Sense of Ethics and Ethical Sense

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To approach Wittgenstein’s remarks on ethics from an academic standpoint is likely to frustrate the reader, whose learned expectation still makes it difficult to appreciate the sense of those remarks. We have grown accustomed to associate ethics with a fixed canon of questions, emerging from problems and methods within the history of philosophy, which defines what ethics involves and promises suitable modes of discourse. Along these lines, ethics is typically understood, especially in the modern context, where the discipline implies the reflection and justification of existing norms, with specific reference to their legitimacy and general validity. To accept actions as morally valid, in so far as they depend on others’ demands, it is not enough to invoke an arbitrary existing norm. Rather, it is necessary to supply reasoning

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1 My thanks are due to Ulrich Arnswald for numerous intensive discussions that shed light on the way to approach Wittgenstein’s ethics. The present study would not have emerged without these discussions.

2 Alongside several cryptic propositions in *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein’s remarks are largely contained in the diary entries parallel to the development of *Tractatus*, in the *Lecture on Ethics* (1929), as well as minutes of conversations with Wittgenstein reproduced by Rush Rhees (1970).
that matches expectations, such as they shape the task of ethics, to justify a moral principle, not merely in relation to the actions and moral code of a community, but to mankind as a whole. In the recent history of ethics, for example, these moral principles were represented by freedom (Kant), the principle of utility (utilitarianism), or justice (Rawls). These principles were to yield the concrete and morally valid rules for action and their suitability for consensus-building was to be made transparent.

Wittgenstein declared such a theoretical programme in ethics as lacking all prospects. In a conversation with Moritz Schlick he remarked, apodictically:

> It is a priori certain that whatever definition of the good may be given — it will always be merely a misunderstanding to say that the essential thing, that what is really meant, corresponds to what is really expressed (Moore). (WVC, 69)

Not only did Wittgenstein reject the academic stance on ethics, along with its methods and discourses, but he evidently also despised them:

> I regard it as very important to put an end to all the chatter about ethics — whether there is knowledge in ethics, whether there are values, whether the good can be defined, etc. (LE, 13)

Wittgenstein could clearly do no other than treat objectivity in ethics as a philosophical discipline as a failed attempt to discuss questions and problems that are at one step removed from the formation of objective concepts. His asceticism with regard to moral philosophy, which was rather paradoxically based on an ethical motivation, could be contested by the fact that there is a legitimate interest to remain accountable for those moral convictions that are relevant to everyday living, as well as to those value judgements, which we make almost by force of habit. If we take it for granted that philosophy is to account for our common use of certain concepts and ideas in plenty, the outcome of Wittgenstein’s categorical rejection of these entities is bound to strike us as unsatisfactory.

Primarily, however, it is not only his distaste for ethics as an academic discipline that makes it difficult to appreciate Wittgenstein’s ethics,
but rather his unorthodox conception of the sense of ethics. According to Wittgenstein, ethical questions belong to metaphysics. Ethics is “[...] the enquiry into the meaning of life, or into what makes life worth living, or into the right way of living.” (LE, 5) Every attempt to answer this question in generally valid terms implies, in Wittgenstein’s view, an abuse of language, especially the value-ridden expressions that occur in ethical discourses. Wittgenstein argued that, on that basis, an ethical theory is impossible in the sense of a science of the right action. Supposing that Wittgenstein’s dismissal of the scientific foundation of ethics were to be accepted, what role remains for ethics? The following analysis defends the thesis that, above all, Wittgenstein opposed a particular approach to moral philosophical speculation: namely, those models that rely on examples of scientifically fashioned solutions in the paradigm of rationally justified norms. The sense of ethics, that is, its proper place in human life, cannot be captured by traditional methods of a normative and rational science. Logically to follow this aspect of Wittgenstein’s thought is perhaps to suggest reasons why he associates, as a matter of course, ethics alongside mystics. Thus, as will be demonstrated, ethics is ineffable. While Wittgenstein may well locate ethics beyond the reach of science, his programme is neither positivistic nor leaning towards reductionism. Rather, his aim is fundamentally to change the picture that philosophers make of ethics.

The purpose of this study is neither to claim Wittgenstein as a supporter of a particular ethical theory, nor to develop an independent approach to ethics by an analysis of his writings. At the same time, the following reflections are based on my conviction that Wittgenstein’s work includes insights that help overcome a series of what I see as weak alternatives, which currently dominate some areas of debate in ethics. Above all, I refer to the choice between universalism and particularism, or the distinction between a rigorous approach, as governed by rational thought in the manner of Kant, and a type of pluralism with relativistic implications. Wittgenstein’s approach to ethics—as to be shown—cuts across these alternatives. In that case, the relevance of his views is due to the fact that he ushered in an innovative discourse on ethical matters that implies a reassessment of the existing paradigm.
of modern universal and rational tenets. The focus of the present discussion is not on a new system, not on an innovative and watertight reasoning that is, in any case, hardly likely to be in short supply in future. Rather, the emphasis is on a different route to what is generally regarded as an ethical problem.

