

Wittgenstein's *Lecture on Ethics*: Personal Expressions and Moral Commitment

Resumo

Mesmo que a Conferência sobre ética possa ser vista em estreita continuidade com o Tractatus no que diz respeito às distinções centrais entre dizer e mostrar, entre ciência, filosofia e ética, e entre proposições legítimas da linguagem e expressões sem sentido do valor absoluto, o modo como Wittgenstein começa a falar sobre ética sugere uma elasticidade e uma forma mais terrena de 'definir' a moralidade do que fora o caso – pelo menos explicitamente – para o Tractatus. Além disso, apesar das similaridades, a maneira como Wittgenstein trata os juízos morais, especialmente se considerados desde o ponto de vista da responsabilidade moral, nos permite uma expressão dos juízos de valor antes impedida – novamente, pelo menos explicitamente – pelas concepções radicais do Tractatus. Dada esta abordagem específica, não apenas devemos responder de uma certa maneira a algum mau comportamento dado em uma certa circunstância como certamente não podemos permanecer então em silêncio.

Palavras-chave: Conferência sobre ética . Tractatus logico-philosophicus . ética . juízos morais . linguagem

Abstract

Even if the Lecture on Ethics is to be seen in close continuity with the Tractatus with respect to the central distinctions between saying and showing, between

science, philosophy and ethics, and between legitimate propositions of language and nonsensical expressions of absolute value, the way Wittgenstein starts talking about ethics and its subject matter advances an elasticity and an earthy way of ‘defining’ morality which is not seen – or at least not explicitly seen – in the *Tractatus*. Furthermore, despite the similarities, the way Wittgenstein accounts for moral judgments, especially when considered from the point of view of a moral responsibility, gives us the possibility of expressing judgments of value which did not seem to be opened – again, at least not as explicitly – to the narrow conceptions of the *Tractatus*. Given this account, not only would one to reply to a misbehavior of a given circumstance, but he would certainly not remain silent.

Keywords: Lecture on Ethics . *Tractatus logico-philosophicus* . ethics . moral judgments . language

The *Lecture on Ethics* is known to be the only ‘popular’ lecture Wittgenstein has ever given in his life, back there in 1929. According to Ray Monk, Wittgenstein took this opportunity given by Ogden – in presenting a paper to ‘The Heretics’ – “to try and correct the most prevalent and serious misunderstanding of the *Tractatus*: the idea that it is a work written in a positivist anti-metaphysical spirit.”¹ At first glance, this would seem to suggest that the *Lecture on Ethics* had been purportedly conceived in a strong continuity to the *Tractatus* alone, advancing still in the same spirit the same attitudes towards ethics and science – and language. In a way, this would then mean for that piece of paper to be ‘classified’ together with the ‘first Wittgenstein’ – if ever we do keep this distinction in view.

But if this is *partly* the case, – as we will soon be able to see – we must be clear about the fact that Wittgenstein had just now returned to Cambridge after all those years of gardening and teaching little Austrians and building his sister a house: at this point, lots of the *Tractatus* had already been put into question by Wittgenstein himself. And this would mean to say that we cannot anymore state that everything is exactly as it was before when it comes to language, philosophy and ethics. For specific topics were already abandoned or revised and the whole of the book seen by Wittgenstein himself as perhaps

1 Monk 1991, p.276-277.

inappropriate to deal with the problems it was supposed to deal – something implied in some of his retrospective comments on the work.²

This reminding note is to say, contrary to what Monk seems to be suggesting, that the *Lecture on Ethics* is not to be seen as merely an extension – and rewording – of the *Tractatus*, but instead as a piece of work written against a transitional background, sharing undoubtedly very many central points with the austerity of the *Tractatus*, but shifting slightly towards the multiplicity of the *Philosophical Investigations*. And this is exactly the background against which the main topics of this paper are to be considered. However, the focus being the *Lecture* itself, this background is to be taken precisely as such – and not as the core question to be answered: this being the possibility of expressing moral judgments ('aloud', so to speak) in leading others to action and to good will as part of a moral commitment to a right and (thus) happy attitude to life – something we could not then see in the *Tractatus* alone such as commonly read.³ Or, maybe, something not yet plainly or explicitly allowed.

In this way, what I hope to become clearer as the punctual topics are to be developed in the text, is the general view that this possibility of expression shows the *Lecture on Ethics* to have something like a *normative tune* going far beyond the mere restatement of the spirit (and thesis) of the *Tractatus*, showing then at the same time to say much more about 'ethics' as such than Monk, for instance,

2 For example, of the same period comes *Some Remarks on Logical Form* which, if still attached to the language of the *Tractatus*, revises some of its conclusions on color-exclusion and on the logical independency of atomic propositions (Wittgenstein 1929 – reprinted in 1997 by Peter Ludlow in *Readings in the Philosophy of Language*). A couple of years later Wittgenstein seems to condemn the spirit of the entire book as 'dogmatic', seeing a similar enterprise as now 'unjustified': "In my book I still proceeded dogmatically. Such a procedure is legitimate only if it is a matter of capturing the features of the physiognomy, as it were, of what is only just discernible – and that is my excuse. I saw something from far away and in a very indefinite manner, and I wanted to elicit from it as much as possible. But a rehash of such theses is no longer justified." (Wittgenstein 1979, p.184). At this point he may seem to be too harsh to himself in criticizing specific topics of revision, but the detection of the *Tractatus* dogmatism is a significant trait of a now more supple way of thinking about philosophy – and its 'fields', – something which could also count to show the new background against which the *Lecture on Ethics* was presented.

