

# The Necessity of the Ethical or Why Murder *Must* Be Wrong

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In the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* we find Wittgenstein's first published investigation of ethics. Furthermore, together with the "Lecture on Ethics", this is the last time he makes any longer investigation into this subject, as the Nachlass reveals only a few, scattered remarks on ethical matters after 1929. I will argue that if the ethical sections of the *Tractatus* are seen in connection to the concept of showing, they then reveal a coherent and radical alternative to traditional conceptions of ethics; an alternative which sheds light on the necessity of ethics. It is a standard dilemma in moral philosophy, that on the one hand we want to make absolute claims like 'Murder is always wrong', while on the other we admit that there might be cases when it is possible to give *ethical* reasons to why a particular murder is not wrong, the murder of Adolf Hitler being the standard example.

As everyone is probably well aware of, the interpretation of the *Tractatus* has again become a living area of research over the last decades. This revival has primarily grown out of a need to find a better understanding of the ending of the *Tractatus* where Wittgenstein claims that the reader who really understands him does this by recognizing his sentences as nonsensical (6.54). The traditional explanation of how meaningless sentences can yield a substantial philosophical outcome has been that Wittgenstein uses the concept of *showing* to express how nonsense can point to truths about the world which cannot be stated directly, but out of the recent discussion of this claim a 'new' interpretation of the *Tractatus* has risen according to which Wittgenstein writes that his sentences are meaningless, because he means just that! This means that none of the sentences of the *Tractatus* contain any real or lasting meaning or have any inherent role of their own, but they can be used as provisional helpers in the reader's therapeutic process of overcoming metaphysical illusions.

What is interesting from my point of view is that this new interpretation poses a specific problem for anyone who wishes to work with Wittgensteinian ethics, as most of Wittgenstein's remarks on ethics are found in the *Tractatus* and thus must be just as senseless as the rest of the book. A related problem appears if you for a moment allow yourself to regress and attempt to read the *Tractatus* as having sense, for here ethics is explicitly claimed to be impossible to state. Wittgenstein writes that there are no ethical sentences, and he continues: "Es ist klar, daß sich die Ethik nicht aussprechen läßt." (6.421) This means that any reader wanting to work with Wittgenstein's utterances on ethics faces a double demand for silence: The first rises from the fact that if you want to free yourself from metaphysical illusions, you must see that the sections on ethics in the *Tractatus* are just sheer nonsense. And if you cheat and try to do this anyway a second demand for silence arises as Wittgenstein works with an idea of ethics that doesn't admit of the ethical being uttered at all.

I think the best way to handle both of these problems is to focus on what I find to be the two least convincing aspects of the new interpretation. First, even though I find it well-argued that Wittgenstein only allows for an austere concept of nonsense, I simply do not think that he is completely consistent when claiming that all of the *Tractatus* is nonsensical, both because this does not fit

well with the way in which he continued to work in many of the areas treated in the *Tractatus* and because many of his remarks seem to be straightforwardly meaningful by any standards. Secondly, when the new reading claims that Wittgenstein dismisses any concept of *showing* I think this is based on a wrong interpretation of the concept. Showing is thought to concern cases where meaningless utterances are used to refer to something *outside* language and the world, that is, attempts to use nonsense to get a grip of ineffable truths; the very thing that Wittgenstein wants to liberate us from by means of the *Tractatus*.<sup>1</sup> But Wittgenstein never ties the concept of showing to ineffable truths as it only occurs in connection with tautologies, contradictions or straightforwardly meaningful sentences, something which makes it possible to combine acceptance of the fact that the *Tractatus* only offers an austere concept of nonsense with a new interpretation of showing.

Wittgenstein uses showing to denote the way the *conditions* of a structure stand out in its use, for example the way in which the conditions of meaning stand out in meaningful sentences, and it is introduced in an intimate connection to saying: "Der Satz zeigt, wie es sich verhält, wenn er wahr ist. Und er sagt, dass es sich so verhält." (4.022) Even though logic and language are the cases where Wittgenstein primarily uses the concept of showing, it is also used in other connections to bring out the unutterability of the particular conditions within a particular area. "Wenn es ein Kausalitätsgesetz gäbe, so könnte es lauten: 'Es gibt Naturgesetze'. Aber freilich kann man das nicht sagen: es zeigt sich," (6.36) When we do work in the natural sciences, causality shows itself, but within the natural sciences we are not able to state the very existence of causality. In general, what shows itself is thus the conditions for a specific type of descriptions of the world, the way a specific structure manifests itself in the use of particular descriptions. (See 6.124) What is shown is not something *in* the world, but something that shapes our dealings with the world, and as such it applies to the world with necessity. This necessity does not mean that one has to regard for example logic or causality as platonic or autonomous, as these conditions can be viewed as intimately tied to the practical dimension of mastering a language. If you view logic in this way, the necessity of logic comes from its being a *practical ability*, which we have to possess in order to speak about the world.<sup>2</sup>

Following my first objection to the new reading of the *Tractatus* I can return to the sections on ethics, where it is presented as a part of the category 'das Mystische' which is characterised by its *showing* itself (6.522). This indicates that ethics, in some way or other, should also be seen as a condition for descriptions or meaning, and the analogy between logic and ethics is emphasised both by the fact that ethics, like logic, is referred to as *transcendental*, and that ethics, through the concept of the mystical, is later tied to the fact that the world *is* (6.432). In 6.41 Wittgenstein connects ethics to the meaning of the world, which makes

<sup>1</sup> Diamond thinks a central part of Wittgenstein's project is to make us *give up* "the attempt to represent to ourselves something in reality ... as not sayable but shown by the sentence." (Diamond 1991, 184). See also Conant 2000, 196.