Briefly to characterize at this point this alternative route in key phrases would be to accept Wittgenstein’s turn to the individual case, the necessity of accepting plurality and contradiction as irreducible, as well as to highlight his emphasis on speech in the first person singular. Furthermore, Wittgenstein’s later insights into forms of life and his views on certainty permit a critique of the view that a system of norms can only be regarded as rationally valid and therefore adequate for the claims of free individuals, whenever that system is based on a reasonable, that is to say, a compelling approach to all those whose behaviour may be deemed as rational action.

II.

Firstly, the task is to determine which prevailing view of ethics Wittgenstein rejects. To this end, it is valuable to place Wittgenstein’s views in the context of several approaches that govern contemporary debate. Not only can Wittgenstein’s ideas be highlighted in sharper relief against the prevailing paradigm, but above all, this route to his thought shows how some philosophers rely on Wittgenstein as a basis for their work, without really departing from the model that Wittgenstein himself contested. In that case, Wittgenstein is clearer than those who follow in his footsteps, whereas he himself drew conclusions from the irreducible plurality of life forms and language games.

Amongst the most frequently discussed examples of a universalistic approach is the discourse ethics of Jürgen Habermas. In dialogue with Hilary Putnam, Habermas recently gave a brief summary of his aims:

Those moral judgements are ‘right’, in so far as they earn universal respect, meaning that, in a rational discourse with virtually ideal conditions, they could meet with the approval of all those concerned. (Habermas 2000, 560)
In this way, Habermas’s reflections resemble the tradition of ethics as a universalistic proposition that dates from Kant. For Kant, the issue of individual good was, ultimately, an empirical question, so that no generally valid rules of behaviour could be established, such as for instance, for the individual’s path to the happy or good life. By contrast, the moral conduct that we demand of our partners is to be grounded by gaining a firm grip on rationality and pure reason. In the same vein, Kant explained the absolute meaning of ethical duties, by interpreting the so-called propositions of moral duty (Sollenssätze), or rather, in Kant’s terminology, the categorical imperative, as rational rules that the individual actor accepts, by the strength of his own decision-making. According to this view, it is irrational to act contrary to a categorical imperative. The refashioning of this programme in discourse ethics runs as follows:

The program of justification pursued by discourse ethics sets itself the task of deriving from suppositions of rationality [...] a rule of argumentation for discourses in which moral norms can be justified. It attempts to show that moral questions can be decided rationally as a general rule. (Habermas 1993, 31f.)

Furthermore, such an approach is incontestable, for otherwise, it is not clear what distinguishes “[...]the argumentative practices of justification from other practices that are regulated merely by social convention.” (Habermas 1996, 15) Following Wittgenstein’s thoughts, at least three assumptions underpinning the universalistic view are to be called into doubt.

In the Lecture on Ethics, it is clear that Wittgenstein vehemently opposes a distinction of ethics and individual morality that is implicit to the universalistic viewpoint. On that score, Wittgenstein approaches the basic question of ethics in an essentially more general and value-neutral context than Kant, such as putting “[...]before [...] a number of more or less synonymous expressions each of which could be substituted for [Moore’s, J.K.] definition [...]” (LE, 4) The concept of the meaning of life that Wittgenstein then resorts to is in fact intrinsically more neutrally framed, in so far as he does not diminish the question of life conduct or the enquiry “into what is really important” (LE, 5), as a
matter of the individual well being, as for instance, in the one-sided sense of Kant. Rather, by allowing for ways of life that are not necessarily compatible with the individual well being, Wittgenstein appears both to call to mind the sense question as a basic facet of ethical enquiry and, furthermore, to make no distinction between that enquiry and the moral philosophical approach to good and morally compelling actions. Ethics, that is, also as moral philosophy, refers to the sense question and, therefore, meaning or sense plays a leading role in the discourse of ethics. To be sure, a distinction between the sense matter—in Wittgenstein’s perception, the basic question of ethics—and the moral quality of action is possible, but there is no distinction on principle. Even assuming that such a distinction were made, in Wittgenstein’s view, it would not suffice for the foundations of a universalistic theory, replete with its general criteria for evaluating actions and describing situations in which morally compelling decisions emerge. Such a general theory without preconceived ideas of the good life is in any case impossible because a formal moral principle implies a material understanding of the Good, or human happiness, not compatible with any arbitrary individual idea of the right way of living.3

Furthermore, Wittgenstein argued against universalisms that the study of ethical questions is not possible without considering the individual personality and the concrete situation in which an ethical crisis confronts the individual in a specific way.4 The conflicts that emerge in this context, such as for instance, amongst various directions and projections of the good life, or between an individual striving for happiness and moral needs, can therefore not be solved in a way that is universally binding. The remarks on ethics in the Tractatus and the

3 Even within a universalist and formal moral philosophy, the question must always be asked what idea of the right way of living is appropriate. That was recently demonstrated by Ursula Wolf (cf. Wolf 1999, 15).