3 And by 'commonly' I mean indistinctly the 'traditional' interpretation of the *Tractatus* as much as the 'resolute reading'. None would actually be able to accept the view according to which moral judgments are – in the context of the willing subject – permissible, let alone necessary. It would however be too much for this paper to enter in such a large debate with the secondary literature on Wittgenstein.

seems to understand⁴ – yet ‘ethics’ only in the particular context of Wittgenstein’s restrictions. This all becoming clearer, we may be able to see that the *Lecture on Ethics* departs in crucial points from the *Tractatus* in view of being a particular piece of work towards a more concrete and applying understanding of morality.

To begin with, let’s try to have a good a picture of what Wittgenstein means here by ‘ethics’.

Surely, we wouldn’t be able to understand Wittgenstein’s point on the whole of the paper without the setting given by the characteristically tracterian distinctions between saying and showing and, consequently, the one established through legitimate language between science, philosophy and ethics as domains of their own. What also remains from the *Tractatus* is the assimilation of what he calls Aesthetics to what he says Ethics is about as in fact one and the same thing (6.421).⁵ Despite those shared features, Wittgenstein has a quite anew and surprising way of showing the object of concern of this *Lecture on Ethics*. He offers us in fact a multifold ‘definition’ of the subject matter which he intends to treat. And this is quite a step when compared to the strictness and shortness of the *Tractatus*: we should bear in mind that one of the few things he says there (explicitly) about ethics – as counting in some way as some sort of ‘definition’ – is that it is transcendental and therefore not expressible (6.421); or else that it concerns the subject of the will as the bearer of the ethical (i.e., the good and the bad), about which, again, we can’t say anything (6.423, 6.43). We have to try and figure out these notions in connection to the work as a whole – or with the help of the *Notebooks 1914-1916* where they are stuffed a little further.⁶

4 Here is what he declares to be the paper’s tune: “What is perhaps most striking about this lecture, however, is that it is not about ethics at all, as the term is usually understood. That is to say, there is no mention in it of moral problems, or of how those problems are to be analyzed and understood.” (Monk 1991, p.278). – In a critical vein, something similar is said by Martin Stokhof concerning the ‘ethics’ of the *Tractatus*: “But what is this good or bad will and how does it relate to ethics as we conceive of it ordinarily, that is, as a system of everyday moral precepts?” (Stokhof 2002, p.209). I would like here to think that this sort of remark is due precisely to a misunderstanding of the kind of role ethics should play, according to Wittgenstein’s view, in one’s life – and not as a system or doctrine or theory as ‘usually’ conceived. The wish for this ‘ordinary’ notion of ethics is nothing but a symptom of a restless search for a ‘sayable’ answer, a symptom Wittgenstein depicts himself in the *Lecture* as “perfectly, absolutely hopeless.”

5 References to the *Tractatus* will be given by the numbers of paragraphs, as references to the *Notebooks* by date of entrance.

6 But, even if in what follows we say a little bit more about those things using both the *Tractatus* and the *Notebooks*, this is not the place to argue for those relations. I give a full account on the topic in my doctorate thesis: *Non-sens et stoïcisme dans le Tractatus logico-philosophicus* (Sattler 2011).

Now, instead of that dogmatic and restrictive way of framing it, Wittgenstein is giving ethics a subject matter which can be said to be about a certain (flexible) number of things. Taking Moore's explanation given in the *Principia Ethica* – “Ethics is the general enquiry into what is good” – Wittgenstein proceeds by enumerating and exemplifying “more or less synonymous expressions” to characterize the features of ethics. These examples, says Wittgenstein, should produce “the same sort of effect which Galton produced when he took a number of photos of different faces on the same photographic plate in order to get the picture of the typical features they all had in common” (p.04).⁷ Nonetheless, this refers not to an absolute commonality, nor is this an absolute ‘definition’ – amounting thus not to an invariable ‘essence’ of ‘the ethical.’ We could for instance think that some more (or less) synonymous expressions could be added to the ones given without changing the whole of the portrait (its “typical features”).⁸ Following this idea, what Wittgenstein seems to be offering here, by means of an (open) list of ‘definitions’, is something very akin to what he will later on offer as that which characterizes a “language-game.”⁹ He says:

Now instead of saying “Ethics is the enquiry into what is good” I could have said Ethics is the enquiry into what is valuable, or, into what is really important, or I could have said Ethics is the enquiry into the meaning of life, or into what makes life worth living, or into the right way of living. I believe if you look at all these phrases you will get a rough idea as to what it is Ethics is concerned with (p.05).

