences, about the existence of objects, for example – express what would be true if, *per impossibile*, they could be said. On an alternative view, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* does its dialectical work by curing us of illusions of understanding, including the illusion of understanding its own sentences (Diamond 2000: 150). Advocates of the latter view, however, may make an exception for ethical sentences: though they do not express unsayable truths, there is no merit in ridding oneself of the tendency to utter them either, for it is worthy of deep respect (Wittgenstein 1993a [1929]: 44).

Care is needed here with the phrase "ethical sentences." Most of the "ethical sentences" in *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* are in fact sentences *about* ethical sentences. Hence, there may be good reason to classify them along with the book's other philosophical sentences, whether these are to be seen as expressing unsayable truths (as suggested in 4.121, 6.522) or as "therapeutic" (as suggested in 6.54). However, how are we to classify ethical sentences themselves (e.g., those in Wittgenstein [1993a (1929)])? Sometimes (as with "absolute safety"), Wittgenstein regards ethical and philosophical sentences as nonsense for the same reason, namely that they attempt to state what must be the case. The same cannot be said, however, for sentences about "the miracle of the existence of the world," though Wittgenstein says the best expression of this in language is not any proposition but "the existence of language itself" (1993a [1929]: 43–4); there is already something *else* the existence of language is supposed to show, namely the truth of philosophical claims such as "there are objects" (shown by the truth of any meaningful sentence that contains a name). However, if "it's a miracle that something exists" says more than "something exists," at least some ethical sentences are exceptional after all. Perhaps these sentences, though worthy of deep respect, are nonetheless nonsensical; but perhaps there is more to making sense than "stating facts" (Redpath 1972: 119).

As to the second question, the ethical *significance* of *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* does not depend on the content of its explicit ethical sentences, and so is independent of disputes about their interpretation. We can only approach the question of its ethical significance properly if we broaden our focus beyond the text, to contemporaneous writings not intended for publication, to Wittgenstein's work after 1930, and to his biography.

To see how this is so, let us begin with the later writings and approach the ethical significance of *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* via those. The later Wittgenstein saw philosophy as "therapeutic," at least insofar as it aims not to persuade the reader of new truths, but to dispel misunderstandings, and it does so by bringing about "a clear view" (Wittgenstein 1958: 122) of some area of language. Add the thought that philosophical misunderstandings are problems of the will as much as of the

intellect, and it follows that philosophy, when carried on properly, is an ethical undertaking, no matter which particular problems it addresses. "Work on philosophy is … a kind of work on oneself" (Wittgenstein 1993b [1936]: 161); hence, to the extent that it succeeds in its therapeutic aim, it must at the same time make one (morally) better. Unsurprisingly, then, Wittgenstein's later work has been held to have an ethical significance despite the fact that ethics is very rarely its subject matter (Drury 1984: 81). Not that it follows from this that the particular problems Wittgenstein addresses are accidental relative to the ethical significance of the undertaking. Wittgenstein's life was marked by a sense, both that "the world" or ordinary life is innocent and good, and that he himself stands condemned for his badness, and so is shut out from it, and it's in this light that we need to understand Cavell's suggestion (1979: 329) that "the correct relation between inner and outer" is not only the theme but also the "moral" of Wittgenstein (1958): the philosophical task of placing the mind where it belongs, in its world, is at the same time an allegory of overcoming exclusion from it.

Much the same can be said for the ethical significance of *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* itself. Crucial in this connection is Wittgenstein's notion of being "in agreement with the world" (1979 [1914–16]: 75e), an ethical notion, partly because it is "what 'being happy' means" (1979 [1914–16]: 75e), and happiness belongs to the stock of notions Wittgenstein ranks as ethical (1974 [1922]: 6.43) – partly because what interferes with "agreement" is the operation of one's own conscience (1979 [1914–16]: 75e; cf. Engelmann 1967: 76). Now, Wittgenstein's earlier work, no less than his later, aims to clear away misunderstandings and is thus "therapeutic": complexity is on the side of our understanding, not on the side of that which we seek to understand ("all the propositions of ordinary language, just as they stand, are in perfect logical order" [1974 (1922): 5.5563; cf. 1993b [1936]: 183]; "[philosophy's] results must be simple, but its activity is as complicated as the knots it unravels"). It needs only the thought that what keeps us from seeing the perfect order of things as they are is a moral failing in us to see the aim of *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, as much as of the later work, as restoring "agreement" between its author and the world – that is, as an ethical enterprise; in an alternative idiom, as a spiritual exercise in which we repair our relationship to the world by ridding ourselves of philosophical misunderstandings.

