

Moral Judgments as Part of What Ethics Must Show

Janyne Sattler, Montréal, Canada

janynesattler@yahoo.com.br

1. Saying and showing, sense and nonsense

The main purpose of this text is to show that expressions such as “Well, you *ought* to want to behave better,” which in the *Lecture on Ethics* Wittgenstein names “absolute judgments of value,” have to be expressed despite the fact that they are not legitimate propositions of language and so cannot be *said*. The reason why this is so is that *showing* what is right or wrong to do is part of a correct and coherent way of living, which in our case means the living of a happy life. To go through all this I’ll first need to talk about some essential distinctions and “definitions” present in both the *Lecture* and in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. I take these works as containing the same conception of language and of Ethics, even if the *Lecture* dates from ten years later than the *Tractatus*.

Let’s begin with the saying and showing distinction. According to Wittgenstein’s own criteria the only language which can be named as such is the one following the radical and restrictive logical conditions of *sense*: a descriptive language which must fit reality positively or negatively and which has bipolarity as one of its main traits. Given these conditions, the fitting in question is only possible between *language* and *facts*. And this is why its propositions are solely empirical and scientific propositions. Everything which does not follow these conditions is therefore *nonsense*, and in this domain we can find Logic, Ethics, Aesthetics, Religion and Philosophy itself. Nowadays it is already clear that the nonsense is not to be considered as mere gibberish and dismissed as such (surely, one major exception is the “resolute reading,” which I’ll however not discuss here), as is also clear that Wittgenstein’s intention was not a positivist one as the Vienna Circle thought it was. On the contrary, Wittgenstein was trying to keep in safe the things he thought were the most important ones, Ethics surely among them all. In doing this Wittgenstein gave Philosophy a new task, the one of clarifying language and sorting out nonsense; so Philosophy has now to be a critical activity and do no more “philosophical propositions” of any kind, as we can read at the paragraph 4.112 of the *Tractatus*. Now we also know that this book had not only a logical purpose, but that the cleaning in question had major ethical reasons: in restricting language to an empirical and scientific language, Wittgenstein also aimed to bring peace to our disturbed and confused philosophical minds struggling to understand what Ethics is all about and writing innumerable (mistaken) moral theories. As Wittgenstein himself told in a letter to Ficker, what we cannot speak is what really mattered to him (Wittgenstein 2001, letter 53.) And as we can see in the *Tractatus*: that about what we cannot speak shows itself and trying to talk about it can’t but bring us damage.

So let’s now try to understand what is this *nonsense* Wittgenstein is trying to dismiss as (logically and morally) damaging. First of all, it doesn’t seem to me to be the nonsense of “logical propositions,” tautologies and contradictions (even if these are equally not legitimate propositions); these show themselves immediately as such and do not lead us to any *illusion of sense*. Wittgenstein is not entirely coherent, but the term he uses to talk about it is *sinnlos*. Things are different when it comes about the term *unsinnig*: its use in the *Tractatus* is deeply related to supposed

“metaphysical-philosophical propositions” attempting to say what is already shown in no matter which “philosophical domain.” This kind of expression is not immediately absurd or tautological but could give us a certain *illusion of sense*. And this is why Wittgenstein’s own example could at first sound as a legitimate proposition: “the question whether the Good is more or less identical than the Beautiful” (*Tractatus*, 4.003.)

The suggestion I would like to advance here is that the nonsense Wittgenstein is dismissing is the one which, when expressed, is *superfluous*. The saying and showing distinction was of the utmost importance exactly because we cannot say what we cannot say (due to the logical conditions of sense), but also because we cannot say what shows itself (and even the logical conditions of sense show themselves in sound language.) And what shows itself is that which is necessary as a condition to that which is sayable. The nonsense Wittgenstein is dismissing could then receive the following “definition”: nonsense is every attempt to say what is *necessarily shown*.

At the paragraph 4.1212 of the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein says that “what *can* be shown *cannot* be said.” All logical (internal) properties of language show themselves in language; the way language works is already given with language itself. In the same manner, the very essence of the world is shown through language: “logic is not a body of doctrine, but a mirror-image of the world” (*Tractatus*, 6.13.) That the world exists is already given with the fact of language itself. And this is necessary, it could not be otherwise. (We can find several other examples concerning this point in the *Tractatus* and in the *Notebooks 1914-1916*; however, I don’t have space here to discuss it longer.)

Now I would like to suggest that this is exactly the same when it comes to Ethics: we cannot have ethical propositions because, as it happens in the case of Logic, it would be *superfluous* to assert something which is necessarily shown.

2. Ethics

How could Ethics be shown? To answer this question we actually need to be sure that for Wittgenstein there’s something like necessary ethical values as there are necessary logical properties of language. And I think we can give a positive answer to this question through Wittgenstein’s own “definition” of what Ethics could be.

He does this in the *Lecture* unfolding Moore’s definition given in the *Principia Ethica*: “Ethics is the general inquiry into what is good.” Wittgenstein then says that we could also think about Ethics as the “inquiry into what is valuable, or, into what is really important, or I could have said Ethics is the inquiry into the meaning of life, or into what makes life worth living, or into the right way of living” (Wittgenstein 1997, p.66.) Certain elements of this definition can also be found in the *Tractatus* but in a more ridiculing manner, as in the paragraphs 6.52 and 6.521 concerning the unspeakable sense of life: *there is* a sense of life which can be attained as a solution to the supposed problems of life, only it cannot be *said*; or as in the paragraphs 6.423 and 6.43 concerning the good and bad will

which will then match with the happy or the unhappy life; or as in the last but one paragraph (6.54) where Wittgenstein says that *there is* a correct way of seeing the world. (I'll not talk about the logical aspect of this correction, exactly because I'm taking an ethical point of view, but I'm aware that both ethical and logical aspects of seeing the world correctly are of importance for what Wittgenstein is aiming at in the *Tractatus*.)