Now, additionally to the diversity and suppleness trait of this new account of ethics, what I would like to call your attention to is that in its multifold

7 References to the *Lecture on Ethics* will be given by the page numbers of The Philosophical Review edition.

8 This seems in fact to be the case if we take Galton's words seriously. He says that the process of composite photographs results in a “generalized picture”: “(...) one that represents no man in particular, but portrays an imaginary figure possessing the average features of any given group of men. (...) it is the portrait of a type and not of an individual.” (Galton 1878, p.132-133). It is this “generalized portrait” which Wittgenstein seems to have in mind when ‘defining’ ethics – and, later on, language-games and philosophy's domains – and not a definite picture of a static image giving (by means of a sum) the one core trait of the subject.

9 And I think here particularly about the paragraph 23 of *Philosophical Investigations* where the “diversity” of language-games “is not something fixed.” Compare to the list of language-games he gives there as well.

feature, this seems also to be a *positive* statement about ethics, an *affirmative* claim about its subject matter, something I don't think we would be able to find in the *Tractatus*. Of course, the 'positive' and the 'affirmative' are certainly not to be viewed here as 'theoretical', as stating an argument for one specific point of view about ethics against another. In fact, the definition given could be said to be 'positive' in a way the *Tractatus* would never allow itself to be: for it says much more about morality, or about the enquiry into it, than one could at first suppose. In saying that ethics is the enquiry into what is valuable, important, into the meaning of life and that which makes it worth living, Wittgenstein seems to be pointing us a path where to walk during our search for those exact same things – and this is carried out through more 'earthly' indications about what ethics is about than those confined to the solipsistic subject of the will.¹⁰ For now at least we know, positively, that life can be worth living, that it has a meaning, a value and a right (against a wrong) way of living. And that this understanding is deeply linked to morality such as we should be experiencing it – *personally*, as we will soon be able to see. In a nutshell, what the view has of 'positive' is this new closeness to the moral subject as the one capable of realizing ethics.

Nonetheless, Wittgenstein remains coherent with another persisting tracterian trait of the *Lecture* in not 'saying' or 'explaining' the content of each one of the definitions listed above. If he gives us the realm or – as he himself says – the subject matter of ethics, he does not explain in what the value really consists in, nor what the meaning of life amounts to being, or those elements making up for a right way of living life as opposed to a wrong one. Undoubtedly, these are still of those things which cannot be *said* in a propositional, true, intention. Again, if there is indeed a value, a right way of living and a meaning of life, to try to express them in the way we talk about a good chair, the right way to Granchester and the like, would involve trying to say that which is ethical or absolute by means of a descriptive language. This bears truly still on the distinction between saying and showing, which in the *Lecture on Ethics* is actually conveyed by the distinction between judgments of relative

10 One of the remaining unanswered questions concerning the notion of a subject of the will seems exactly to be the absence of a linkage between that will exterior to the world and a subject's actions in the world. If there's in fact an extensive literature on this topic (a whole exegetical tradition on the *Tractatus* – as well as on its inheritance to Schopenhauer) the gap has not yet been fulfilled by means of what is given in the *Lecture on Ethics*. The argument advanced in the present paper, even if addressing not directly this subject, may help us to establish the starting point from which to think it further through that which I would like to call here this new 'earthly' way of defining the realm of ethics.

and of absolute value. Or else, between that which can legitimately be said and that the expression of which is absolutely beyond any hope.

Judgments of relative value refer to facts alone, those things we can describe by means of the propositions of language. And expressing thereby the further distinction between science and ethics, Wittgenstein gives language the interesting following characterization: “Our words used as we use them in science, are vessels capable only of containing and conveying meaning and sense, *natural* meaning and sense” (p.07). Something ethics would never fit to be: “Ethics, if it is anything, is supernatural and our words will only express facts” (p.07). Now this is exactly the way of featuring judgments of relative value against their absolute correlative: no matter which words we may employ here with the appearance of being moral – ‘right’, ‘ought’, ‘good’, etc. – we will always be able to dismiss them through a correct factual saying of the same. In Wittgenstein’s own words: “Every judgment of relative value is a mere statement of facts and can therefore be put in such a form that it loses all the appearance of a judgment of value” (p.05-06). Here, one of Wittgenstein’s examples is “the right way to Granchester”, conveyed in factual, practical, manner such as follows: “This is the right way you have to go if you want to get to Granchester in the shortest time” (p.06). However, this cannot at all be done with the supposed judgments of absolute value: there is no way in which ‘right’, ‘ought’ or ‘good’, when supposed to convey an absolute or an ethical significance, can lose their appearance of judgment to express a descriptive, natural, fact.

Another way of understanding this difference is to say that relative value expressions are precisely *relative to something* of a predetermined purpose, function or standard. In the example above, ‘right’ means just the faster and more practical way to get to a given place, being ‘right’ *relative* to this goal. The same goes for the other terms, as Wittgenstein here explains:

If for instance I say that this is a good chair this means that the chair serves a certain predetermined purpose and the word good here has only meaning so far as this purpose has been previously fixed upon. In fact the word good in the relative sense simply means coming up to a certain predetermined standard. (p.05).

But would there be something like a fixed standard corresponding to the meaning of a ‘good man’ such as there is one corresponding to a ‘good

chair’?¹¹ Could we describe or enumerate the elements composing this very notion in a judgment of absolute value? But would it then be ‘absolute’? No, says Wittgenstein, because “this is not how Ethics uses” this kind of terms. In its absolute form ‘good’ is not relative to nothing – fitting therefore not the limited scope of meaningful, natural, language. ‘Absolute’ is in this way not only opposed to ‘relative’ as to ‘natural’ and ‘factual’ – being therefore ‘supernatural’.

