

Living in Silence: the End of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* and *Lecture on Ethics*

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Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus logico-philosophicus* starts as a book on logic and (the limits of) language. In the first years after publication (in 1921) it was primarily read as a work aiming to put an end to nonsensical language and all kinds of metaphysical speculation. For this reason it had a great influence on the logical positivists of the Vienna Circle. But for Wittgenstein himself it had another and more important purpose. In 1919 he had sent his manuscript to Ludwig von Ficker, the publisher of the literary journal *der Brenner*, hoping that Ficker would consider publishing the *Tractatus*. In the accompanying letter he explains how he wishes his book to be understood. He thinks it is necessary to give an explanation of his book because the content might seem strange to Ficker, but, he writes:

In reality, it isn't strange to you, for the point of the book is ethical. I once wanted to give a few words in the foreword which now actually are not in it, which, however, I'll write to you now because they might be a key to you: I wanted to write that my work consists of two parts: of the one which is here, and of everything which I have *not* written. And precisely this second part is the important one. For the Ethical is delimited from within, as it were, by my book; and I'm convinced that, *strictly speaking*, it can *ONLY* be delimited in this way. In brief, I think: All of that which *many* are *babbling* today, I have defined in my book by remaining silent about it.¹

Because the larger part of the book is about logic and the nature of language, Wittgenstein apparently feels the need to elucidate its ethical purpose. It is not immediately clear how the remarks on ethics, the world as a whole and 'the mystical' follow from the logical part of the book. The relation between the logical content and the ethical point of the book is still a matter of discussion among critics.

Language and the World

The outline of the book reflects its content. The structure of the *Tractatus*, which is written in numbered propositions, purports to be representative of its internal essence. It is constructed around seven basic propositions, numbered by the natural numbers 1-7, with all other paragraphs numbered by decimal expansions. In this way proposition 2.1 is an elaboration on proposition 2, proposition 2.11 is an elaboration on 2.1 and so on. In a footnote on the first page of the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein explains that the numbers of the separate propositions indicate their logical importance and the emphasis laid upon them in the exposition. The seven basic propositions are the most

¹ Quoted by Ray Monk in: *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius*, New York 1990, p. 178. Wittgenstein here speaks about the ethical purpose of his book and the *ethical* being delimited from within, but the *ethical* also comprises what Wittgenstein later calls 'absolute value', the meaning of the world and the *mystical*.

important. They are all expounded in subordinate propositions, the last one excepted, the famous proposition 7: 'What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence'.

Throughout the Middle Ages and in the centuries that followed, Aristotelian logic had been predominant, but by the end of the nineteenth century there had been major developments in logic and the foundations of mathematics, to which Bertrand Russell and Gottlob Frege had made important contributions.² When Wittgenstein came to Cambridge to study with Russell (in 1911) the nature of logic was still widely debated. It became one of the important issues of the *Tractatus*, but Wittgenstein thinks his ideas about logic and language have a wider significance. In the preface of the *Tractatus* he says:

The book deals with the problems of philosophy, and shows, I believe, that the reason why these problems are posed is that the logic of our language is misunderstood. The whole sense of the book might be summed up in the following words: what can be said at all can be said clearly, and what we cannot talk about we must pass over in silence.

Thus the aim of the book is to draw a limit to thought, or rather – not to thought, but to the expression of thoughts: for in order to be able to draw a limit to thought, we should have to find both sides of the limit thinkable (i.e. we should have to be able to think what cannot be thought).

It will therefore only be in language that the limit can be drawn, and what lies on the other side of the limit will simply be nonsense.³

He adds that he thinks that he has definitively solved the problems of philosophy. Most of these problems arise because we do not understand the logic of our language. When we have learned from Wittgenstein how exactly language works we come to see that many of the problems that are addressed in philosophy are the result of a misconception of language and that many philosophical theories are sheer nonsense. The aim of the *Tractatus* is to put an end to the pseudo problems that dominate philosophical discussions. Wittgenstein maintains that a proposition is meaningful only if it can, at least in principle, be verified, that is if we can establish whether it is true or false by comparing it with reality, or as Wittgenstein puts it, with facts *in* the world. A proposition about the world as a whole can never be meaningful because we cannot point to any (individual) fact that makes it true or untrue.⁴ These sentences are 'metaphysical nonsense'. This makes us wonder at the first propositions of the *Tractatus*:

1. The world is all that is the case.
 - 1.1 The world is the totality of facts, not of things.

If the *Tractatus* was meant to put an end to metaphysical nonsense, the reader is indeed led astray by these propositions. What do they mean? Marie McGinn discusses the views of several interpreters

² B. Russell says about Aristotelian logic in *A History of Western Philosophy* (London 1946): 'His present-day influence is so inimical to clear thinking that it is hard to remember...how admirable his logical work would still seem if it had been a stage in a continual process, instead of being (as in fact it was) a dead end, followed by thousand years of stagnation.' (p. 195).

