The Paradox of Ethics — ‘It leaves everything as it is’

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[...] 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.

Ludwig Wittgenstein, LE

This essay attempts to approach Wittgenstein’s ethics with reference to its different facets. Perhaps, it is better to say with Wittgenstein that “[t]he same or almost the same points were always being approached afresh from different directions, and new sketches made.” (PI Preface). The aim is not only to trace Wittgenstein’s footsteps by walking through the “landscape of ethics”, but at least, too, to sketch out the radical nature of Wittgenstein’s ethics. In the first part of the enquiry, the focus is on the question of the ultimate justification for ethical theories and their epistemological truth; and, by contrast, in the second part, emphasis shifts to the question of the connection of ethics and mystics. Part three explores whether Wittgenstein’s ethics is metaphysics. In the fourth and final part, the relationship of ethics and religion is traced, to conclude with an outline summary of those special qualities, as observed in Wittgenstein’s ethics.

I. Against Universal Ethics

“What is good is also divine. Queer as it sounds, that sums up my ethics. Only something supernatural can express the Supernatural”, Wittgenstein wrote in Culture and Value (CV 1929, 3). In this instance, ethics is almost placed on a religious plane, a fact that already emerges from
Wittgenstein’s reflections in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, namely, that on the basis of the limit of language, it makes no sense to refer actions to ethical dimensions.

This project already assumes a specific understanding of ethics, based as it is, neither on an academic conception of individual moral directives for action, nor on a theoretically devised scheme, but on an ethical impulse. That impulse is dismissed by ethics as a normative theory or doctrine that, nonetheless, “by clarifying the status of ethical propositions, expresses the view that human action is not to be philosophically justified [...]”, or qualified, but rather to be taken as given” (Kroß 1993, 128). In Wittgenstein’s late philosophy, this supposed paradox dissolves into a myriad of possible ways of acting, into the plurality and the unforeseen nature of human speech acts, that is, into the multiplicity of the grammar in its expressions of “good” and “evil”.

The rejection of ethics as a formative doctrine or theory means that the ethical dimension is treated as transcendental, as it were, neither in need of an ultimate justification, nor with the capacity to make such a thing possible. For Wittgenstein, an ethical theory or doctrine can only be nonsensical. In the *Tractatus*, he justifies that view philosophically in the elucidations for the proposition 6.4 “All propositions are of equal value”, by stating:

So it is impossible for there to be propositions of ethics. Propositions can express nothing that is higher. It is clear that ethics cannot be put into words. Ethics is transcendental. (Ethics and aesthetics are one and the same).

(ThP 6.42, 6.421)

Moreover, the ethical dimension is extracted from the field of facets that are described in words. That leads to the paradox that acting in the world cannot contain any statements on the ethical quality of action, although the ethical dimension is meant to be linked to the sense of action and the actor’s status. This aspect can be explained by the fact that the same action can be performed by any number of different “selves”, that is to say, the same action can be described at one time as “evil” and at another as “good”.

The significance of the “self” for ethics is particularly clear in Wittgenstein’s *Lecture on Ethics*. Wittgenstein emphasizes to Friedrich Wais-
mann that “[a]t the end of my lecture on ethics, I spoke in the first person”. This is “quite essential”, since “I can only appear as a person speaking for myself.” (LE, 16)

In his lecture, Wittgenstein uses the term ethics in a sense that, on his conviction, also incorporates the greater part of aesthetics. As already noted in the Tractatus, he repeats the expression that “[t]here are no propositions which, in any absolute sense, are sublime, important, or trivial” (LE, 6), but adds by way of illustration that he meant “that a state of mind, so far as we mean by that a fact which we can describe, is in no ethical sense good or bad.” (LE, 6) Here, the aforementioned plurality of “selves” is explicitly reflected in the possibility to describe the same ways of acting as “evil” and “good”.

Wittgenstein’s Lecture on Ethics is further founded on the consideration that the ability to define ethical propositions requires a theory of ethics. Yet this would only be possible, if there were a criterion or measure to prove the propositions as either suitable or unsuitable, as possible or impossible. To evaluate such propositions, they would have to be part of a system of self-referential statements, for only that kind of system can demonstrate a criterion with a logically justifiable basis. Hence, propositions only make sense, if they make statements about facts in the world. As in the natural sciences, a theory would have to describe these facts in propositions that are systematically ordered (Kroß 1993, 138). From this departure, Wittgenstein forces the destruction of the philosophical idea of a book of the universe, an idea that leads in his late philosophy to the recognition of a multiplicity of behavioural patterns, the plurality and heterogeneity of life forms. The lecture illustrates this as follows:

And now I must say that if I contemplate what Ethics really would have to be if there were such a science, this result seems to me quite obvious. 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. Our words used as we use them in science, are
vessels capable only of containing and conveying meaning and sense, *natural* meaning and sense. Ethics, if it is anything, is supernatural and our words will only express facts [...]. I said that so far as facts and propositions are concerned there is only relative value and relative good, right, etc. (LE, 7)