<sup>2</sup> This interpretation of logic in the *Tractatus* is very close to the one given in McGinn 2001.

it possible to argue that ethics in the *Tractatus* is a condition of the description of the world seen as a meaningful whole.<sup>3</sup> Or, to put it in another way, what Wittgenstein calls *die Ethik* is not itself a fact but rather what constitutes the possibility of relating to the world as meaningful or valuable, and thus at the same time the condition for our everyday morality or judgements about value.

As the condition for value and morality ethics must be necessary and I want to argue that this necessity shows in our attitude to particular expressions within ethics. It is thus possible to see what Bernard Williams calls the 'thin' moral concepts – like right, wrong, virtuous etc. – as pointers which reveal the structure of ethics. We are not able to give any further reasons for the fact one ought to do the *right* actions, and this is so because the concept 'right' simply shows a part of the rules of ethics; it is a defining, not a describing term. Parallel to this, whole sentences can function as a kind of tautologies by showing necessary ethical connections, as for example the sentence 'Murder is wrong'. I want to claim that according to a Tractarian view of ethics, a sentence like this has no meaning when seen isolated from any context, it describes nothing, but it shows the limit of our ethical understanding, as it is a rule which necessarily applies within morality. It is possible to claim that anyone who does not understand this sentence is unable to participate in an ethical discourse, unable to have an ethical outlook on the world. The necessary character of sentences like 'Murder is wrong' also explain why we want to hold on to them no matter what, even when we are confronted with what we ourselves agree are counterexamples. We are afraid that acting against a sentence like 'murder is wrong' would compromise its status as rule, and therefore change the very system of ethics and our entire moral outlook. I think this is what Wittgenstein is trying to express in the following quote: "Wenn das gute oder böse Wollen die Welt ändert, so kann es nur die Grenzen der Welt ändern, nicht die Tatsachen; nicht das, was durch die Sprache ausgedrückt werden kann. Kurz, die Welt muß dann dadurch überhaupt eine andere werden." (6.43)

When we treat some sentences as definitions or ethical tautologies we thus determine the ethical conditions for any dealings with value. To see this clearly is at the same time to see that the ethical must be constituted by us, it cannot be given any external justification, and we cannot cite any more fundamental reasons to justify the ethical, there is simply nothing more to say on the matter. The silence of Wittgenstein's ethics is thus a silence which shows us that we alone have the absolute responsibility for the structure of our ethical worldview, as well as for what we actually do. The Danish philosopher K.E. Løgstrup also notes the connection between silence and the radical responsibility connected with the ethical. Working within a phenomenological framework, he thinks that the very existence of life, of other people, gives rise to a one-sided ethical demand which is "silent in the rather dramatic sense that any formulation of it as an explicit demand is unavoidably a misrepresentation of it. 'What is demanded is that the demand should not be necessary.'" (Fink 2004, 6)<sup>4</sup> Because the ethical in both Wittgenstein and Løgstrup is completely dependent on us, and because the demand it makes on us is absolute, it cannot be stated.

The question arising from Wittgenstein's claim that there are no ethical sentences was whether we are then forced

to employ meaningless propositions in our dealings with ethics. I think the Tractarian conception of ethics shows that the answer to the question is twofold. First, when it comes to the attempt to say the ethical, the attempt to state the very existence of the ethical structure, I believe that the answer is in the affirmative. We can demonstrate or show this existence, but we cannot say it. This also sheds light on a comment from "A Lecture on Ethics", where Wittgenstein says that the attempt "to write or talk ethics ... was to run against the boundaries of our language" (Wittgenstein 1965, 12). But if we, secondly, look at how values or moral actions unfold on the background of the ethical, these are in no way nonsensical. The existence of the ethical shows in our meaningful actions, in the meaningful conversations we have about doing this or that, in our meaningful reactions to other people's actions or to the world as such, et cetera.<sup>5</sup> It is therefore important to distinguish between the general and metaphysical question of the existence of ethics and the question of how morality and value unfolds in the meaningful lives we, hopefully, all live – and philosophy is the activity which brings us an understanding of this difference.

In the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein wants to show that it is an essential condition of our world that we act ethically towards it, perceive it in terms of good and evil. There is no escaping the ethical, it is given together with the way we experience the world as a form of natural or pre-conventional normativity.<sup>6</sup> But it is of vital importance for Wittgenstein that the transcendental necessity of the ethical in itself says nothing about what we actually do find good or evil, or what we ought to find good and evil. Wittgenstein thinks philosophy should shed light on how our world is structured by various norms, ethical and others, but as far as ethics goes, it can say nothing about what these ought to consist of. The investigation of ethics in the *Tractatus* therefore in no way determines the content of a normative ethics.

## Literature

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<sup>3</sup> That ethics is an investigation of the meaning of life is one of the synonyms presented in the beginning of Wittgenstein's "A Lecture on Ethics".

<sup>4</sup> The last line is a quote from Løgstrup: *The Ethical Demand*, p.146.

<sup>5</sup> I thus disagree with Diamond's interpretation, according to which Wittgenstein says that *all* utterances connecting to morality or value are nonsensical. See Diamond 2000.

<sup>6</sup> This is another point of similarity with Løgstrup, see Fink 2004 p.8.