Of course this cut between judgments of relative and of absolute value – as the more strong cut between science and ethics – goes still very well with our very known opposition between sense and nonsense: every attempt to say what cannot be put into descriptive terms is doomed to be *nonsense*. And all the expressions of ethical or absolute value intending to be expressions of ethical or absolute value – or intending to cope with the facts of the world – are essentially nonsensical. The following quote from the *Lecture on Ethics* clarifies this exact connection further:

Now when this is urged against me I at once see clearly, as it were in a flash of light, not only that no description that I can think of would do to describe what I mean by absolute value, but that I would reject every significant description that anybody could possibly suggest, *ab initio*, on the ground of its significance. That is to say: I see now that these nonsensical expressions were not nonsensical because I had not yet found the correct expressions, but that their nonsensicality was their very essence. For all I wanted to do with them was just *to go beyond* the world and that is to say beyond significant language. (p.11).

Again, the commonalities between the *Lecture* and the *Tractatus* are thus of a considerable extent with respect to their central arguments: propositions are

¹¹ Surely, depending upon our point of view the answer would actually be ‘yes’. For Stoicism, for giving but one example, you can only be said to be a good man if you reach all of the strict criteria of a virtuous life. No non-virtuous man could ever be a good man. And, of course, in being virtuous, there is also a bunch of specific tasks one has to fulfill for being so considered. – See a full account on this topic in Long & Sedley’s classic *The Hellenistic philosophers*, entrance 61 and 62 (Long & Sedley 1987). – Would the use of those moral terms be relative to a stoical standard in the same way they are when the subject is a ‘pianist’, a ‘runner’, a ‘cooker’? In the particular context of the *Lecture on Ethics*, Wittgenstein’s answer seems clearly to be ‘no’, although Margutti Pinto (1998) is an author who would go for the affirmative. See his *Iniciação ao Silêncio: uma análise do Tractatus de Wittgenstein como forma de argumentação* (mainly pp.238-239). Anselm Winfried Müller touches on more or less the same in his *Absolute Requirement*, a central topic in Wittgenstein’s *Lecture on ethics* (Müller, 1989).

of those things to be meaningfully said and employed by science and ordinary language against all the attempts to bring the absolute quality of ethics down to earth.¹² Attempts being, with this intention, always nonsense. That's the reason why we could take Wittgenstein's notion for what nonsensicality is meant to be here – the wish to go beyond the world and thereby beyond significant language – as essentially tractarian: nonsense is every attempt to say by means of language that which necessarily shows itself in its absolute quality, amounting to something both logically impossible and (morally) superfluous.¹³ It is also precisely in this fashion that ethics can never come to constitute a science. “Ethics,” says Wittgenstein, “so far as it springs from the desire to say something about the ultimate meaning of life, the absolute good, the absolute valuable, can be no science. What it says does not add to our knowledge in any sense” (p.10). Something alternatively said in the *Tractatus* (and in the *Notebooks*, for that matter (25.5.15)): “We feel that even if *all possible* scientific questions be answered, the problems of life have still not been touched at all. Of course there is then no question left, and just this is the answer” (6.52).

If those commonalities raise lots of different questions and could certainly be discussed further, I would nonetheless like to emphasize now two other points of related importance in the quotes of the *Lecture* given above which may perhaps help us to get closer to some of our aims.

On the one hand, for the sake of understanding the scope of what is being allowed here or not, we should have a closer look at this ‘desire’ or ‘urge’ to talk about ethics and the need for answering our “problems of life.” Indeed, at the end of the *Lecture* this comes in repeatedly. Wittgenstein had just said that in expressing supposed judgments of absolute value he had wished to go beyond the world and beyond significant language. But instead of rejecting it simply as nonsense and setting it to absolute silence, this wish is said to

12 Because, remember: “Hence also there can be no ethical propositions. Propositions cannot express anything higher” (6.42). The same sense of highness is given by the *Lecture* itself and its two connected metaphors: “It seems to me obvious that nothing we could ever think or say should be the thing. That we cannot write a scientific book, the subject matter of which could be intrinsically sublime and above all other subject matters. I can only describe my feeling by the metaphor, that, 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.” And again: “Ethics, if it is anything, 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” (p.07).

13 For a developed account on this interpretation of ‘nonsense’ in terms of the *Tractatus* (and the *Notebooks*) see once again Sattler 2011.

be a tendency of all men when trying to write or talk about ethics or religion: to run against the boundaries of language, something however “perfectly, absolutely hopeless.” But, says he, if this impossibility means that ethics can be no science at all – and I would add, no theory or doctrine at all – “it is a document of a tendency in the human mind which I personally cannot help respecting deeply and I would not for my life ridicule it” (p.10).