Wittgenstein confirms by that flow of thoughts what he already called the transcendental nature of the ethical in his *Tractatus*: namely, that the ethical dimension is only revealed by its exclusion from articulate expression, that is, the absence of a state of affairs that can be described. For him, in our world of facts and states of affairs, no “absolutely right road” can be recognized with the coercive power of a judge, as it were, an absolute ethical power of creating acts and evaluating actions. He writes:

Now let us see what we could possibly mean by the expression, “the absolutely right road.” I think it would be the road which *everybody* on seeing it would, *with logical necessity*, have to go, or be ashamed for not going. And similarly the *absolute good*, if it is a describable state of affairs, would be one which everybody, independent of his tastes and inclinations, would *necessarily* bring about or feel guilty for not bringing about. And I want to say that such a state of affairs is a chimera. No state of affairs has, in itself, what I would like to call the coercive power of an absolute judge. (LE, 7)

Even if it were possible to imagine an absolute and normative ethics as given, it could not possess the coercion of an absolute judge, for that power would still remain an indescribable state of affairs. A consensus in the definitions would obtain, yet it does not follow that this consensus would extend to the judgements. By rejecting the “the coercive power of an absolute judge” Wittgenstein destroys the universality claim of ethics, by conceding that the decision whether the demand to take “the absolutely right road” or the *de facto* remark “This is the absolute good!”, accepted by individuals, exclusively depends on an individual’s practical approach. Since every demand to adopt a certain way of seeing things always implicitly presupposes that there is another possibility, every idea of an absolute is a delusion.

Despite this sobering analysis, Wittgenstein recognizes a “drive” that is manifested in man’s continued attempt to create ethical theories. These ethical theories are interpretations of human actions. That the number of such theories seems infinite is to be explained by humanity’s wish to
undertake such interpretations. In his early works, particularly the Tractatus, Wittgenstein attempted to research this wish by devising an objective philosophy. He confines his belonging to this life form, by writing:

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. 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. (LE, 11f.)

Whilst Wittgenstein’s late philosophy, on the one hand, destroys the idea of a higher or “absolute judge” and justifies the inaccessibility of theories in ethics, his reflections permit, on the other hand, the definition of “self” as hanging ethics on the peg of “subject/self” and not linking that connection to the prevailing state of affairs in the world. By using the phraseology “saying I” in his Lecture on Ethics, Wittgenstein makes it a fait accompli that demonstrates certainty; and, in that sense, the point is reached where ethics and religion unavoidably collide and, for the “I-saying” Wittgenstein, become one. In terms of ethics, the “self” obtains a special significance.

In that way, the quest for an ultimate reason, as well as the definition of the highest aims in human life make no sense in Wittgenstein’s context of an ethical theory. His philosophical investigations remain devoid of ethical determinants for human action and without a final justification, since instead of a unified, ultimate truth, what emerges is a plurality and heterogeneity of life forms and a respective variety of behaviours that could contain a multiplicity of truths. In this regard, Wittgenstein’s late philosophy could also be described as “linguistic relativism” (cf. Machan 1981, 359), in which case, however:
Wittgenstein’s relativism, used as an instrument of critical objection to the metaphysical content of epistemology, is itself not motivated by epistemological factors; its basis is precisely not a sceptical dismissal of the possibility of statements claiming truth, but rather the rejection of that truth claim, as it could be guaranteed with the assistance of the theory of knowledge (Kroß 1993, 145).

Ethics can neither be an ultimate source of reason, nor a guarantee for epistemological truth. As a matter of course, ethical determinants for human actions remain without a conclusive justification.

Now the question arises as to what motivates an individual to take ethical action, in view of the lack of conclusive justification, or guaranteed truth for the correct way of acting. In the following section, attention is focused on whether the mystical dimension substitutes for Wittgenstein the epistemological motivation for ethical action.

II. The Mystical Dimension of Ethics

At the end of 1919, Wittgenstein wrote to Ludwig von Ficker, the editor of the periodical *Der Brenner* (“The Torch”) about the *Tractatus*:

You see, I am quite sure that you won’t get all that much out of reading it. Because you won’t understand it; its subject-matter will seem quite alien to you. But it isn’t really alien to you, because the book’s point is an ethical one. I once meant to include in the preface a sentence which is not in fact there now but which I will write out for you here, because it will perhaps be a key to the work for you. What I meant to write, then, was this: My work consists of two parts: the one presented here plus all I have not written. And it is precisely this second part that is the important one. My book draws limits to the sphere of the ethical from the inside as it were, and I am convinced that this is the ONLY rigorous way of drawing those limits. In short, I believe that where many others today are just gassing, I have managed in my book to put everything firmly into place by being silent about it (von Wright 1982, 83).