4 If Wittgenstein’s conversations with various people about ethical themes, as documented by Rush Rhees, are also taken into account, there can be no doubt that he would have dismissed the idea that a moral problem consists in discovering what the Good actually is in each respective case (cf. Rhees 1970, 98f.).
associated diary entries already allude to this viewpoint. In these sources, we find: “What is good and evil is essentially the I, not the world.” (NB, 5.8.16). Not the action as a describable, worldly fact is to be qualified as ethical, but the individual intentions of the subject, in whose actions that ethical dimension is expressed. For that reason, Wittgenstein can also state in *Tractatus* that the will cannot be called the vehicle of the ethical (cf. TLP 6.423). In this context, the connection between the ethical dimension and the action would be associated with “the meaningfulness of action in the world, or the experience of a loss of meaning in this action” (Kroß 1993, 133). This association is, however, entirely contingent. Only insofar as the subject evaluates his actions according to ethical categories, thus lending meaning to the world, does a connection emerge between the world of the subject and the world that is given as a finite entity. Wittgenstein also remained consistent to this view in his later works, although here, the metaphysical subject of *Tractatus* has “adopted the figure of ‘I-saying’ as grammatically special, as expressing certainty” (Kroß 1993, 142).

Wittgenstein’s reconnection of language with life forms in their relation to language games, as significant in his late philosophy, was more compelling as a critique of universalism than his emphasis on the relationship between individuals and their ethical judgement and action. Those authors who followed Wittgenstein’s lead found a basis to oppose the efforts of universalist theorists, seeking to underpin a generally valid canon, free of historical or cultural contexts and, instead of that, gain an anchor in value judgements and decisions in real world scenarios. In that case, the starting point is the indefatigable plurality of life forms, language games and the cultural and moral traditions that flow into them. Advocates of these possibilities such as Richard Rorty and Michael Walzer insist at the same time that this view implies no

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6 Cf. NB, 8.7.16: “The world is given me, i.e. my will enters into the world completely from outside as into something that is already there.” Cf. also NB, 15.10.16: “Things acquire ’significance’ only through their relation to my will.”
relativism, in so far as that represents a theory, by which all ethical value systems can be either proved true or false. That position can only be contradictory and easily refuted in a theoretical sense (cf. Putnam 1992, 178). Whoever accepts or passes judgement on a specific ethics as true implies something about his life conduct. A theoretical statement on the superiority of his ethics is not yet achieved. To give reasons and to make moral judgements are activities documenting an individual’s life conduct or actions, or those of a community, or else, life styles rooted in them that give meaning to possible or real actions. Every philosophical interpretation of action already rests on the assumption of such individual opinions, so that acting represents an incontestable precondition for any philosophical or ethical interpretation of reality (Kroß 1993, 141). Not relativism, but pluralism, in the sense of accepting diverse answers to value judgements in ethics is therefore a measured response to the requirements of universalism.

In this regard, Michael Walzer spoke of a ‘moral minimalism’ (cf. Walzer 1994). By that, he means a central residue of moral principles “in terms of a (thin) set of universal principles adapted (thickly) to these or those historical circumstances” (Walzer 1994, 4). In unison with the late Wittgenstein, Walzer’s assumption is that moral systems are culturally integrated, only adopting a universal character in quite specific situations, “when moral language is turned to specific purposes” (Walzer 1994, 4), as for instance, in crisis situations—Walzer had the 1989 Prague demonstrations in mind. These situations produce partial common interests and solidarities. In other words, minimal morality implies a basic store of principles and norms that recur at particular times and in special situations and may be recognized by

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7 Richard Rorty expressed this as follows: “This view is often referred to dismissively as ‘cultural relativism.’ But it is not relativistic, if that means saying that every moral view is as good as every other. [...] It is one thing to say, falsely, that there is nothing to choose between us and the Nazis. It is another thing to say, correctly, that there is no neutral, common ground to which a philosophical Nazi and I can repair to argue out our differences.” (Rorty 1993, 44).

8 For that reason, the documentary value of Wittgenstein’s ethics has been referred to, cf. Bouveresse 1994, 103.
actors of various cultural, historical and linguistic backgrounds (cf. Walzer 1994, 17). In Walzer’s view, however, it would be a mistake to isolate this minimal morality from its cultural context, in the hope of one day achieving an objective, trans-cultural code. On the contrary, the code is irreducibly bound with particular meaning and semantically loaded and is always linked to specific morals, as they were developed in specific historical and cultural contexts. For that reason, a minimal morality cannot be the theoretical basis, to be deduced and anchored to specific and materially substantive morals, but merely seen as a slice of those circumstances (cf. Walzer 1994, 18). Like the late Wittgenstein, Walzer’s focus is not on the search for justifications, but on divided viewpoints and lifestyles that first facilitate a language game, that is, even make a particular form of practical reflection possible (PI §241f.). The life forms in which actors circulate, who act morally and reflect on their actions, are fed by a dense network of equally pre-contractual agreements, common interests, rules for participation that, taken together, constitute a way of life that has grown historically:

Minimalism […] is less the product of persuasion than of mutual recognition among the protagonists of different fully developed moral cultures. (Walzer 1994, 17)