Interestingly, at about the same period, Wittgenstein named this tendency “ethics itself.” Dating from December 30, 1929 the remarks about ethics in *Wittgenstein and the Vienna Circle* seem to have the *Lecture on Ethics* as its very background. In taking Heidegger’s talk about distress and astonishment as his premise, Wittgenstein states that “man feels the urge to run up against the limits of language” (Wittgenstein 1979, p.68). And then the example he gives is here the same we find in the *Lecture* concerning our astonishment at the fact that the world exists: “This astonishment cannot be expressed in the form of a question, and there is also no answer whatsoever. Anything we might say is *a priori* bound to be mere nonsense. Nevertheless we do run up against the limits of language” (Wittgenstein 1979, p.68). However, if we have certainly to stop chattering about ethics – as we will soon see – this tendency of ours of bumping into language, the fact we (insistently) do so, “*indicates something*” [*deutet auf etwas hin*] of the utmost importance: “this running up against the limits of language”, declares Wittgenstein, “is *ethics*.” And that’s why, later on, echoing the *Lecture* once more, Wittgenstein repeats: “All I can say is this: I do not scoff at this tendency in man; I hold it in reverence” (Wittgenstein 1979, p.118). Surely because this, being ethics itself, it is exactly what the meaning of life refers to.¹⁴

On the other hand, the second point I would like to emphasize would require us a very complex account of the linkage between some of Wittgenstein’s remarks in the *Tractatus* and the *Notebooks* and one of the Stoic aspects one could hold – as I do – for his ethics to be about, something far too long for the scope of this paper. Instead, I will here try something simpler and of limited purpose and ambition – but still in tune with a wider Stoic reading. That is, that one way of understanding why this human tendency ‘is

14 However, I should be honest and say at this point that, in talking about the religious discourse, Wittgenstein adds a puzzling and striking (transitory?) remark: “Running against the limits of language? Language is, after all, not a cage” (Wittgenstein 1979, p.117) This is completely at odds with the saying of the *Lecture* and we could only imagine that taking language as a cage is here just another mistake of the whole of this human tendency: that all we would need to express what we wished to would be to say it in the first person, or to say it about oneself (*idem*, p.118). It would then make sense to say that language is a cage only for those who try to theorize about it.

ethics itself' is exactly to view it as the search for the meaning of life and consequently, for Wittgenstein, the search for the meaning of the existence of the world. Surely, as we can see in those very known paragraphs of the *Tractatus*, that search does not amount to anything answerable by means of language, but it does amount to a sort of acceptance, in 'silence' so to speak, of something far beyond our control: reaching the meaning of life is in this way reaching *agreement* with the fact that the world exists – and in the way it exists.¹⁵ It is then by means of this 'solution' that our problems of life disappear and we become able to reach peace of mind:

6.52 – We feel that even if *all possible* scientific questions be answered, the problems of life have still not been touched at all. Of course there is then no question left, and just this is the answer.

6.521 – The solution of the problem of life is seen in the vanishing of this problem. (Is not this the reason why men to whom after long doubting the sense of life became clear, could not then say wherein this sense consisted?)

Thus, one way of interpreting these paragraphs is to say that the 'problem of life', that exactly which constitutes our human tendencies towards the limits of language, or else 'ethics itself', is the 'problem' of the existence of the world. Hence to see the following passage in *Wittgenstein and the Vienna Circle*: "The facts of the matter are of no importance for me. But what men mean when they say that '*the world is there*' is something I have at heart" (Wittgenstein 1979, p.118). If this resembles again the already mentioned final note of the *Lecture on Ethics*, the obvious question Waismann – the listener, as we ourselves – may still want to ask Wittgenstein is: "Is the existence of the world connected with what is ethical?" (idem). Wittgenstein's answer to that question might at first seem mysterious, but should become clear enough against the background of what we already know – as the assumption goes – from the Notebooks 1914-1916 (8.7.16):¹⁶

15 See also in the Notebooks 1914-1916 the following entries 11.6.16 and 8.7.16.

16 Where, as we can also see here in Wittgenstein and the Vienna Circle, the ethical is never that far away from a certain religious understanding and attitude. We may however consider Wittgenstein's religious point of view a very particular one as, among other things, he identifies 'God' to 'Destiny' and the whole of the world. For a nice account of this specific aspect of Wittgenstein's ethics see Spica 2011 and, for instance, the various views advanced in Wittgenstein and Philosophy of Religion (Arrington & Addis 2001).

Men have felt that here there is a connection and they have expressed it thus: God the Father created the world, the Son of God (or the Word that comes from God) is that which is ethical. That the Godhead is thought of as divided and, again, as one being indicates that there is a connection here. (Wittgenstein 1979, p.118).

The explanation to account for this connection goes then roughly and sketchy as follows: Such as it is the world is *given* by God, and to put an end to the ‘problem’ thereby related is willingly to accept this ‘fact’ without any more searching. The solution given, the answer and the meaning thus found, all lie therefore in taking whatever God brings us to take. In stopping the search, the questioning and the unsubmitive distress, quietness and contentment will necessarily follow.