The tension at the core of the book manifests itself in the concept of “showing” that Wittgenstein uses to expose the illusion of an intrinsic link between the ethical *obiter dicta* and the coherent logical and empirical philosophy of language that forms the overwhelming part of the book.
Wittgenstein therefore distinguishes between showing in the sense of representational language and showing, to “climb up the ladder” to a right view of the world. The former can be shown with a symbolic system, whilst the latter cannot be shown, but must reveal itself. Wittgenstein identifies this with the mystical: “There are, indeed, things that cannot be put into words. They make themselves manifest. They are what is mystical.” (TLP 6.522)

The content of the treatise reveals itself to the reader, therefore, not only by its explicit meaning, but also by what is not said. What is essential here, that is, ethics, only commences beyond the limits of language, namely, at the point where silence begins. The limits of language are drawn within language. All other aspects (such as ethics, aesthetics, religion) do not belong to the sphere of articulate sense. These things remain inarticulate and can only be shown by the mystical realm.

The difference between “showing” and “showing itself” corresponds to the distinction between the representational language of theoretical philosophy and the practical drive, to discover an essential way of thinking and means of confronting the deepest human concerns of life. These aspects, in turn, do not concern representable and contingent facts, but necessities of human life, such as the question of eternity, of “good” and “evil”, of the will that changes the world etc. A key aspect of the Tractatus is the ethical deed, even though this viewpoint is worked out in a theoretical work that rather contradicts these formal reflections (cf. Edwards 1982, 27). The medium is contrary to these thoughts, as it cannot be assumed that the underlying insights into the nature of subjectivity, of ethics, and religion could be articulated by logical analysis. Rather, these aspects show themselves in the form of a philosophy that runs against the limits of language and so endeavours to say what cannot be said. For that reason, it is extremely difficult to identify the link of logic and ontology in the treatise and the transcendental insights that Wittgenstein viewed as the real content of the book (cf. Stern 1995, 70-72). Hence, Wittgenstein also promises encouragingly that those who are inclined to understand him are to be richly rewarded by “seeing the world aright”: 
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. (TLP 6.54)

Naturally, this recognition cannot be verified, since it lies beyond what is the knowable. A person, having surmounted the propositions of the *Tractatus* and having “seen the world rightly” will no longer try to express their recognition, knowing, as he does, that it cannot be expressed (cf. Anscombe 1971, 171). All questions of human life and ethical values are thereby effectively separated from the sphere of scientific research. Hence, it can be argued, that everything that is a matter of human concern — whether ethics, aesthetics, religion or even philosophy itself — fall into the category of the mystical for Wittgenstein. Nevertheless, at the very least, a general knowledge can be derived from the *Tractatus*, namely, that whatever can be known does not exhaust reality, that there are things in life that cannot be discussed (cf. Maslow 1961, 162).

In a strict sense of experience, one cannot communicate exactly what one experiences. This is not to say that Wittgenstein rules out communal feelings, or communication of impressions. We can exchange impressions and values, we can even partake of the same moral values, we can follow the intuitions of other people — yet, all this, only to a certain degree, given that we cannot experience exactly the same sense data and content.

The meaning of life cannot exist within the boundaries of the world, but rather: “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. [...]” (TLP 6.41) However, Wittgenstein advocates the thesis that we can have intuitions whose transcendental character cannot be put into words and is based on mystical feelings, whose reality is recognized, as it were, beyond space and time. This supra-natural element is for Wittgenstein “[t]he solution of the riddle in space and time that lies outside space and time.” (TLP 6.4312) And further:
The solution of the problem of life is seen in the vanishing of the problem. (Is not the reason why those who have found after a long period of doubt that the sense of life became clear to them have then been unable to say what constituted that sense?) (TLP 6.521)

By reaching such knowledge of the problem of life that drives us to “climb up the ladder”, then the problem as such disappears. It fades, since it must fade, since the solution to the problem of life lies precisely in its disappearance. It is questionable, whether the disappearance is the reason why the solution cannot be spoken, or whether the solution, the “climbing of the ladder”, or the disappearance, from the outset, represent, an expressible experience. Even Wittgenstein cannot give an answer to the question, although he concludes that precisely this incommunicable dimension must amount to what we call mystical and that in this respect what cannot be put into words is shown.

For Wittgenstein, the answer to the question of the meaning of life resides in oneself. Attention has to be directed to oneself since the power to change the world only lies in the power to change one’s own attitude toward the world. This power is a mystical force and, as such, mystic becomes the last bastion of things in life that mean the most to us: namely, all ethical conceptions, all things that we cannot express and that are nonetheless of fundamental significance for us (cf. Maslow 1961, 160). Hence, the ethical intent of the Tractatus does not appear as an arbitrary by-product of Wittgenstein’s philosophy of language and thought. Since “[l]ogic is not a body of doctrine, but a mirror-image of the world” (TLP 6.13), the treatise’s logic and the language philosophy only proves the philosophical incompetence of atomistic, logical-empirical philosophy of language. Because of this, it shows that silence can be the only medium for the revelation of the mystical force. Silence is the outcome of recognition for those who “throw away the ladder after [they have] climbed up it.”