Rorty’s and Walzer’s differently weighted appropriations of Wittgenstein’s pluralistic views make it possible to criticize the universalistic ideal of justification, since they place at the forefront of debate an irreducible premise, lacking a common historical root, that engenders a multiplicity of different life forms and language games anchored in their midst. In that way, it is clear that authors who support the paradigm of justification base their assumptions in ethics on an inadequate view of the problem: what should direct the interest of the ethicists is not the question of justification, but growing aware of the

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9 Against Rorty, it can also be mentioned in this connection that, quite unlike Wittgenstein, he never questions the life form of western, liberal democracies and he thinks about moral progress exclusively in the sense of the universalization of this life form. In this view, Rorty is at one with Habermas, who otherwise remains his adversary. Cf. Rorty 1994, 983.
peculiarities and differences of lifestyles that are to be accepted as such. The concern expressed by some universalists against this alternative of giving up any sort of moral judging, if no rational foundation can be found for that process, is just as much a sign of an incorrect approach to the problem as the opposite claim: namely, that in this case, any course of action would be morally feasible, or every value system of equal merit. By contrast, to follow Wittgenstein is to remember that a particular ethics can only be defended, in so far as it forms an integral part of a form of life. The arguments to be brought in their favour are as much our own as the language used in that process is also our own. Indeed, only in that way can it be made plain what the justification of a particular norm or moral judgement is to mean. To understand, for instance, what is intended by someone who gives such weight to a moral judgement that he claims its value exceeds every context, it is necessary to know the relevant context in which the claim was made, to whom the claim was addressed, how it was expressed and received, how reactions were etc. The entirety of these practices and reactions of the linguistic and non-linguistic kind belong to a particular language game that the actors actually control, yet without the game resting on a metaphysical guarantee, like reason. No rational structure is available that points beyond the contexts in which individual languages are used and that underpins the related purpose still further; and, moreover, according to Wittgenstein, such a structure is superfluous. Likewise, as our language game is neither rational nor irrational, but merely there, like life itself, so too, is the language we use in our moral discourses, in Wittgenstein’s view, lastly only governed by the fact that we rely upon something.

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10 Tugendhat (1995, 22) is exemplary: “And we could no longer judge morally, if we could not keep hold of the inherently objective, that is, personally irrelative standard in moral, as in all judgements.”

11 Cf. OC, 559; cf. also the interpretation by Putnam (1992, 176ff.).

12 OC, 509: “I really want to say that a language-game is only possible if one trusts something, (I did not say ‘can trust something’).”
III.

The ongoing chain of thoughts, in the present study, on the relationship between certainty and life form enables a deeper investigation of the question how Wittgenstein’s views assist with an illustration of the boundaries of ethics, as measured by a modern conception of that discipline. Wittgenstein’s commentaries on the concept of rules are especially relevant in this regard. The relevance of rules in ethics results from the fact that moral norms in ethical discourse are to be represented as a particular class of practical rules, according to which, specific ways of acting can be described as obligatory.

If the description in *Philosophical Investigations* is followed, two decisive lines of argument can be highlighted as relevant to this case. Firstly, Wittgenstein insisted that following a rule is not an interpretation in the sense of theoretical activity, in which a general rule of thumb can be applied to individual cases. The perception of rule-following as interpretation leads to a regression of rules for rules. This perception of rule-following must therefore be given up in language games. Wittgenstein is very direct about this matter: “That is not what we ought to say, but rather: every interpretation, together with what is being interpreted, hangs in the air; the former cannot give the latter any support. Interpretations by themselves do not determine meaning.” (PI §198) Interpretation alone cannot determine sense, as is the salient point of this argument; and, hence, it follows that not every course of action can be equated with a rule. The linguistic remark “rule” is rather to be brought into line with a way of reacting that has been learned; and, in turn, that acquired knowledge is embedded in a suitable mode of action. In this case, Wittgenstein used the example of route marks, allied to the course of action, in order to follow the direction that they

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13 Cf. for a basic survey Tugendhat 1995, 42ff.
14 Cf. PI §86; cf. also Z 229: “But an *interpretation* is something that is given in signs. It is this interpretation as opposed to a different one (running differently).—So when we wanted to say ‘Any sentence still stands in need of an interpretation’, that meant: no sentence can be understood without a rider.”
Wittgenstein’s response to the possible objection that recourse to an embedded way of acting only provides a causal and no normative explanation for rule-following, is the reference to existing habits. The resulting characterization of rule-following as a practice neatly summarizes the embedding of using rule-expression with ways of action that they determine (cf. PI §198f., §202). That is Wittgenstein’s second decisive view on the question of following rules. The manner of using a linguistic expression has no immediate equivalent in grammatical form. That tells us as little as interpretation about the right way to use an expression without any doubt. In that sense, following rules is a practice and to understand rules means to know how to practice a technique: “To understand a sentence means to understand a language. To understand a language means to be master of a technique.” (PI §199)

The link between rule expression and use in a particular context, which is fixed by routine practice, is itself a normative process, yet without necessarily relying upon an interpretation because of that routine. On the contrary, in the language game of practicing, it is not yet a use to follow a rule. The only course of action is therefore to oppose the practiced link of expression and use. In that case, however, another game is already being played:

You cook badly if you are guided in your cooking by rules other than the right ones; but if you follow other rules than those of chess you are playing another game; and if you follow grammatical rules other than such-and-such ones, that does not mean you say something wrong, no, you are speaking of something else. (Z 320)

The use of linguistic expressions must therefore be understood as an inter-subjective practice, as a custom, or even an institution. In that sense, the use hardly differs from games like chess.