To turn now to Wittgenstein's influence on subsequent moral philosophy, many who have adopted or adapted Wittgenstein in their own work in ethics have been enthusiastic readers either of Aristotle (*see* ARISTOTLE) or of Simone Weil (*see* WEIL, SIMONE), or both. Many have also been alert to the embeddedness of moral life in social forms. Moreover, most have written, in one way or another, in opposition to currents of thought which have dominated moral philosophy since at least the mid-twentieth century, most notably non-cognitivism (*see* NON-COGNITIVISM; the thesis that ethical language is apt only to express attitudes that are not candidates for truth and falsity), but also generalism (*see* PARTICULARISM), and theory construction in ethics. Wittgenstein can thus be seen as one of the inspirations behind a kind of counterculture – or better, overlapping set of countercultures – in modern moral

philosophy. It is curious therefore that his insistence, up to and including 1929–30, on a dichotomy between ethical and fact-stating language seems to align Wittgenstein himself with non-cognitivism. Certainly, one of his earliest influences in moral philosophy was on the Vienna Circle, and thereby on the emotivism (*see* EMOTIVISM) of A. J. Ayer and indeed on later sub-varieties of non-cognitivism: central to Blackburn's quasi-realism (Blackburn 1993), for example, is Wittgenstein's idea that sentences with a variety of functions may share a common indicative linguistic form. It is perhaps no surprise, then, that many subsequent moral philosophers have drawn strength not only (or not at all) from Wittgenstein's explicitly ethical writings but from other aspects of his work.

An early example of a Wittgensteinian idea at work in moral philosophy was that of a "practice" (Wittgenstein 1958: 202) with norms internal to it (Mounce and Phillips 1969). The idea was to counter non-cognitivism by arguing that, within a practice (for instance, one involving promises), moral claims followed from factual ones. This approach, however, attracted charges of dogmatic conservatism, and of relativism (because there is a plurality of social practices, and these can be objects of moral criticism). The attempt to meet these objections while respecting the social embeddedness of moral thought is one of the motive forces behind MacIntyre's influential work (1981).

Wittgenstein has also had a long-lasting impact on moral philosophy via a nonreductionist version of moral realism (*see* REALISM, MORAL), which can be explained as the thesis that ethical language is not only apt to express truths (thus ruling out non-cognitivism) but sometimes succeeds in doing so (thus ruling out the error theory [*see* ERROR THEORY] in metaethics): see McDowell (1981); Wiggins (1998); and Lovibond (2002). Until well into the twentieth century, metaethics in the "analytic" tradition focused on a small set of highly abstract moral terms, such as "good" and "right," whose meaning (according to non-cognitivists) reduces to the expression of a non-truth-evaluable attitude. Wittgenstein, however, questioned the centrality of highly abstract terms in aesthetic appraisal (Wittgenstein 2007 [1938–46]: 3), and the point can be transposed to ethics. Hence, the non-cognitivist also needs a story about less abstract, or "thicker" moral terms such as "tactful" or "obsequious" (*see* THICK AND THIN CONCEPTS), and this is that such terms be analyzed as conjunctions of an attitudinal component (as for "good") and a "descriptive" (i.e., truth-evaluable but nonevaluative) component. Wittgenstein's work on rule-following (1958: 143–242) has been taken to show that this non-cognitivist story cannot succeed. Just as shared perceptions of salience – not themselves communicable by further rules – are necessary for there to be such a thing as giving and understanding instructions (1958: 85), a shared ethical sensibility is required for people to understand how to "go on in the same way" with a (thick) ethical term: absent that shared sensibility and the extension of a thick ethical term will be "shapeless," that is, there will be no discernible principle of unity for the things that fall under it. (Compare the Aristotelian thought that what the virtuous person knows is uncodifiable [Lovibond 2002: 29].) However, an analytically distinguishable nonevaluative component of the meaning of "obsequious" would be precisely a term whose

extension *isn't* "shapeless" independently of any evaluative interest. Hence, the non-cognitivist analysis of thick ethical terms is untenable; so, non-cognitivism is untenable. More positively, this Wittgensteinian account of moral terms, as unanalyzably both truth-evaluable and bearing the right relation to sensibility to be motivating, has been held to mark out a place for value in the world, as neither merely projected onto it by us, nor, as on some reductionist versions of moral realism, present independently of any human powers or concerns.