As a consequence, the subject matter of ethics, for Wittgenstein, significantly differs from what most people think ethics is about. Neither theorizing about certain behaviour patterns, nor researching the problems of behaviour amongst others can be at the heart of ethical enquiries. Rather, the fundamental question in ethics must be a preoccu-
pation with being-in-the-world and the meaning of life. Individuals can only know how to live in this world by understanding the meaning of being-in-the-world and life itself. It is crucial to distinguish these widely diverging conceptions of ethics. To Wittgenstein, ethics has no special task in discourse amongst different people, whilst we treat ethics as a whole as a field of inter-subjective discourse (cf. Diamond 1991, 9).

Wittgenstein’s conception of ethics is scarcely to be distinguished from a religion, as each discipline is concerned with the meaning of the world and life. That Wittgenstein says nothing about how to live one’s life, is justified by his theory that “[t]he world is independent of my will” (TLP 6.373). This rules out being judged for doing something deliberatively, and as a consequence our usual understanding of the ethical cannot any longer be applied. According to TLP 6.423, “[i]t is impossible to speak about the will […] as […] the subject of ethical attributes”, and “the good or the bad exercise of the will […] can alter only the limits of the world, not the facts […]” (TLP 6.43). Ethical significance can only be traced back to the ethical will, not to the world at large. The ethical will alters the limits of the world by changing the attitude one takes toward the world. In that way, the ethical will also changes the perception of how one sees the world. Only oneself can change the limits of one’s world by directing one’s attention to the ethical will, without which it is impossible to allow the development of good will. This attention can only be experienced in the mystical, where the meaning of life can be shown. The significance of ethics, which cannot be put into words, can only lie in a praxeological context, that is to say, in the way in which the individual’s attitude to the world is to be changed and not his basic conviction, in order to learn how to lead one’s life and give it meaning (cf. Edwards 1982, chapt. 2).

The ladder that we are meant to climb up and then throw away in the Tractatus helps us to achieve a view of the world sub specie aeternitatis. At this point, the mystical is shown. The meaning of life is to be revealed in the mystical realm that is devoid of space and time. In the timelessness of the experience of an event, timelessness means the same as eternity. In this sense, a view of the world and of the individual life can be obtained sub specie aeternitatis. This holds true “if we take eternity to mean not
infinite temporal duration but timelessness, then eternal life belongs to those who live in the present." (TLP 6.4311)

For Wittgenstein, ethics is an instrument for giving meaning to one’s own being-in-the-world. Since this meaning can only be achieved through one’s own ethical will, every kind of ethical impulse is based on a mystical experience, or on an experience of showing. To assess the importance of the mystical dimension for Wittgenstein’s ethics, it is necessary to elaborate the extent to which the mystical corresponds to the metaphysical dimension, or whether, using mysticism as a prop, Wittgenstein merely wants to convey a metaphysical theory of meaning that lies outside of our experience.

III. Ethical Mysticism without Metaphysics

For Wittgenstein, there is a human “drive”, to devise a “picture of the world” that gives life meaning and helps to explain the world. That is, so to speak, to provide a kind of certainty on the basic questions of our existence. This “drive” in human beings corresponds to a “metaphysical need”, a striving for ultimate truths and securities.

That anything exists at all, this fact carries the great fascination that preoccupies Wittgenstein. The sudden meaningfulness of this fact is a known experience in the sphere of mystics and it again occurs as such in Wittgenstein’s work. Already in the Tractatus logico-philosophicus, this “basic question of metaphysics”, that is, why anything exists at all, is described as mystical: “It is not how things are in the world that is mystical, but that it exists.” (TLP 6.44)

However, although Wittgenstein pursues the question of existence for his entire life, he never touches the secret nature of “the basic question of metaphysics.” He does not even try to clarify this question. Already in proposition 6.5 of the Tractatus, Wittgenstein explains why he will never confront this “basic question”, even if the underlying experience, namely the sense of wonder about existence, is extremely significant: When the answer cannot be put into words, neither can the question be put into words.
The riddle does not exist.
If a question can be framed at all, it is also possible to answer it. (TLP 6.5)

Wittgenstein’s mysticism is not metaphysical, since it is not about a theory of the “meaning of the world” outside of our experiences. For him, the ethical questions of philosophy as doctrine belong to metaphysics, his own project of ethics as activity, or the quest for the ethical life is, however, post-metaphysical, so to speak, not related to the experience of mystical knowledge and not appealing to metaphysics to assist with his answers. Mystics can neither be expressed in statements, nor can it name any sort of truth. “True” or “false” are not relevant categories to mystics. The fact that he tolerates the clarification of the “question of the meaning of being”, the sense of wonder about existence, does not stop him from producing a critique of metaphysical questions and answers.