Rule application always takes place on the basis of practice of usage and, in that way, the process is continued. Usage alone is a criterion to test if someone actually follows the rule. For that reason, rule-following not only implies an understanding of rule expression, but also of uses that are appropriate for the rules, or as Wittgenstein writes:
“If language is to be a means of communication there must be agreement not only in definitions but also (queer as this may sound) in judgments.” (PI §242) The connection of definitions and judgements that is alluded to here depends on the internal link between rule and application. Therefore, the agreement of individuals in language, that is, in their active use of linguistic mechanisms in language games is no agreement “in opinions but in form of life” (PI §241). By that, Wittgenstein means the respective association of activities and actions in language games, amongst those language games, and in human life as a whole.

If Wittgenstein’s perception is correct, that a consensus of opinion is based on a consensus in language, and in turn, a consensus of life form, then this assumption also has consequences for understanding the anchorage of ethical norms. The argument implies, namely, that consensus must already exist in the judgements themselves, before the rules that hold sway in discourse ethics can even be effective in society. Wittgenstein’s explanation of rule following suggests that it is inadequate to achieve consensus in the definition of a terminology. Rather, what is necessary is a further consensus of the manner of its application. Yet that way is only made manifest in the practice of rule-following, which in turn, constitutes a way of life. Even rules of discourse, therefore, only consist of a complexity of practices that are relative to the life form. For that reason alone, they are recognized as such and followed as rules. With Wittgenstein’s description, rules of discourse cannot be viewed as procedural, first giving rise to rules of a specific moral code, and to a degree, applied as special cases. Rules devised from such theories for ethical-practical discourses are

[…] simply abstracted from, and not very far from, contemporary democratic culture. If no such culture existed, this particular version of a minimal morality would not even be plausible to us. (Walzer 1994, 13)

Even discourse ethicists, such as Habermas, work with rules that imply material and ethical preconceptions. Various social practices lead to particular moral ideas, for instance, the practice of government carries “ideas about the responsibility of governors toward the governed”
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(Walzer 1994, 15). However, these ideas only function with specific cultural systems that, in turn, yield independent and varying forms. The kind of consensus on these practices that exists in such a system is not the result of a rational consensus building, but is rather created by a common way of life. Only this common aspect facilitates the identification of valid norms; and it can be described as a complex process of participation in socially diverse practices, language games and discourses that provide the context for what may be called in this sense the basis of a line of argument:

All testing, all confirmation and disconfirmation of a hypothesis takes place already within a system. And this system is not a more or less arbitrary and doubtful point of departure for all arguments: no, it belongs to the essence of what we call an argument. The system is not so much the point of departure, as the element in which arguments have their life. (OC, 105)

Language and modes of argument are rooted in behavioural patterns that are neither rational nor irrational, but precede any kind of intellectual process: “Language did not emerge from some kind of ratiocination.” (OC, 475) Here, too, the limits of a way of thinking that is based on the paradigm of justification are made plain, for the identification with specific practices is not vouchsafed by reasoning, but is rooted in the way of action that is inherent to the language game:

Giving grounds, however, justifying the evidence, comes to an end; - but the end is not certain propositions’ striking us immediately as true, i.e. it is not a kind of seeing on our part; it is our acting, which lies at the bottom of the language-game. (OC, 204)

It is essential, to recognize this aspect, if the peculiarity of Wittgenstein’s illustration is to be correctly assessed and its limits to be correctly described: “Where two principles really do meet which cannot be reconciled with one another, then each man declares the other a fool and heretic.” (OC, 611) And immediately following that remark: “I said I would ‘combat’ the other man, - but wouldn’t I give him reasons? Certainly; but how far do they go? At the end of reasons comes persuasion.” (OC, 612) Emphasis on the limits of justification not only magnifies the limits of a rationalistic ideal of communication, as based
on consensus, but it also prevents false notions of homogeneity in life forms that are distinct and separate. At this point, another aspect comes into play that is preferably neglected in discussions about life forms and rules. The agreement about which Wittgenstein speaks in his elucidation of the rule concept is not to be treated as though the rules of everyday action bring to light an implicit contextual knowledge and common procedures that are shared by all members of the society in question. Rather than searching for such common elements, Wittgenstein invites a perception of language as “a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing […]” (PI §66), for which he uses the expression “family resemblances” (PI §67). This method of comparing and contrasting phenomena in their vital functions is meant to liberate from static and hypostatic considerations. By pitting the family resemblance against the ideal of identity, Wittgenstein holds up a different method to the quest for unity that is meant to culminate in respect for the irreducible plurality and diversity of life forms and, so too, for the ways in which ethical discourses can be conducted. In Wittgenstein’s view, there is no single, possibly more rational approach than other ways of following a rule:

Following a rule is analogous to obeying an order. We are trained to do so; we react to an order in a particular way. But what if one person reacts in one way and another in another to the order and the training? Which one is right? (PI §206)

15 On this point, authors like Michael Walzer differ from Wittgenstein, as Walzer typically emphasizes identities and common interests (cf. Walzer 1994, 7-8, 16). The unquestionable condition of homogeneity also describes approaches that, acknowledging Aristotle, intend to establish ethics on the reflection of tested ethical practices. Cf. also the basic work of Schnädelbach (1986). Kambartel’s critique of ethical pluralism also relies on this condition of a homogeneous, common life form (cf. Kambartel 1986, 98).

16 Cf. AWL, 34: “One of the ways of looking at questions in ethics about good is to think that all things said to be good have something in common, just as there is a tendency to think that all things we call games have something in common.”

17 Cf. also Z 430: “Our language game only works, of course, when a certain agreement prevails, but the concept of agreement does not enter into the language-
This question emerges in every deep-seated moral conflict and, so Wittgenstein, it cannot be answered by reference to the so-called right interpretation of the rule that is meant to comprise the conclusion of a rational discourse. On the whole, rules function so well in social practice because they are not static and do not leave an open field for interpretation. Hence, in Philosophical Investigations, Wittgenstein already warns in his first discussion of the rule concept to overlook the diverse functions of rules within language games: “it can be said that what we call a rule of a language-game may have very different roles in the game.” (PI §53)

IV.

The illustrations of the connection of rule-following, language game and life form have shown how several of Wittgenstein’s views permit a correction of existing perceptions, questions and methods in practical philosophy and suggest alternative approaches. Wittgenstein’s way of discussing philosophical problems has proved fruitful for ethics, since it is possible to call into question these hastily ordered theoretical approaches that falsely promote unity in the diversity of ethical discourse. In conclusion, Wittgenstein’s method and its relevance for ethics is to be more closely considered. An aspect of his thought that was briefly mentioned in the introduction is to be highlighted: namely, the exclusion of ethics from empirical life in favour of a mystical interpretation. In that way, greater attention is to be paid to the thesis, as mentioned in the introduction, that Wittgenstein rejected as a matter of principle the over-theoretical and scientific appropriation of ethical questions.

The distinctions between Wittgenstein’s early position on ethics, in Tractatus, in the Lecture on Ethics and in his late works have so far not been mentioned here. Rather, the working premise was a basic game. If agreement were universal, we should be quite unacquainted with the concept of it”

approach to ethical questions that runs through Wittgenstein’s collected works (although in his later writings he no longer explicitly considered ethical questions at all). That approach was Wittgenstein’s mistrust of scientific attitudes and theoretical models in ethics.\(^\text{19}\) His *Lecture on Ethics* is a work of transition. To be sure, this text still visibly depends on the world-view of *Tractatus*; and yet, it also points forward to the method of grammatical analysis of contexts of words and their uses, as is characteristic of his later philosophy (Weiberg 1998, 57f). Had Wittgenstein been consistent about applying the method of *Philosophical Investigations* to his *Lecture on Ethics*, then he would have concentrated on describing the role that value expressions and ethical judgements play in actions in individuals’ lives. In that case, he would presumably have omitted to depict these ways of speech as inauthentic (*uneigentlich*) expressions for a thing, namely, for a unified conception of ethics as metaphysics, religion and aesthetics.\(^\text{20}\) In view of this shift of method, his *Lecture on Ethics* itself could fall under suspicion as metaphysics, since the focus is on the distinction of an absolute, inexpressible ethical sphere and a limited sphere in which language refers to facts alone. However, closer scrutiny of Wittgenstein’s analysis of ethical language use in his *Lecture on Ethics*, yields another perspective that gives precedence to the thought of the ineffability of ethics and in that case, the actor is at once, as it were, pre-empted in his most original responsibility.

Wittgenstein anchors moral language usage to a pre-eminent way of applying the basic vocabulary of ethics. A myriad of applications is plausible for these words, yet for Wittgenstein, they have an elevated

\(^{19}\) Weiberg arrives at this result (1998, 58f.) The orientation by scientific methods and problem solving was, according to Wittgenstein, a main source of conceptual confusion: “Philosophers constantly see the method of science before their eyes, and are irresistibly tempted to ask and answer questions in the way science does. This tendency is the real source of metaphysics, and leads the philosopher into complete darkness.” (BB, 18).