Further important lines of Wittgensteinian influence on moral philosophy take off in one way or another from Wittgenstein's thinking about the distinctiveness of our human "form of life" (Wittgenstein 1958: 19).

Thompson has argued (2008: 76) that "life-form-words" such as "human" belong to a distinctive logical or grammatical category, comparable to (but less abstract than) Frege's categories of concept and object. This claim supplies an understanding of the special use of language on display in sentences such as "the mayfly breeds shortly before dying" (true, although most mayflies die before breeding), and thus a logical warrant for another variety of opposition to non-cognitivism, the ethical naturalism advocated by Philippa Foot (2001; *see* NATURALISM, ETHICAL; FOOT, PHILIPPA). On this view, virtues and vices are, respectively, natural excellences and defects in human beings: truthfulness is an excellence in human beings in just the same sense as night blindness is a defect in owls, because of the "Aristotelian necessity" (Foot 2001: 15) that we need (say) truthfulness in order to live the kind of life characteristic of the creatures we are.

Insofar as it aims to characterize our concepts of life-forms otherwise than in terms of bare objecthood plus particular characteristics (Thompson 2008: 26), Foot and Thompson's naturalism is related to another, broader current of Wittgensteinian ethical thought which has been termed "Wittgensteinian humanism" (Litwack 2009: 3–4). Here, thoughts about the distinctiveness of human beings join hands with a critique of another feature of the modern philosophical mainstream, its conception of moral thought as "the formation and application of universal rules governing choices" (Diamond 1996a: 88). One manifestation of this is a dualism of duties upon moral agents (e.g., not to harm) plus criteria (e.g., rationality, or sentience) for bringing things within the scope of the duties. However, this gives the duties a misleading appearance of priority. It is not that the duties have a life of their own, and are owed to fellow humans as a consequence of their distinctive characteristics, but rather that a human's being something we do not treat in certain ways (e.g., as food) is among the very many things "which go to build our notion of human beings" (Diamond 1991: 324). More generally, if other human beings lacked the significance to us which makes us unthinkingly observe various boundaries in our behavior toward one another, it is difficult to see where harm would derive the importance it would need to have in order for avoiding it to be the very basic reason for action which, on the duties plus criteria view, it is supposed to be.

Comparable ideas are found in Peter Winch's work, whose moral philosophy makes use in multiple ways of Wittgenstein's remark that "my attitude to [another human being] is an attitude towards a soul" (1958 II, iv; cf. Cavell 1979; Gaita 2000).

By this, Wittgenstein intends the disposition, manifested primitively in a range of reactions toward others such as wincing when another is in pain, to treat human beings differently from all other things, and which is "part of the natural history of mankind" (Winch 1987: 150). Invoking Weil on the power of the "human presence" (Weil 1977: 157), Winch argues that the uniqueness of our unlearned reactions to one another underpins a range of attitudes – pity, grief, sympathy, anger – and connects with "our understanding of the kinds of creatures we are" (Winch 1987: 163); in Diamond's language, it helps to determine the concept "human." Though Kant is not wrong to say we must treat each other "as ends only," we are not to be conceived as deriving our treatment from a general duty of respect plus recognition that the individuals in question have certain features (in Kant's case, rationality). On the contrary, our knowledge and understanding of other human beings can directly "impose moral bonds on our will" (Winch 1987: 173).

Despite their several common sources and targets of opposition, these Wittgensteinian trends in ethics have sometimes come into conflict. Diamond has argued that, thanks to its focus on the deployment of moral concepts (albeit "thicker" ones), Wittgensteinian nonreductive moral realism is a further manifestation of modern moral philosophy's preoccupation with moral judgment: according to her, however, moral thought need not be a matter of deploying a distinctive set of concepts at all (Diamond 1996b: 242). In so saying, she takes herself to be echoing *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* which has an ethical significance, but not by way of the distinctively ethical sentences it contains (Diamond 1996b: 249). Whether moral thought indeed lacks a proprietary set of concepts remains an unsettled question. Be that as it may, the idea that moral thought need not deploy a proprietary vocabulary is one of several which have recently opened up imaginative literature as a field of study to moral philosophy (*see* LITERATURE AND ETHICS).

See also: ARISTOTLE; EMOTIVISM; ERROR THEORY; FOOT, PHILIPPA; LITERATURE AND ETHICS; NATURALISM, ETHICAL; NON-COGNITIVISM; PARTICULARISM; REALISM, MORAL; THICK AND THIN CONCEPTS; WEIL, SIMONE

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