Wittgenstein exposed the fact, in a paradoxical way and by negation, that every natural language is underpinned by its own ontology. Every “natural” or not “formalized” language must possess a particular metaphysics that is identical with its “meta-language”. For Wittgenstein, philosophical propositions are not within the limits of language, defined again by its inner structure. Rather, philosophical propositions, that is, propositions of metaphysics, are inevitably and incurably speculative, since they transcend the limits of language and also the limits of the world, because: “The limits of my language mean the limits of my world.” (TLP 5.6)

Since, however, according to TLP 5.61 “logic pervades the world” and “the limits of the world are also its limits”, there can be no legitimate metaphysics, since there is, next to the sphere of substantive empirical propositions and that of “nonsensical” propositions of logic, no further legitimate sphere. As in TLP 4.022, a proposition shows “how things stand if it is true. And it says that they do so stand.” For that reason, a proposition in which a state of affairs is expressed, not only contains “the truth-possibilities of a proposition” (TLP 4.431), but at the same time, it is “the expression of its truth conditions” (TLP 4.431). That is to say that the proposition is an expression for the fact that whoever expresses it holds the view that his truth conditions are
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fulfilled. In any case, “no proposition can make a statement about itself, because a propositional sign cannot be contained in itself [...]” (TLP 3.332). Thus, it is virtually inherent to the essence of metaphysics that “the distinction between the factual and conceptual investigations” is blurred and at the same time it is the task of “philosophical investigations” to make this explicit. In Zettel, it is stated: “Philosophical investigations: conceptual investigations. The essential thing about metaphysics: it obliterates the distinction between factual and conceptual investigations.” (Z 458)

Nevertheless, in the Tractatus, Wittgenstein almost commits the same mistake of intending to state something metaphysical, that is, to mean to say something that cannot be said in words. As Wittgenstein’s philosophy of language endeavours to say things that cannot be put into words in an empirical way, he finally has to end the project of explaining the world — yet not without satisfying his own “longing for the transcendent” (CV 1931, 15), by his “propositions — as steps — to climb up beyond them” (TLP 6.54). Only by “throwing away the ladder” does Wittgenstein succeed in not sliding into the metaphysical realm. The turnabout at the last minute leaves the “transcendent”, that is to say, the view of the world sub specie aeternitatis, in the sense of proposition 6.522 of the Tractatus, as “things that cannot be put into words” and therefore as “mystical”.

Wittgenstein’s thought is a constant reversal at the limits of traditional philosophy:

Wittgenstein attempts to bring a philosophy to an end, namely, philosophy as doctrine, of which it is often said that it is ‘the’ philosophy. His thought makes it possible to observe the history of this philosophy from the periphery, as the history of wonder about the existence of the world and of the need to gain clarity about this astonishing world and the role of human beings within it. (Kroß 1993, 181)

His work stands for a philosophical description, instead of attempts at metaphysical elucidation. His philosophy consists of a variety of philosophical perspectives and standpoints. It wards off metaphysics that presents itself as being rational. Wittgenstein’s critique of metaphysics also showed two points at the same time:
Firstly, as theoretical options, scepticism and relativism are still based on false, quasi-metaphysical ideas of what we can actually know. Secondly, metaphysical pictures already place a burden on many of our everyday notions, even leading astray in “small” cognitive situations. We can become objectivizing metaphysicians everywhere, even against our will, when understanding any sensible action. (Rentsch 1999, 144)

The question of “being itself” and the end of “metaphysics” are one and the same. “The mystical” that Wittgenstein speaks of is not a way of being, but rather a situatively chosen life form. The “mystical” is therefore not a “metaphysical zero point”. From this point, a new attack against metaphysics as striving for the “meaning of being” cannot commence Sisyphus-like. Rather, it is an enduring end to philosophy as doctrine and a beginning of a philosophy as activity. Human language practice is ahead of every philosophy as doctrine, so that it cannot be overtaken. Hence, ‘the’ philosophy recedes behind life. What emerges instead of systematic observation is “differential observation of human life and practice.” (Kroß 1993, 65).

In the Tractatus, “sense” is used as a terminus technicus. To say that a statement makes “sense” is the same as the observation that the statement relates to objects in the world and that it is contingent. By the same token, to say that a statement is nonsense is only to state that it is not about such a statement. The category “nonsense” largely serves in the Tractatus to differentiate and is not a tool of critique. Wittgenstein’s concept of “nonsense” bears no relation whatsoever to the everyday use of the term. In this regard, it follows that the view of philosophical statements as nonsense is not synonymous with their absurdity or nonsensical character. Because it is impossible to make sense about what ultimately is to be “reasoned”, it can only be shown. Since

[...] the “riddle of existence” (is) [...] no riddle like any other that might be dissolved into some other methods still available today. Rather, it is a riddle that is essentially without resolution. If it belongs to the conditions of suitability for a question that the possibility of an answer cannot be excluded on principle, then “the basic question” is, in this sense, at least “nonsensical”. (Birnbacher 1992, 135)
Metaphysical projects, for Wittgenstein, are “nonsense”, since they lead beyond the sphere of “meaningful statement”. However, this nonsense is, for many people, a highly meaningful nonsense that is to be respected; and, hence, metaphysics is not primarily a “nonsensical” chaos, but rather an attempt to domesticate that entity. Wittgenstein undertakes an enduring destruction of metaphysics, since after its fall, that is, the release from a “generality that is already to be assumed”, there is no longer any danger of falling back into it, given that the destruction of the dogma of generality “creates a situation of openness and also contributes to a tentative new order.” (Kroß 1999, 186).