³ *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 3-4.

⁴ Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus* uses 'Satz', which in the English translations is rendered as 'proposition'.

of the *Tractatus* who have been inclined to read these opening remarks as a statement of Wittgenstein's fundamental ontology. She takes a different approach to the opening remarks: by the subsequent remarks we gradually come to see that the opening remarks do not have the metaphysical status that they appeared to have, but are in fact about the nature of language:

That is to say, the impression that these remarks say something about the essential structure of a transcendent reality that our language somehow hooks onto is seen to be a false one. What we come to see is that what Wittgenstein is doing in these remarks is nothing more than tracing the logical order that is essential to language's ability to express propositions that can be compared with reality for truth or falsity. (...) We see that what appeared to be a series of metaphysical remarks that describe the a priori order of reality, which it possesses independently of our means of representing it, is, at bottom, an articulation of the logic, that is, the essence, of depiction.⁵

Although the *Tractatus* starts with seemingly metaphysical propositions we find that the book is not really about the world as a whole, but about the nature of language and logic, which the opening remarks are meant to help articulating. In Wittgenstein's early work there is an isomorphism between the world and language. Just as in 1.1 Wittgenstein states that the world is the totality of facts, he claims in 4.0011 that language is the totality of propositions. Analysis of the world and of language shows them to consist of corresponding components and ends up with corresponding simple elements. The most elementary facts in the world, atomic facts are a combination of objects. Objects are simple and form the substance of the world (2.02, 2.021). On the other hand propositions may be analyzed into compounding propositions, which in turn may be analyzed into smaller propositions until we get to elementary propositions, which consist of names: the meaning of a name is an object (3.202 and 3.203) and:

4.221 It is obvious that the analysis of propositions must bring us to elementary propositions which consist of names in immediate combination.
This raises the question how such combination into propositions comes about.

Propositions

Wittgenstein's view of language is part of his picture-theory: 'We picture facts to ourselves' (2.1). Many things can function as a picture of something else. A painting or any other representation can be the picture of something in reality. Any picture, says Wittgenstein, is necessarily a logical picture as well, which means that, in order to be able to picture something, the picture itself and the thing or fact that it is a picture of, must have something in common: the logical form. In a picture the elements are combined in a definite way and the form of this combination makes it possible to compare the picture to some part of reality. If the combination of the corresponding elements of reality is the same as that of the elements of the picture, the picture is true. We can never know if a picture is true by just looking at it, we will always have to compare it to the real world: there is no

⁵ Marie McGinn, *Elucidating the Tractatus, Wittgenstein's Early Philosophy of Logic and Language*. Oxford, 2009, p. 137.

picture which is a priori true.⁶ Propositions are a kind of picture of reality (4.01) and so there are no necessarily true propositions about the world, all truths are contingent.

Analysis of a proposition will never reveal its truth or falsity, but we may find out its truth-conditions. By analyzing a proposition we find the elementary propositions that it is made of and which are logically so combined as to yield this proposition. Every elementary proposition is the expression of some atomic fact. If the atomic fact exists, the elementary proposition is true, if it does not exist, the elementary proposition is false. All the possible combinations of truth and falsehood of the elementary propositions determine when the compound sentence will be true, and when it will be false. Every elementary proposition can be true (T) or false (F), these are its truth-possibilities. The truth-possibilities of elementary propositions are the conditions of the truth or falsehood of propositions and we can build logical schemata of truth-possibilities of all propositions, using T and F.⁷ Wittgenstein does not give any answer to the question what these elementary propositions may be, he does not give any examples of elementary sentences or atomic facts. They seem to be prerequisites for his logical theory more than linguistic facts. In 5.5562 Wittgenstein states that if we know on purely logical grounds that there must be elementary propositions, this must be known to everyone who understands propositions in their unanalyzed form.