This very meaning and understanding can also be found in yet another remark, coming from the same work, but concerning now Schlick’s ethics and his comments on God. Here, not only taking the world as given (by God) is what brings one piece of mind in trying to find the meaning of life, but taking God’s orders to be what the good and the right are is the correct attitude to avoid all kinds of excursion to the realm of theological, philosophical and ‘scientific’ explanation, since this can only bring us more confusion and delusion than it would bring quietness and comprehension:

Schlick says that in theological ethics there used to be two conceptions of the essence of the good: according to the shallower interpretation the good is good because it is what God wants; according to the profounder interpretation God wants the good because it is good. I think that the first interpretation is the profounder one: what God commands, that is good. For it cuts off the way to any explanation “why” it is good, while the second interpretation is the shallow, rationalist one, which proceeds “as if” you could give reasons for what is good. The first conception says clearly that the essence of the good has nothing to do with facts and hence cannot be explained by any proposition. If there is any proposition expressing precisely what I think, it is the proposition “What God commands, that is good” (Wittgenstein 1979, p.115).

Now, in view of what we have thus far seen, – the last remark summarizing in a certain way the whole of one reading – I would like to advance the suggestion

that the aim of the distinctions in play from the *Tractatus* on, with the *Lecture on Ethics* leading to a change of another kind, is to avoid all sorts of attempts of *explanation* of what cannot be said – ethical and religious ‘propositions’ in particular, – the paragraph 4.112 making this point very clearly already: “Philosophy is not a theory but an activity. (...) The result of philosophy is not a number of ‘philosophical propositions’ but to make propositions clear.” This restriction being surely applied to every one of the supposed ‘philosophical disciplines’ or ‘domains’ and to ethics even stronger – Wittgenstein wishing to save it here from the ‘shallowness of rationalization’ – it is about those specific attempts that we have “to put an end to all claptrap about ethics” [“*Geschwätz über Ethik*”] (Wittgenstein 1979, p.68). By ‘claptrap’ Wittgenstein seems not to be referring to loose expressions of everyday life, not even to moral judgments as such, but (mainly or solely) to a ‘philosophical claptrap’, the attempt of *explaining* something about ethics and its origin, of *saying* something about its foundation and essence, and of *defining* once and for all that the expression of which reaches nothing but nonsense. This is what is being banished by Wittgenstein’s refusal – but, indeed, no more than this:

In ethics we are always making the attempt to say something that cannot be said, something that does not and never will touch the essence of the matter. It is *a priori* certain that whatever definition of the good may be given – it will always be merely a misunderstanding to say that the essential thing, that what is really meant, corresponds to what is expressed (Moore). (Wittgenstein 1979, p.69).

Here, it clearly follows that no ‘philosophical theory’ about ethics could ever be of any interest at all. Wittgenstein is now impatient and emphatic in denying the wish for any explanation whatsoever:

I would reply that whatever I was told, I would reject, and that not because the explanation was false but because it was an *explanation*. If I were told anything that was a *theory*, I would say: No, no! That does not interest me. Even if this theory were true, it would not interest me – it would not be the exact thing I was looking for.

What is ethical cannot be taught. If I could explain the essence of the ethical only by means of a theory, then what is ethical would be of no value whatsoever. (Wittgenstein 1979, p.116-117).

However, if this means that there can be no ‘ethical propositions’ and no explanations or ‘ethical theories’ of any kind, if all attempts to talk about ethics amount inevitably to a mere and endless ‘claptrap’, leaving the problems of life all the same unanswered, if we can’t say anything of the sort, then what should we do – if we should in fact do something about it – with our apparently-only-philosophical *moral* vocabulary? What about moral judgments? What about imperatives, orders, praises and accusations? What about ‘good’, ‘right’ and ‘virtuous’? Since moral judgments are not legitimate propositions of language, would they too be relegated to Wittgenstein’s emphatic denial just seen? Should we stop expressing them, as the mere chatters and the theories?

Coherently with the picture I’ve given above, my answer to the last question would here be ‘no’. We are not banished from expressing moral judgments if they bear no such intention as, say, a philosophical, metaphysical or scientific intention of expression; or else, if they bear no such intention as a propositional, descriptive or factual intention.

The following of the above remark of *Wittgenstein and the Vienna Circle* casts an interesting light on this point by looking retrospectively at the *Lecture on Ethics*, showing at the same time the scope and the limit of that which may be labeled ‘illegitimate’ – and that which is thus allowed to be expressed:

At the end of my lecture on ethics I spoke in the first person: I think that this is something very essential. Here there is nothing to be stated anymore; all I can do is to step forth as an individual and speak in the first person.

For me a theory is without value. A theory gives me nothing. (Wittgenstein 1979, p.117).

And that’s the crucial point: together with the extract of the *Lecture on Ethics* to be analyzed next, this is a remark I would like to consider as strong evidence for the allowance Wittgenstein is conceding to the expression of moral judgments, if not a clear authorization to ‘vocalize’ – and thereby show or indicate – moral imperatives, admonitions, praises and the like. Of course, this allowance goes as far as *the first person* is concerned and its expression has to bear no one intention of theorizing or of *saying* anything of a comparable propositional status. What Wittgenstein seems to have in mind is that, as an individual of a certain quality, I have to put myself responsibly forward

and express that which is of moral importance to my own character when it comes to the others. And if I cannot do anything else *but* to perform this act as a singular person, it also seems I *must* do it if the situation really requires.

It is precisely in this context, I argue, that we have to read that extract of the *Lecture* where a correct reply to a slanderer is exemplified by Wittgenstein in distinguishing judgments of relative and of absolute value.¹⁷ The analysis goes just about as follows.