The question of sense is a basic characteristic of ethical questioning and also forms the basis of the desire for metaphysics. Wittgenstein shows, however, that ethics must not also be understood metaphysically. The “mystical” that Wittgenstein proposes as the ethics of the individual is not a way of being but a life form. In that sense, it is false to claim, as some do, that Wittgenstein even intensifies the metaphysical interpretation of ethics, by associating ethics with mystical and religious experiences. Neither mystics nor religion are based on a “generality that is already existing”, a viewpoint that is rather a criterion of metaphysics.

In the following section, emphasis is on the link of religious and ethical language in Wittgenstein’s view.

IV. Ethical Feeling and Religion

Wittgenstein’s ethics is rooted in “wonder about existence”, in the fascination “that something exists at all.” An ethical feeling results out of the wonder of being-in-the-world that is equally the basis of religion and aesthetics that also emerge from the mystical that manifests itself in a world-view sub specie aeternitatis. In the diaries, the following entry occurs: “The work of art is the object seen sub specie aeternitatis; and the good life is the world seen sub specie aeternitatis. This is the connexion between art and ethics.” (NB, 7.10.16) The connection of ethics, religion and aesthetics is especially striking in Wittgenstein’s work. Each element is based on the experience of an event that cannot be articulated in the form of logical-empirical propositions. Rather, it is an
event of mystical character, in the sense of an observation of the world following from outside and, as a result, leading to a change of perspective on the world.

Ethics and religion are attempts to draw a sense out of life and they are nothing other than answers to the “astonishment about the existence of the world”. In this context, it is understandable that individuals lend meaning to their being in the world, by claiming to know their action as ethically considered and often being able to understand their existence as part of a religious whole. For Wittgenstein, this is nothing more than “significant” nonsense, even if it is to be respected. Neither ethics nor religion requires language for belief, since neither can be rejected as “true” or “false”. They are expressions of a striving for meaning, a hope for the experience of an event that shows itself-in-the-world in the form of mystical knowledge. The knowledge lies, namely, in the event that can exclusively be perceived as an unspeakable power of the mystical. It could also be said with Wittgenstein that we can name this “[...] meaning of life, that is, the meaning of the world [...] God.” (NB, 11.6.16) Such mystical experiences must necessarily be experienced by the self, for “propositions about God, good and evil, the meaning of life etc. are false propositions and these themes therefore point to the sphere that cannot be put into words, just like all propositions that show no facts.” (Weiberg 1998, 45) Statements about God and religion therefore lose every meaning that they cannot convey in words. The meaning of belief is not discredited in that way, for “How things are in the world is a matter of complete indifference for what is higher. God does not reveal himself in the world.” (TLP 6.432)

The rule of silence also holds true for ethics (as well as aesthetics), namely, the assertion of inexpressibility “in the limits of language that are the limits of our world”. Here, the religious aspect of ethics comes to light, for the definition of what we call God is one and the same as striving for an ethical life, for a meaning in life and in the world that manifests nothing other than a life in the sense of God.

Yet how does an individual arrive at faith? Wittgenstein can imagine a number of possibilities: faith can be accepted through education. In this case, faith is only a part of what a child learns to believe, since “the
child learns to believe a host of things. I.e. it learns to act according to these beliefs.” (OC, 144) It is also plausible that individuals are convinced of the correctness of an intuition by simplicity or symmetry (cf. OC, 92). Furthermore, there is the conscious possibility of deciding for a particular system:

It strikes me that a religious belief could only be something like a passionate commitment to a system of reference. Hence, although it’s belief, it’s really a way of living, or a way of assessing life. (CV 1947, 64)

This turn towards religion can be seen as synonymous with the turn to a world-view or a particular world image, since whatever is perceived as truth, after the decision, is independent of the system of values that one decides to support. For that reason, in any system of values, it is possible to see those respective foundations of the house on which one builds one’s convictions: “I have arrived at the rock bottom of my convictions. And one might almost say that these foundation-walls are carried by the whole house.” (OC, 248)

Wittgenstein is not critical of faith, but rather of the attempt to justify faith scientifically. It should not be judged, whether someone believes in religious pictures and symbols or not, but an attempt to prove the existence of God by the means of reason appears dishonest. Shortly before his death, Wittgenstein writes:

A proof of God’s existence ought really to be something by means of which one could convince oneself that God exists. But I think that what believers who have furnished such proof wanted to do is give their ‘belief’ an intellectual analysis and foundation, although they themselves would never have come to believe as a result of such proofs. (CV 1950, 85)