Logic

After the general description of propositions, Wittgenstein is able to give his view on the propositions of logic. These are fundamentally different from the propositions of ordinary language. Generally we understand a proposition if we understand its truth-conditions.⁸

In 4.46 Wittgenstein says that among the possible groups of truth-conditions there are two extreme cases. A tautology is a proposition which is true for all the truth-possibilities of the elementary propositions, a contradiction is false for all the truth-conditions. In these cases we do not have to look at reality to determine its truth or untruth, we can know this by just looking at the proposition itself. Unlike the propositions of ordinary language, logical propositions do not tell us anything about the facts in the world. They are not pictures of reality for they are true or false whatever the facts in the world may be. The propositions of logic lack sense, they are senseless, but, in Wittgenstein's view, they are not nonsense for, although they *say* nothing about reality, they *show* its logical form:

- 6.12 The fact that the propositions of logic are tautologies *shows* the formal – logical – properties of language and the world.
- 6.124 The propositions of logic describe the scaffolding of the world, or rather they represent it. They have no 'subject-matter'. They presuppose that names have meaning and elementary propositions sense; and that is their connexion with the world.
- 6.13 Logic is not a body of doctrine but a mirror-image of the world.
Logic is transcendental.

⁶ *Tractatus*, 2.21-2.225.

⁷ *Tractatus*, 4.31-4.45.

⁸ *Tractatus*, 4.024: To understand a proposition means to know what is the case if it is true. (One can understand it, therefore, without knowing whether it is true.)

Logic as the mirror-image of the world means that it shows the possibilities of language and all the possible states of affairs in the world, but it can never help us establish what the facts in the world are. Propositions have sense because they are a picture of something in reality. We can determine whether this picture is true by comparing it with reality. By tautologies and contradictions, the propositions of logic, we come to see the logical structure of reality and the relations between true propositions. Nonsensical propositions are utterances which simply cannot be true or false because we cannot establish what would make them so, we do not know their truth-conditions and therefore do not really understand them. In the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein gives two examples of this kind of utterances: the question whether 'the good is more or less identical than the beautiful' (4.003) and the sentence 'Socrates is identical' (5.473). These are nonsensical because in them words (signs) appear that have no sense, because in this instance we have failed to give them one. This is a matter of choice, an arbitrary determination: 'We cannot give a sign the wrong sense' (5.4732).

Philosophy

In several places in the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein discusses the nature and purpose of philosophy. He argues that philosophy is not a body of doctrine resulting in philosophical propositions, but it is an activity, aimed at the logical clarification of thoughts. We find true propositions about facts only in the natural sciences and the correct method of philosophy is to do no more than, whenever someone wants to say something metaphysical, demonstrate to him that his propositions are senseless because he has failed to give a meaning to some signs in his propositions.⁹ So for Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus* philosophy is subordinate to the natural sciences, its task is to clarify their propositions as well as those of ordinary language, and not to present a body of propositions of its own. Metaphysics, then, is bad philosophy or rather, not philosophy at all. Its propositions lack sense, they are senseless, nonsensical, because we have failed to give a meaning to some signs in them.

This brings us to the question whether the *Tractatus* itself is, by its own standards, a philosophical work. There are no clarifications of scientific propositions in it. The very first proposition of the *Tractatus*: 'The world is all that is the case' is nonsense, and so are most of the subsequent propositions. We notice that not only the remarks about the world, ethics or the mystical are nonsensical, but even the remarks about the nature of language and logic, subjects to which the *Tractatus* had seemed to make a major contribution, for we cannot say anything about the logical form of propositions, but only show it. The problems that arise from this position are already mentioned by Bertrand Russell in his introduction:

What causes hesitation is the fact that, after all, Mr Wittgenstein manages to say a good deal about what cannot be said, thus suggesting to the sceptical reader that possibly there may be some loophole through a hierarchy of languages, or by some other exit. The whole subject of ethics, for example, is placed by Mr Wittgenstein in the mystical, inexpressible region. Nevertheless he is capable of conveying his ethical opinions. His defence would be that what he calls the mystical can be shown, although it cannot be said. It may be that this defence is

⁹ *Tractatus*, 4.11-4.112 and 6.53.

adequate, but, for my part, I confess that it leaves me with a certain sense of intellectual discomfort.¹⁰