\(^{20}\) See Bouveresse (1994, 103): “It is [in the late philosophy, J.K.] no longer a question of the inauthentic (*uneigentlich*) language of ethics missing something like the *essence* of its object.”
meaning, if they are used in an *absolute* grammatical sense, that is, without recourse to prescribed goals of action or measures of evaluation. This manner of application qualifies them as ethical terms and Wittgenstein seems to imply that they are then always used as equivalent according to the form, if they emerge in sentences that contain such absolute ways of application. Wittgenstein is therefore able to identify the moral judgements with the absolute application of these words, to dissociate them from judgements about facts (cf. LE, 5ff.). His analysis yields the result that expressions such as “good” or “duty” have no clear sense, since they are non-relative predicates. Nor can it be seen how an action is absolute, that is, without justification, if relative to something else. It is also unclear, how something to be preferred is to be justified by any other means than relative to a wish, that is, relative to something that is, in turn, an act of preference (cf. Tugendhat 1995, 51). To adopt Wittgenstein’s example, you can talk of “a right” road in a relative sense, namely, relative to a particular goal, “and it is quite clear to us all that there is no sense in talking about the right road apart from such a predetermined goal.” (LE, 7) The idea of an absolutely right road “which *everybody* on seeing it would, *with logical necessity*, have to go” (LE, 7) is, however, as nonsensical as talking about an “absolute good” or “the good in itself”. Each notion is based on a false idea of a state of affairs, in so far as it forces a particular way of action as a logical necessity that has itself “the coercive power of an absolute judge” (LE, 7). Wittgenstein drew the consequence that the absolute claim raised in ethical judgements – whether as propositions of duty or of the absolute good – place them on a higher plane than mundane statements of fact. As a result, ethics cannot be put into words and is transcendental (cf. TLP 6.421). The linguistic nonsensical “duty in itself” is, as with all talk of “absolute values” or an “absolute good”, an expression of a vain attempt to transcend what can be expressed in a language that makes sense (LE, 11f.).

Wittgenstein intensifies this view of ethical language still further, by locating ethics in the vicinity of mystical and religious experiences, as in *Tractatus*. To be sure, the link between the investigations of ethical language use, as in propositions of duty, and linguistic expression that
he called mystical experiences, is not immediately transparent. You could talk of absolute experiences of value that rise above every conceptual determination. Wittgenstein counts a feeling for the facticity of the world amongst them, a feeling of absolute security and of being guilty (cf. LE, 8ff.). The flow of the argument further implies that by excluding ethics from empirical facts, Wittgenstein intends to point to its theoretical ineffability. Thus, justice cannot be done to Wittgenstein’s unearthing of an ineffable realm of ethics, if one refers to logical analysis, neither one that reduces ethics to a series of factual statements, nor one recreating a special empirical function, such as expressing feelings, or persuading the adoption of practical actions.\textsuperscript{21}

What is literally essential is the element of nonsense:

\[\ldots\] not only that no description that I can think of would do to describe what I mean by absolute value, but that I would reject every significant description that anybody could possibly suggest, \textit{ab initio}, on the ground of its significance. (LE, 11)

The sense of ethics and its higher meaning for humanity is manifest, as Wittgenstein asserts, in the fact that it cannot be designated an object of scientific research, since no principles, no theoretical tasks, no process of universality or analysis is adequate. Nonetheless, Wittgenstein’s thesis of the ineffability of the ethical realm is no example of a positivistic attitude of superiority, intent on contesting the meaning of ethical questions with linguistically logical arguments. The need to confront ethical questions, above all, on the basic level of the right conduct of life, is rather a testament to human conduct as such. An individual way of life can neither be legitimized by scientific ethics nor merely dismissed by a logical and empirically motivated philosophy of language.

To take into account Wittgenstein’s remarks, as already stated, on the relationship between subject, ethical will and world, as in \textit{Tractatus}, it is possible to treat the absolute experiences of value described in the \textit{Lecture on Ethics} as an attempt, albeit indirectly, to point to the irre-

\textsuperscript{21} The interpretation of ethical statements as expression of feelings or as orders dates back to Alfred Jules Ayer (cf. Ayer 1936, 111).
ducible character of ethics as it is relative to each individual. The reference is indirect, since even the experiences Wittgenstein describes are based on a characteristic misuse of language. The misuse lies in employing expressions in an absolute sense, when only a relative usage makes sense. Towards the close of his Lecture on Ethics, Wittgenstein therefore shifts into the use of the first person and invites the reader to recall similar experiences of this kind.

The emphasis on the function of the basic ethical vocabulary, in the light of this interpretation, would be less of an approach to a possible theory of moral language still to be achieved, than an indication of the inherently indeterminate nature of ethical speech. All talk of a unified interpretation, conforming to rules, is pointless. There can be no such interpretation with the aid of ethical values for actions that are unconnected to the particular situation and the identity of the actors involved. What someone says whilst describing individual actions is related to his attitude to his obligations, intentions or even relationships to others (cf. Cavell 1999, 325). In that case, diverse and contradictory motives collide and lead to conflicts that give rise not so much to the question of which action is now objectively appropriate, but rather the more urgent question of our self-perception and knowledge of another, that is, also the question of our responsibility: “[T]he trunk and branch of responsibility are what you are answerable for. And where your conduct raises a question, your answers will again be elaboratives.” (Cavell 1999, 312) This perspective on the behaviour of actors who evaluate their own and others’ actions in a moral light, first studied by Wittgenstein, was described by Stanley Cavell by the concepts of justification and responsibility. To treat another individual in the right way, to pay him his due, implies an appeal to his own self-consciousness, particular status, evaluation of his situation and demands upon him: “The problems of morality then become which values we are to honor and create, and which responsibilities we must accept, and which we have, in our conduct, and by our position incurred.” (Cavell 1999, 325) Not the search for a justification of one’s actions, which might well be accepted by any rational being, but rather growing aware of responsibility, in the sense of an assurance of per-
sonal and another’s standpoint in their respective contexts, such elements characterize Wittgenstein’s confrontation with ethical questions, according to this view (cf. Cavell 1999, 312).