To persuade others of the existence of God with proofs, as supplied by the Church and believers, is an attempt doomed to failure. In Wittgenstein’s view, this matter is known to Christianity, since it is based on “historical narratives”:

Christianity is not based on a historical truth; rather, it offers us a (historical) narrative and says: now believe! But not, believe this narrative with the belief appropriate to a historical narrative, rather: believe, through thick and thin, which you can do only as the result of a life. Here you have a narrative,
Wittgenstein’s thought on religion and ethics are in stark contrast to the world-view of science. They have quite different modes of thought, whose foundations are neither to be justified nor reasoned. Whoever develops an ethical feeling or accepts a faith no longer needs an answer for this, since he has already reached the foundation of his faith. The foundation of faith or ethics is a system of values that cannot be questioned, since they are either recognized as “true” or not. Wittgenstein writes: “At the foundation of well-founded belief lies belief that is not founded.” (OC, 253)

For Wittgenstein, truth is not the primary aspect, but rather “truthfulness”—truthfulness in the attempt to give meaning to individual life. Above all, that is a question of personal style, because ethics can be judged as little as truthfulness, although it remains the basis of the meaning that an individual desires in life. Here, Wittgenstein also sees a consensus of ethical striving with the Christian religion: “I believe that one of the things Christianity says is that sound doctrines are all useless. That you have to change your life. (Or the direction of your life.)” (CV 1946, 53)

The language itself suggests that the validity of ethics and religion is worthy of generalization, yet that also obscures the fact that it cannot be found in propositional statements. By contrast, it is worth remembering:

[...] that there is not a religious language-game shaping the entire discourse of a religious individual, but a religious world-view that forms the basis of his thought and action in a way that cannot be questioned. The differences between religious and non-religious individuals manifest themselves primarily not in language, but in an individual life. (Weiberg 1998, 141)

In the broadest sense, neither ethics nor religion can be distinguished, since both disciplines exclusively fall within the realm of human action. However, Wittgenstein differentiates between both these forms of faith, by lending different weight to each. Religious faith represents a
higher level of belief, whilst ethical faith can be described as on a lower level. The difference that Wittgenstein means to summarize is:

[...] that in the first case, the individual feels ill and in the second case merely imperfect. In each case, quite different attitudes to life are outlined, as far as dealing with problems are concerned and with the independent initiatives of individuals. Whoever feels imperfect regards himself as guilty of this state, he fights with his own self, with his own character (like Wittgenstein), whereas a religious believer, who feels ill, is not conscious of any guilt. He puts his fate in good faith into the hands of his doctor — that is, God — and hopes for recovery (from outside)—and in that way he behaves more passively. (Weiberg 1998, 163f.)

Whoever takes Wittgenstein seriously, is hardly likely to be engaged in theology or the philosophy of religion, but either to limit his research to the description of a religious language-game, or “only” to believe. The search for truth in the sense of an academic discipline is, after its destruction, nonsensical. Such a quest cannot resolve the problems. Only religion as activity can help individuals in the search for the meaning of life. Religion, like philosophy, cannot be treated as a doctrine, since it is a practice, whose significance can only be shown, by acting accordingly. By contrast to ethics, in its constant relation to the quest for the meaning of life, the religious believer achieves certainty for himself, since “[t]o believe in a God means to understand the question about the meaning of life. [...] To believe in God means to see that life has a meaning.” (NB, 8.7.16) All doubts on the problem of life are ruled out for the believer and faith is so strong that he no longer tries to question or prove his faith with the aid of reason. In this case, what holds true of the deeply devout believer is that “[r]eligion is, as it were, the calm bottom of the sea at its deepest point, which remains calm however high the waves on the surface may be.” (CV 1946, 53)

V. At the End of Ethics — A New Beginning

The idea of ethics is related, in philosophy, to the attempt to establish a canon of norms and methods to vouchsafe the universality of ethical concepts and rules for action. These norms and methods are directed at
ethical questions, conflicts and problems of inter-subjective behaviour that are to be resolved by ethics, by developing these issues into a normative science of generally legitimate propositions. This theory of ethics can be seen as a science of the justification of ethical decisions, so to speak, a theory that is identical to the teleology of academic ethics that often makes Being, in a circular way, out of the principle of duty and, ultimately, derives again that principle from an artificially constructed Being. Universalist ethics is, for that reason, largely characterized by the disappearance of the distinction between Being and a sense of moral obligation.