In 4.112 Wittgenstein has said that a philosophical work essentially consists of elucidations and in 6.54 he claims that his propositions do serve as elucidations and eventually lead the reader to a position where he can see the world in the right way.¹¹ Peter M.S. Hacker contends that it was Wittgenstein's intention to lead his reader to a correct logical point of view:

(...) the propositions of the *Tractatus* elucidate by bringing whoever understands their author to recognize them as nonsensical. They are not elucidations in the sense of analyses of 'scientific' propositions into their constituents. Rather are they pseudo-propositions by means of which one can climb beyond them. They lead one to see the world aright, from a correct logical point of view.¹²

Seeing the world from the correct logical point of view means knowing the difference between saying and showing, and being able to distinguish between propositions with sense, senseless propositions and nonsensical propositions. Wittgenstein has not elucidated any single proposition, but by clarifying all these differences, he seems at once to have made the preliminaries for the elucidation of all propositions. He has made claims about language and the world which we now both understand and understand to be nonsensical.

'Nonsense'

Over the last decades the debate on the *Tractatus* has focused on the question why Wittgenstein would have written a book which, by its own lights, has to be considered as largely nonsensical. Central to this debate is the interpretation of the final remarks of the *Tractatus* (6.54 and 7)

My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually recognizes them as nonsensical, when he has used them – as steps – to climb up beyond them. (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it.) He must transcend these propositions, and then he will see the world aright.

What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence.¹³

Here we encounter in full the paradox that has been slumbering from the preface onward. Wittgenstein evidently acknowledges the fundamental paradox in his work but it does not silence him, which already made Bertrand Russell suspect that he had found some way around it. Until

¹⁰ Bertrand Russell, *Introduction, Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, p. 22.

¹¹ In the preface too Wittgenstein suggests that his book contains philosophical 'truths': '(...) the truth of the thoughts that are here communicated seems to me unassailable and definitive. I therefore believe myself to have found, on all essential points, the final solutions of the [philosophical] problems'. Here too we detect the fundamental paradox in Wittgenstein's thoughts.

¹² P.M.S. Hacker, *Insight and Illusion, Themes in the Philosophy of Wittgenstein*, Oxford 1986, 26.

¹³ *Tractatus*, 6.54 and 7.

recently most interpreters of the *Tractatus* tended to dilute the force of this paradox: the book's propositions may be nonsense but they are 'illuminating' all the same. P.M.S. Hacker is one of the interpreters who take this view:

Illuminating nonsense will guide the attentive reader to apprehend what is shown by other propositions which do not purport to be philosophical; moreover it will intimate, to those who grasp what is meant, its own illegitimacy. The task of philosophy in this respect then is twofold, to bring one to see what shows itself, and to prevent one from the futile endeavour to say it by teaching one 'to pass from a piece of disguised nonsense to something that is patent nonsense'.¹⁴

Hacker thus distinguishes two varieties of philosophical nonsense: illuminating nonsense and misleading nonsense, of which the illuminating variety leads the reader to a correct logical view of the world.

Cora Diamond and James Conant disagree with Hacker's reading of the *Tractatus*. They maintain that Hacker attributes to Wittgenstein the very belief which the preface of the *Tractatus* already diagnoses as philosophy's characteristic illusion, the belief that we can rise to a position from which we may see the world as if from outside it. These authors present a new perspective on the book as a whole, which emphasizes that Wittgenstein asks that *he*, and not his propositions, be understood. They see Hacker's determination to understand the book's propositions as a refusal to throw away the ladder. Diamond calls this 'chickening out':

Are we going to keep the idea that there is something or other in reality that we gesture at, however badly, when we speak of 'the logical form of reality', so that *it, what* we were gesturing at, is there but cannot be expressed in words? *That* is what I want to call chickening out. (...) To read Wittgenstein himself as not chickening out is to say that it is not, not really, his view that there are features of reality that cannot be put into words but show themselves. What is his view is that that way of talking may be useful or even for a time essential, but it is in the end to be let go of and honestly taken to be real nonsense, plain nonsense, which we are not in the end to think of as corresponding to an ineffable truth.¹⁵