All this cannot be said or put into a moral theory and even the term "definition" employed above is in this sense misleading. But I think Wittgenstein's Ethics is not empty of a content which, as I argue in my thesis, could be qualified as stoical. The point I'm suggesting is not that we can find stoical influences in his works, but that we can understand his Ethics better if we understand it as having several stoical elements and characteristics and that a correct and coherent way of seeing the world must necessarily integrate those traits. So, for instance, the will, the carrier of Ethics, can be good or bad and lead to a correct or an incorrect way of life. In the *Notebooks* the correct way of life is identified with the happy life (entry 30.7.16) and is characterized as a life lived in the present, without fears and hopes, without fear of death, in accordance with the world as it is and in accordance with whatever happens in the world, because in it everything happens by mere chance. The world of facts is neither bad nor good, but these are characteristics of the willing subject which, as a limit, does not appear *in the world*. Still, this happy life should integrate good actions which are in themselves rewarding, as is stated in the paragraph 6.422 of the *Tractatus*:

The first thought in setting up an ethical law of the form "thou shalt..." is: And what if I do not do it? But it is clear that ethics has nothing to do with punishment and reward in the ordinary sense. This question as to the consequences of an action must therefore be irrelevant. At least these consequences will not be events. For there must be something right in that formulation of the question. There must be some sort of ethical reward and ethical punishment, but this must lie in the action itself. (And this is clear also that the reward must be something pleasant, and the punishment something unpleasant.)

Good actions bring the reward in themselves and I think that this can only mean for the willing subject a good consciousness, peace of mind, or in stoical terms, *ataraxia*. Moral correctness is here identified to happiness.

Notice that, in this sense, attaining happiness is nothing more than a matter of *attitude*. It doesn't depend on any external conditions in the world, but only on the good will of the subject. More than that, this positive attitude towards life *is* already happiness. As we can read in the *Notebooks*, "the will is an attitude of the subject to the world" (entry 4.11.16), and this is why the world of the happy person is different from the world of the unhappy: one has to want to be happy and one has to want to lead a correct life.

Taking this all into account, we can now talk about both how Ethics shows itself and how what is shown provides a criterion for action.

I think Ethics can be shown in various ways, through examples and good or bad actions of other people, through literature stories and characters, through the advices of someone of a solid and coherent character, but above all through the way of life we see the happy person living. At the same time, the happy person is the criterion and the guide for both the actions and the attitude one should have towards the world and life.

Surely, none of these things can be said or turned into a moral theory, and this "criterion" could never be a theoretical or scientific one, as Wittgenstein himself puts at the very end of the *Lecture*: "Ethics so far as it springs from the desire to say something about the ultimate meaning of life, the absolute good, the absolute value, can be no science." But the whole of what is shown is *necessary* as a condition to the very fact of life, and to what we conceive as morality (see the entry 21.7.16 in the *Notebooks*). Necessary as it is, all talk about Ethics, pretending to be true or pretending to be philosophical and giving us this very appearance of sense, is *superfluous*. With this superfluity, not only are we breaking the logical rules of language as given by Wittgenstein, but we are still morally in fault: understanding why the silence over "ethical propositions" is required is also part of the correct way of seeing the world. (Surely, that we constantly try to run "against the boundaries of language" is due to that "tendency in the human mind" which Wittgenstein says at the end of the *Lecture* he deeply respects.)

Now, given the necessity of Ethics, there being values and criteria that show themselves, and given the demand of coherency and of right actions for the sake of the happy life, value judgments are not only allowed but actually required as a way of showing. This is how we should understand that passage of the *Lecture* where one is obliged to reply: "Well, you *ought* to want to behave better."

This expression is *obligatory* as a correct reaction to a wrong behavior. This too marks the difference between relative and absolute value: there's nothing wrong in answering "Ah then that's all right" to a bad tennis player who says "I know I'm playing badly but I don't want to play any better"; but things are different concerning bad *moral* actions: "But 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'? Certainly not; he would say 'Well, you *ought* to want to behave better'" (Wittgenstein 1997, p.68.) "Certainly not" is the crucial expression here. The silence concerning someone else's bad behavior is a bad behavior too and would not be in accordance with a correct way of leading life; it would equally be a bad action implying its own punishment.

In this sense, the silence Wittgenstein is demanding over ethical expressions pretending to be propositions of language should in no way lead to an immoral silence when it comes to others' immoral actions. This seems to me to be still in complete accordance with the individual character of Wittgenstein's Ethics, but shows us a step further in the way this Ethics can take others into account.

Literature

- Moore, George Edward 1993 *Principia Ethica*, Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig 2001 "Ficker-Wittgenstein", in: *Tagebücher und Briefe*, Wittgenstein's Nachlass: The Bergen Electronic Edition.
- 1997 "Lecture on Ethics", in: Stephen Darwall, Allan Gibbard and Peter Railton (eds.), *Moral Discourse & Practice*, New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 65-70.
- 1998 *Notebooks 1916-1918*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- 2006 *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, London: Routledge.