Briefly to recapitulate the central results of “these hikes through Wittgenstein’s ethics”: For Wittgenstein, it makes sense neither to search for an ultimate legitimacy to ethics, nor to seek guarantees for truth as a theory of knowledge. Ethical theories for human actions must remain, for him, without a final justification. In place of an ultimate truth, Wittgenstein posits, as a philosopher of pluralism, a multiplicity of life forms and ways of behaviour that each contains their respective truth. Ethical knowledge can only be achieved in the mystical sense. According to Wittgenstein, philosophical ethics cannot promote the meaning of life, but only working on one’s individual self, that is to say, the quest for an ethical sense is an instrument of the individual’s being-in-the-world and the desire to find meaning in life. As this meaning can only be found through one’s own ethical will and, in turn, its expression lies in the experience of the perception of the mystical, every kind of ethical belief rests on a mystical experience of showing. This question of meaning is not only a basic feature of ethical, but also metaphysical enquiry. Yet Wittgenstein supplies examples to demonstrate that the ethical impulse cannot nearly be considered as metaphysical, since “the mystical” element that is proposed as the ethics of the individual is not a way of being, but a life form. It is a praxeological concept, whose goal is to understand philosophy as action. Furthermore, Wittgenstein shows that ethics and religion can only occur through the sphere of action and the doctrine of faith is to be rejected just as a philosophical doctrine of ethics, for neither can solve problems. Religion as activity may help individuals in their quest to find a purpose in life. By contrast to the ethical
The Paradox of Ethics — ‘It leaves everything as it is.’

explorer, who is constantly searching for the meaning of life, the religious believer has already achieved certainty in relation to the meaning of life.

What is the outcome for the traditional conception of ethics as an academic tradition? Wittgenstein adopts quite a different idea than philosophers of what ethics can and should achieve. He intended not to solve the problems of philosophy, but those of his own existence. Hence, he lays no claim to ethics in the sense of a scientific theory. As a philosophical discipline, ethics can achieve nothing, since every attempt to create an objective and absolute claim is bound to fail for problems that cannot be summarized in a general theory. As a result, Wittgenstein strove, by his praxeological individual ethics, for a complete destruction of scientific ethics: “I think it is definitely important to put an end to all the claptrap about ethics — whether intuitive knowledge exists, whether values exist, whether the good is definable.” (WVC, 68f.) Yet his goal was not to forbid such statements, but to expose their “valuelessness” and to achieve a paradigmatic change in the picture of ethics.

The meaning of ethics for human life cannot be derived from any scientific basis. It cannot be treated as a research field that can be mastered by scientific methods. Ethics cannot be reduced to a system of propositions that establish a code for the phenomena of our world in analogy to scientific theories. Ethics is essentially bound to the “subject/self”. An external, “higher being”, or an “absolute judge” does not exist in Wittgenstein’s view. Any experience of value is always the experience of the individual subject.

The question of ethics is always a subjective one about the right way of living. That can only be determined by each individual on his own account and, for that reason, ethics cannot be stated in universally valid terms. The discipline can neither be a science, nor act as a doctrine of the right way of living, since it is more or less beyond the bounds of theory, not within the range of generally valid maxims or moral appeals. Wittgenstein therefore avoids formulating a binding doctrine of virtue and duty, as well as falling foul to an ethical relativism, by developing an alternative philosophy as activity, as it were, the praxeological concept of an individual “clarification” of life conduct. Hence, the ethical
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will directing ethical conduct as a practice in relation to the question-
able nature of life is turned into the decisive factor of a successful life.

The individual world-view determines ethics and every individual
must answer the question of the right conduct, without concrete refe-
rence to philosophical theories, in accordance with his own life situation;
and that questioning is not an exception, but rather the continual activity
that endures throughout his lifetime. Ethics can therefore be seen as
working through things for the individual self. At the close of the Trac-
tatus, this view is stated more explicitly:

We feel that even when all possible scientific questions have been answered,
the problems of life remain completely untouched. Of course there are then
no questions left, and this itself is the answer. (TLP 6.52)

In the belief that he had solved the scientific problem of ethics, Witt-
genstein also recognized that little is achieved by solving that philoso-
phical problem. The actual ethical matter, the meaning of one’s own
existence, is to be confronted anew, as though it were a perpetuum mo-
bile, time and again. In the preface to the Tractatus, Wittgenstein already
noted: “And if I am not mistaken in this belief, then the second thing in
which the value of this work consists is that it shows how little is
achieved when these problems are solved.” The problem of life remains
the individual’s permanent search for ethical sense.

The question of sense in life can never be answered. In a way, life is
the quest for an ethical meaning and life is in toto also the answer.
Ethics is a doing, the achievement of individual principles and the con-
stant reflection of the self-consciousness of “subject/self” and the
individual view of the world. How we live shows who we are. The prac-
tice of searching for a meaning of life is ethical action in itself. In the
diaries this thought is described as: “The will is an attitude of the subject
to the world. [...] The act of the will is not the cause of the action but is
the action itself.” (NB, 4.11.16) Action cannot be ethically judged, since
it presents the self-elected life form of a person that cannot require
justification. The fact that others’ actions may not be judged ethically
by Wittgenstein’s viewpoints may be unsatisfactory. Yet academic
philosophy cannot offer more, since as Wittgenstein aptly commented:
Philosophy may in no way interfere with the actual use of language; it can in the end only describe it.
For it cannot give it any foundation either.
It leaves everything as it is. (PI §124).

Translated by Suzanne Kirkbright

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