According to Diamond, Wittgenstein's propositions *are* nonsense, plain and simple. All interpretations that construe the *Tractatus* as an attempt to communicate an ineffable theory still cling to the ladder. The contention of the *Tractatus* is that there are no philosophical doctrines. One way to take this is that the book contains numerous doctrines that can, strictly speaking, not be put into words, so they do not count as doctrines. After having thrown away the ladder one is left holding on to some ineffable truths about reality, which one has become able to see. This is Hacker's view. Diamond contends that the notion of ineffable truths is to be used only with the awareness that it itself belongs to what has to be thrown away. Throwing away the ladder means to throw everything away, including the distinction between things that can be said and things that can only be shown. We do not have to understand the *Tractatus'* propositions, but we have to understand Wittgenstein himself, what he is doing in the book, what he is trying to make us see. Diamond

¹⁴ P. Hacker, *Insight and Illusion*, 18-19.

¹⁵ Cora Diamond, 'Throwing Away the Ladder' in: *Philosophy* 63 (1988) 5-27, here 7-8.

maintains that to want to understand the person who talks nonsense, is to want to enter imaginatively the taking of that nonsense for sense. The *Tractatus*, in its understanding of itself as addressed to those who are in the grip of philosophical nonsense, supposes a kind of imaginative activity, an exercise of the capacity to enter into the taking nonsense for sense, of the capacity to share imaginatively the inclination to think that one is thinking something in it.¹⁶ We do not really understand what the propositions mean, but we can see what Wittgenstein wants to achieve by means of them. The *Tractatus* has a therapeutic aim, its purpose is to cure us of our metaphysical inclinations. After we have come to recognize our own metaphysical inclinations by understanding Wittgenstein's metaphysical remarks, we will leave them behind and be cured of our futile attempts to speak about the world as a whole, from a point of view that is not there to be taken.

In the propositions 6.54 and 7 we see that Wittgenstein was fully aware of the contradiction in his work. The conclusion is that one must be silent about things that cannot be spoken of. Of course Wittgenstein himself has not heeded this recommendation, but written a book full of what we now have come to see as nonsense. He had to write the *Tractatus* to make us see his remarks as nonsense, as well as the remarks we ourselves are inclined to make about the world, ethics, the meaning of life etc. So, as Russell noticed, he must have found a way to escape the paradox, at least in this instance. Russell suggests Wittgenstein's solution may be found in a hierarchy of languages, which had been Tarski's solution to the liar's paradox, but it is that of Russell himself as well.¹⁷ Wittgenstein, however, does not mention a hierarchy of languages or logical types, but his metaphors are vertical: we ascend to a higher point of view from which we can see the world aright.¹⁸ Still it is not made clear in what way this language of *ascending*, this 'nonsense', differs from ordinary or scientific language.

Hacker says the propositions in the *Tractatus* are nonsense, but they are *illuminating* nonsense from which something is to be learned. Diamond's opinion is that the propositions of the *Tractatus* are really nonsense, but that they put us in a position to understand what the author is aiming to do in writing his book. After we have been cured from our metaphysical inclinations no one will still want to make metaphysical assertions but we will be silent about anything but facts. Wittgenstein's assessment of the paradox in his work and the way he has found to address it are therefore found in the interpretation of proposition 6.54, where he refers to an understanding between him and his reader.

The 'Mystical'

In retrospect it may seem strange that in the first years after publication the *Tractatus* was solely read as a work on logic, as it takes an obvious turn on the last pages. Up till there Wittgenstein had maintained that only propositions that can be compared to something in reality, to facts in the world, have sense. Now he turns to the sense of the world as a whole (in 6.41 and 6.42):

¹⁶ Cora Diamond, 'Ethics, Imagination and the Method of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*', in: Alice Crary and Rupert Read (eds.), *The New Wittgenstein*, 157-8. See also: Diarmuid Costello, ' "Making Sense" of Nonsense: Conant and Diamond Read Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*', in: Barry Stocker (ed.), *Post-Analytic Tractatus*, Aldershot, 2004.

¹⁷ Bertrand Russell, 'Mathematical Logic as based on the Theory of Types' (1908) in: *Logic and Knowledge*, essays 1901-1950, edited by Robert C. Marsh, London 1977, pp. 59-102.

¹⁸ This language of ascending, climbing the ladder, resembles the language of mystical ascent which we find in e.g. *The Mystical Theology* by Dionysius the Areopagite.

The sense of the world must lie outside the world. In the world everything is as it is, and everything happens as it does happen: in it no value exists – and if it did exist, it would have no value.