In saying to a bad non-pro tennis player that he is “playing pretty badly” and his answer being “I know, I’m playing badly but I don’t want to play any better”, all I can say, explains Wittgenstein, is “Ah then that’s all right.” Here, ‘bad’ is merely a relative term appealing to the standards of tennis-playing according to which one can successfully or not to win a game or become a professional. However, things change considerably when ‘bad’ means not a relative, but an absolute value. “But”, continues Wittgenstein, “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?’” Now, the next one is precisely the answer which interest us here the most, as Wittgenstein says: “Certainly not; he would say ‘Well, you *ought* to want to behave better?’”

17 The context is also framed by a reading of Wittgenstein’s ethics as essentially Stoic in character. This means to say that in talking of happiness, it is peace of mind (or else *ataraxia*) we are referring to. As already stressed before, this relation between Wittgenstein and Stoicism is surely too complex to deal with in this paper. Only, for the sake of clarity, the main elements of this characterization could be summarized as follows: the one should not to fear death or the future, but to be in agreement with the world as given and however it is, to live solely in the present and to live in such a way as to make the problems disappear, that is to say, to live in such a way as life to become unproblematic. This agrees in certain ways with the ethical experiences par excellence such as accounted for in the *Lecture on Ethics*: the one already mentioned of being astonished at the fact that the world exists, the experience of feeling absolutely safe regardless of what happens in the world, and the experience of feeling guilty taking God to disapprove one’s actions. As a way of example, we could also give an image of what a happy (Stoic) way of living consists in, in considering an extract of *Culture and Value* where the same spirit is still in play: “The solution of the problem you see in life is a way of living which makes what is problematic to disappear. The fact that life is problematic means that your life does not fit life’s shape. So you must change your life, & once it fits the shape, what is problematic will disappear. But don’t we have the feeling that someone who doesn’t see a problem there is blind to something important, indeed to what is most important of all? Wouldn’t I like to say he is living aimlessly-just blindly like a mole as it were; and if he could only see that, he would see the problem? Or shouldn’t I say: someone who lives rightly does not experience the problem as sorrow, hence not after all as a problem, but rather as joy, that is so to speak as a bright halo round his life, not a murky background (1937)” (Wittgenstein 1980, p.31). – Brief as it is, that’s the frame for the argument to follow.

In light of the ‘certainly not’ answer, we can very well think that the judgment of value – in this case in the form of an imperative – is to be said as the only appropriate answer one could give to a slanderer who does not even *want* to try and change his behavior. In this way, to agree with his indifference, remaining silent or, worse, remaining oneself indifferent – in saying, for instance, “ah, then that’s all right” – would mean to behave in the exact same preposterous way. The response seems furthermore to suggest that, if one is to be moral responsible to oneself and to others and at the same time a consistent virtuous agent, one *certainly* has to step forth as an individual and express, *in the first person*, a judgment capable of showing the other his own misbehavior and perhaps to guide him to moral improvement.

Along these lines, we can see that moral judgments are not to be condemned to the same sort of silence and to the same labeling of nonsense as those ‘ethical propositions’ intending a descriptive meaning or a philosophical, scientific (or else metaphysical) level, when the sole intention is *to show* what to want and what to do when required.¹⁸

To clarify this topic a little further, let’s notice that by denying that ethics can be taught – in the quote seen above – the German term employed is an adjective modified into a noun, “*das Ethische*”, in the very sense of what ethics would be as ‘essence and ground’: “*das Wesen des Ethischen*.” Now, this means that, at this very point, Wittgenstein is talking about *that which* makes ethics what it is: its transcendental quality or essence as the condition of existence of life and the world.¹⁹ And that precisely is what we cannot teach, the supposed ‘essence’ of the value, of the good and the bad, of the will itself. By distinguishing thus the subject matter of his refusal, Wittgenstein seems to be giving this (impossible) teaching the meaning of a *sayable teaching* – through a theory, a doctrine, a system or a manual – and not the meaning of a moral answer given responsibly by a moral agent. In this way, all we are really banished from doing is to account for some sort or other of *explanation* of what ethics is, be it by means of a mere description or else by means of a metaphysical system.

18 For the suggestion that moral judgments can (and have to) show things by means of ‘speaking’ to people (against ‘saying’ them) what to do see Dall’Agnol 2004 and also Moyal-Sharrock 2007 – both advancing a similar proposition despite some differences in their readings.

19 See Wittgenstein’s explicit saying that ethics is the condition of existence of the world in the following entries of the Notebooks: 21.7.16 and 24.7.16.