The “re-personalization” 22 of morality that occurred with the rehabilitation of individual responsibility also includes the recognition of the restricted relative nature of the individual standpoint and an insight into the risks associated with every decision and evaluation. Even the reference to a general rule is no escape route. A positive weighting of material values, or even formal rules of behaviour, would suggest a certainty that would turn the moral content on its head, by depriving the actor of his sense of responsibility. To forego a positive moral discourse is one way to deal with this situation. To make decisions, to fulfil moral judgements and to defend standpoints are all actions performed by individuals who cannot rely upon metaphysical guarantees. Every application of a rule – as illustrated by our previous emphasis on rule-following – involves a step into open territory that is only possible because the actor always relies upon something:

I really want to say that a language-game is only possible if one trusts something, (I did not say ‘can trust something’). (OC, 509)

The addition in parenthesis denotes a decisive difference from a way of thinking that seeks certainty in the form of rational justifications; and by drawing attention to the particular uncertainty that lies in every act of trust and precedes every rational justification within the language game.

The element of uncertainty in every act is, nonetheless, necessary, in order for the actor to trust in his own sense of responsibility. Uncertainty, ‘the undecidable’ 23, and responsibility therefore shift into a line of association that is obscured by any ethics that set store by the possibility of a rational consensus. Paradoxically enough, such irrational aspects are part of the rationality of the moral sphere. They depend, as Gerhard Gamm put it, on the fact “that in the destruction of

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22 The expression is attributable to Bauman (1993, 34).
reasons, we become free to take over responsibility for others” (Gamm 2000, 246). The transcendental dimension of ethics, as postulated by Wittgenstein, would then not only be intended (in the sense of beyond the natural order (transcendent)) but also in the Kantian sense of transcendental, as a condition for the possibility of responsible action.24

V.

The leading thesis of these discussions was that Wittgenstein’s thoughts on ethics offer a possible alternative to the predominance of the traditional paradigm of practical philosophy. Wittgenstein’s approach to ethical questions leads not only to a critique of the ideal of rational justification of norms. Instead, his approach promotes a critical assessment of traditional ethical theories. These theories not only oversimplify because they conceal the variety of moral discourses, but also because they are based on the idea of the homogeneity of ethical life forms. On this count, incidentally, Aristotelians join forces with their Kantian counterparts. No matter whether they pay service to Ethos, or to communities of discourse, either way, notions of identity and homogeneity about Wittgenstein’s emphasis on difference are what prevail. The task of considering moral expressions and actions, as schooled by Wittgenstein’s thought, would be to bring this aspect of difference decisively into the forefront of debate. The quest for a unified theory to assist the process of differentiation, – a process that every morally competent actor must know –, would be substituted by a grammatical investigation and description of language games in which ethical expressions emerge. That change of approach is to recognize the

24 Similar ideas are referred to by Derrida: “The undecidable remains caught, lodged, at least as a ghost – but an essential ghost in every decision, in every event of decision. Its ghostliness deconstructs from within any assurance of presence, any certitude or any supposed criteriology that would assure us of the justice of a decision.” (Derrida 1992, 24f.) Derrida incidentally associated his studies on the “mystical ground of authority” with Wittgenstein’s mystics (cf. Derrida 1992, 14).
contexts in which expressions are employed and to become aware of actual events, regardless of arbitrary theoretical demands, when a moral debate is ongoing, or in cases of moral judgements and action. Furthermore, the shift would lead to a reorientation from the mode of justification and determination to the mode of description and continual interpretation. It is not a vain hope for this approach to achieve greater sensitivity towards the variety of voices from which an ethical sense is borne; and, equally, towards the inherently indeterminate and ambivalent character of moral discourses in modern societies that are irreversibly pluralistic. In this regard, a reminder is not only apt, since every material or formal general moral code, as well as every run of the mill consensus of a moral majority, unavoidably threatens to suffocate those voices that are not willing or able to be convinced and to appropriate a moral code.

Even if this rudimentary programme were to be held appropriate and, considering that the philosophical self-enlightenment of the individual’s relation to the world no longer offers metaphysical guarantees, the person who confronts ethical questions is, nonetheless, not relieved of the need to answer them in a decisive way in his unique and concrete situation, and without laying claim to a comprehensive philosophical explanation. All that such a person can be advised in view of his individual life, after all, leads to the trivial endeavour of solving practical problems that arise on a pragmatic, case by case basis.

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Bibliography