If there is any value that does have value, it must lie outside the whole sphere of what happens and is the case. For all that happens and is the case is accidental.

What makes it non-accidental cannot lie within the world, since if it did it would itself be accidental.

It must lie outside the world.

So too it is impossible for there to be propositions of ethics.

Propositions can express nothing that is higher.

Earlier he had said that logic is ‘transcendental’, now it appears that ethics is transcendental as well (6.421). Ethics, the sense of the world and the sense of life lie outside the world of facts. Propositions that try to express something about values, the world as a whole or about life are senseless, but that does not mean that Wittgenstein considers them to be of no importance. In 6.45 Wittgenstein says: ‘To view the world *sub specie aeterni* is to view it as a whole – a limited whole. Feeling the world as a limited whole – it is this that is mystical’. About the most important things in life it is impossible to speak and if we do try to say something about them we inevitably speak nonsense, so it is better to pass them over in silence (7).

In 6.522 there is another mention of the ‘mystical’, but the English translation and the interpretation of this proposition are somewhat dubious. In German it reads: ‘Es gibt allerdings Unausprechliches. Dies *zeigt* sich, es ist das Mystische’. C.K. Ogden translates it thus: ‘There is indeed the inexpressible. This *shows* itself; it is the mystical’, whereas D.F. Pears and B.F. McGuinness render the propositions as: ‘There are, indeed, things that cannot be put into words. They *make themselves manifest*. They are what is mystical’. There are two remarkable differences in these translations. The first is the use of the plural in the Pears/McGuinness translation. Wittgenstein (and Ogden in his translation) uses the singular for something that shows itself. The second difference is that Ogden translates ‘*zeigt*’ as ‘shows’, whereas Pears and McGuinness say that things (plural) make themselves manifest. In both aspects Ogden stays closer to the original. The translation by Pears and McGuinness involves an interpretation which, in my view, is on the whole incorrect because it suggests that according to Wittgenstein inexpressible things can somehow reveal themselves. Moreover, ‘shows’ is here to be preferred as the translation of ‘*zeigt*’ because of its affinity with logical ‘showing’ earlier in the *Tractatus*. There *are* no things that are inexpressible and yet in some way succeed to make themselves manifest to us. What Wittgenstein says is that there is something that lies beyond what is expressible in our language, any language, and *this* shows itself (we may add) in language. What we, as Wittgenstein’s readers, have understood by the end of the *Tractatus* is that, language being as it is, there are things that cannot be expressed in meaningful propositions.¹⁹ *This* shows itself and because we now understand the nature of language we are able to see this in all propositions, or, as is said in 6.54, we can now see the world aright.

¹⁹ ‘It will therefore only be in language that the limit can be drawn, and what lies on the other side of the limit will simply be nonsense’. (*Tractatus*, Preface).

Thus far the meaning of 'the mystical' is derived from the logical considerations. Yet in many discussions of the mystical aspects of the *Tractatus*, considerations about Wittgenstein as a person, his life and his experiences, are included in the argument. B.F. McGuinness, for instance asks if Wittgenstein did have a mystical experience of some sort during the war.²⁰ Other authors do not speculate on mystical experiences but hold that Wittgenstein's experiences as a soldier have almost certainly induced the 'mystical turn' at the end of the *Tractatus*.²¹ Somehow it is clear that the man Ludwig Wittgenstein, his life and his experiences are involved in the text.

The *Lecture on Ethics*²²

In the preface of the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein says that he believes to have found the final solution to the problems of philosophy. The truth of the thoughts communicated in the book seems unassailable and definitive to him, and so his philosophical work is done. After having finished the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein abandoned philosophy and decided to pursue a different career. First he became a schoolteacher in a small Austrian village, later he worked as a gardener in a monastery.²³ At the urging of some of his friends Wittgenstein returned to Cambridge in 1929 to resume his philosophical vocation. During the first years in Cambridge his view of philosophy and its problems underwent great changes, but in a lecture held in 1929 or 1930 we can still recognize the ideas of the *Tractatus* on the limits of language. This *Lecture on Ethics* is important as a clarification of the views of the *Tractatus*, because Wittgenstein at the time he delivered this lecture still adhered to his former opinions and in his lecture goes more deeply into what it means to utter 'nonsensical' propositions, notably ethical ones.