It must, however, be clear that in restricting nonsense to the 'sayable teachings' of ethics, or in calling for individual moral answers by means of moral judgments, we are not to attribute these a propositional legitimacy, but to take them only to be open to expression for the sake of morality itself – for the sake, that is, of individual moral standing and coherency. Surely, for a certain reading of the *Tractatus*, this could still be in tune with its distinctions and restrictions – especially if, as I suppose is in fact the case, the criteria for establishing a moral responsible attitude concerning one's own answers to the others are to be taken from that work.²⁰ However, the fact that one is allowed, or even maybe obliged, to express moral judgments *in the first person*, may suggest us in the same measure a significant difference concerning the moral task extended (and permitted) to the ethical subject – and to Wittgenstein's ethics itself. After all, there's now a 'person' involved: that one has to step forth 'as a person' – and, for example, to answer responsibly in a certain way, but not in another – is undoubtedly a more earthly manner of considering moral behavior and moral responsibility. Indeed, when retrospectively referring to the *Lecture on Ethics* in the remarks of *Wittgenstein and the Vienna Circle*, Wittgenstein does not talk anymore about something of essential or of fundamental meaning and the term used is not anymore an adjective taken as a noun, but the noun itself, "*die Ethik*." In denying the possibility of all sorts of theoretical or of philosophical teachings of "the ethical", ethics itself cannot but be shown by means of a 'person'. In its original version, the stress put on the individual's task seems to be more obvious: "Ich kann nur als Persönlichkeit hervortreten und in der ersten Person sprechen" (Wittgenstein 1979, p.117). Well, that's not a blank term. If the subject of the will, the bearer of the ethical, can be characterized as good or bad independently of how the world actually is (see, for instance, 6.41, 6.423, 6.43; 2.8.16, 5.8.16), the most we can explicitly get as a way of defining it, be it from the *Tractatus* or from the *Notebooks*, is a "good will" or a "bad will", or else "the happy" or "the unhappy". But the term '*Persönlichkeit*', perhaps best translated as 'personality' rather than simply as 'individual', carries more certainly the meaning of an individuality characterized singularly by a certain '*Charakter*'. Of course, it is not the psychological sense of the term which seems to be in question. We come here perhaps much closer to the ordinary sense of the word according to which 'a personality' is someone who bears remarkable features and stands

²⁰ Again by means of the Stoic elements here in play and a full assessment of what for Wittgenstein means to live a happy and correct life.

out from the others. This term is notably followed in the text by *‘hervortreten’* which, if can also mean ‘appear’, could as well be said to be ‘to move forward, to stand out or to put oneself in evidence’.

Clearly, what there is to be distinguished or put in evidence is not a mere physical ‘appearance’, but *the personality as a criterion* – which, from the point of view here assumed, is characterized by the stamp of happiness and moral rightness (not to use the term ‘virtue’): in appearing and presenting himself and speaking in the first person, this individual would then represent the very nucleus of morality (or else, morality itself) – hence to stand out as a criterion – and show, by means of his own personality, way of living life and words, this exactly which no theory would ever be able to explain. In this way, it matters significantly ‘who’ does it: such a strong demand cannot really be fulfilled by an inconsistent agent, but by he only who recognizes himself as a moral person or as an individual personality, carrying the responsibility of consistency *vis-à-vis* himself and the others. He would actually look like the Stoic virtuous man.

But if the expression of moral judgments, its allowance and requirement, may indeed be accessed through a given account of moral responsibility which is in turn necessarily linked to a specific notion of moral character, what exactly are the criteria forming such a standard of normativity from which to say something like “well, you *ought* to want to behave better”? The shortest answer is to say that those criteria are in the same measure the ones composing the attitude of the happy life, where the ‘value’ and the ‘right’ are positively qualified in view of the right way of living. As evidence, we can see in the *Notebooks* that the happy life is actually (and necessarily) the only correct life to live – a rightness which, according to this paper’s background reading, is fully Stoic in character:²¹

30.71.6 - I keep on coming back to this! simply the happy life is good, the unhappy bad. And if I *now* ask myself: But why should I live *happily*, then this of itself seems to me to be a tautological ques-

21 The longest answer would required an altogether different paper aiming at a more complete description of those elements composing happiness as peace of mind – accounting at the same time for the criteria of normativity here referred to. – I’m aware that this might weaken the argument, but is a task to be accomplished elsewhere with its proper deepness and detail.

tion; the happy life seems to be justified, of itself, it seems that it is the only right life.²²

Now, one's character standing out as a criterion means that his personality is fully consistent with his expressing moral judgments and that his authority derives precisely from the fact that his own right attitudes are themselves his happy rewardings. Otherwise said: being happy is the reward for showing morally and responsibly for the sake of the others and,– by these very means–, for standing as a standard to be listened and followed. The 'right life' being the 'happy life', a happy 'personality' is itself a normative standard of behavior. We could then say that it is such a personality's responsibility which is involved in the requirement of moral judgments of the sort seen in Wittgenstein's example,– when someone seems to be living helplessly unhappy and behaving in a helplessly misguided way by his own will (as the slanderer in that case). That demand is one of expressing an advice, of showing something he himself sees and of trying to lead the other to a better wanting. Indifference and silence are therefore incompatible with his moral commitment *to himself*.

The *normative tune* involved in moral judgments being permissible (and sometimes obligatory) is, in this way, directed at both the one to be lead by them (as the slanderer again) and the one expressing them as him-self a responsible moral character. But if we could certainly say a lot more to complement the argument presented in this text, the sketch above seems to me at least to show that there is more to the *Lecture on Ethics* than a mere retaking of the *Tractatus* – and its normativity goes here hand in hand (in a more explicit fashion) with a coherent, moral personal commitment and attitude to oneself and to others.

22 See also the paragraph 6.54 of the *Tractatus* where Wittgenstein indicates the possibility of a right view of the world – with 'rightly' meaning undoubtedly more than a mere logical right (non-philosophical) perspective.

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