Wittgenstein starts by distinguishing between relative and absolute values. A judgment of relative value is a mere statement of fact and can be put in such a form that it loses all the appearance of value, e.g. 'this man is a good runner' simply means that he runs a certain number of miles in a certain number of minutes. Now Wittgenstein contends that although all judgments of relative value can be shown to be mere statements of facts, no statement of fact can ever be, or imply, a judgment of absolute value.²⁴ Ethics, Wittgenstein says, is supernatural and our words will only express facts. Then what do people have in mind when they use such expressions as 'absolute good' or 'absolute value' and what do they want to express by them?

Wittgenstein tries to explain these expressions by referring to the cases in which he himself uses them. He describes some particular experiences which for him are *par excellence* experiences that come to mind when he wants to determine what he means by absolute or ethical value. The first example he gives of such experiences is 'I wonder at the existence of the world', but in saying this, he admits, he is misusing language: '...it is nonsense to say that I wonder at the existence of the world, because I cannot imagine it not existing.'²⁵ But a certain characteristic misuse of our language runs

²⁰ B.F. McGuinness, 'The Mysticism of the Tractatus' in: *The Philosophical Review* 75, 1966, 305-328.

²¹ Ray Monk, *Wittgenstein, the Duty of Genius*, London 1991, p.137.

²² Ludwig Wittgenstein: 'A Lecture on Ethics, followed by Notes on Talks with Wittgenstein by Friedrich Waismann', in: *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 74-1, 1965, pp. 3-26

²³ See also J. Schakenraad, *Wittgenstein as a Wild Mystic: Michel de Certeau on Ludwig Wittgenstein's philosophy of language*, p.8, www.philosophyplus.com.

²⁴ *A Lecture on Ethics*, p. 5-6.

²⁵ *A Lecture on Ethics*, p. 9.

through all ethical and religious expressions. All these expressions may seem to be just similes, but a simile must be a simile for something, we must be able to drop the simile and state the facts which stand behind it. As soon as we try to drop the simile and state the facts, we find there are no such facts. Wittgenstein concludes:

I now see 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. My whole tendency and I believe the tendency of all men who ever tried to write or talk Ethics or Religion was to run against the boundaries of language. This running against the walls of our cage is perfectly, absolutely hopeless. Ethics 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. But 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.²⁶

We find some comments Wittgenstein later made on his lecture in the *Notes on Talks with Wittgenstein*, which were taken by Friedrich Waismann during and after discussions with Wittgenstein and Moritz Schlick, and were published together with the *Lecture on Ethics*. Now he says:

At the end of my lecture on ethics, I spoke in the first person. I believe this is quite essential. Here nothing more can be established, I can only appear as a person speaking for myself. (...) I can only say: I don't belittle this human tendency; I take my hat off to it. And here it is essential that this is not a sociological description, but that I speak *for myself*.²⁷

Just as in the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein wanted to put an end to idle metaphysical speculation, he now wants to put an end to all the chatter about ethics. In ethics one is always trying to say something that can never concern the essence of the matter, but the effort to do so, the human tendency to speak about ethical matters, points to something. The concluding propositions of the *Tractatus* resemble Wittgenstein's view in the *Lecture on Ethics* on remarks that are made on ethical matters, the absolute good etc. In both cases he speaks in the first person (*my* propositions, anyone who understands *me*). And he adds:

Here I am conscious of having fallen a long way short of what is possible. Simply because my powers are too slight for the accomplishment of the task. – May others come and do it better.²⁸

²⁶ Ibid., 11-12.

²⁷ Friedrich Waismann, *Notes on Talks with Wittgenstein*, in: *A Lecture on Ethics*, p. 16.

²⁸ *Tractatus*, Preface, p. 4. Cf. The concluding remarks of Eriugena's *Periphyseon*: J. Schakenraad, *Johannes Scottus Eriugena: The End of Thought*, p. 19, on: www.philosophyplus.com.

Wittgenstein's life had to show what his conclusions meant, his own ethics, when there remained nothing to be said. Wittgenstein's speaking for himself in the *Tractatus* is unique. He speaks metaphysical nonsense, just like when he says that he wonders at the existence of the world, but he does so with a purpose. He wants to be cured and to cure his readers of this metaphysical inclination. Then he thought that he had solved the problems of philosophy and decided to pursue a different career, showing his values in life. His life after the *Tractatus* may be considered a part of his philosophy, elucidating his thought and showing what he could not say.

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