

Introduction

The Content of a Lecture on Ethics

I

(1) Ludwig Wittgenstein delivered a lecture on ethics in Cambridge on November 17, 1929. Wittgenstein was forty years old and recently returned to Cambridge and academic philosophy after more than a decade away. The audience was a group called “The Heretics” who were not academic philosophers. The group was established to promote discussion of problems of religion and philosophy. Past speakers to The Heretics had included Virginia Woolf and past members included Wittgenstein’s dear friend David Pinsent who had died in the First World War. Wittgenstein was invited to speak by C.K. Ogden, a co-founder of The Heretics, who had been central in the publishing of Wittgenstein’s book *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* in 1922. The content of Wittgenstein’s lecture survives in the drafts he prepared for the lecture. (The drafts are found in chapter 2 and chapters 6–9 of this volume.)

The “Lecture on Ethics,” as it is now known, is a unique work in Wittgenstein’s philosophical output.¹ It is the sole lecture he delivered to a general, non-philosophical audience. It is the sole work

¹ We use the word “Lecture,” capitalized, to refer to any handwritten or typed version of the draft of the lecture. The word “lecture,” not capitalized, is used to refer to Wittgenstein’s talk to The Heretics on Sunday, November 17, 1929.

Wittgenstein prepared exclusively about ethics. It is the sole lecture for which several complete drafts have survived. The four drafts of the lecture posited in this volume suggest Wittgenstein spoke directly from his prepared text, against his usual practice. All of these qualities give the lecture a special importance.

(2) Ethics, being the Lecture's subject, is its most important aspect in the context of Wittgenstein's philosophical work. The Lecture is a sustained, written treatment of ethics, prepared for an audience. In the rest of his work, Wittgenstein wrote very little about ethics and almost none of it for an audience. Scattered throughout his philosophy working papers are short remarks about ethics, but none is even a page long; none constitutes a sustained train of thought.² Collected, these remarks would be scarcely more than a dozen pages. In the sole book published in his lifetime, the *Tractatus*, there are three somewhat terse pages on ethics.³ These are themselves culled from a dozen pages in Wittgenstein's diary from the second half of 1916.⁴ Those other of Wittgenstein's surviving diaries record perhaps another dozen pages drawn from a few months in 1931 and the first half of 1937.⁵ Simply by the quantity of content, Wittgenstein's Lecture is a major part of Wittgenstein's writing on ethics.

The singular philosophical importance of the Lecture derives from its being a considered train of thought that is a statement

² These are mostly collected in L. Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value: A Selection from the Posthumous Remains*, rev. 2nd edn with English translation, ed. G.H. von Wright, H. Nyman, and A. Pichler, trans. P. Winch (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998).

³ §6.4ff. All references to the *Tractatus* will be by section number. L. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. C.K. Ogden (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981).

⁴ References to wartime notebooks will be by *NB* and date (abbreviated in order of day, month, year). L. Wittgenstein, *Notebooks, 1914–1916*, 2nd edn, ed. G.H. von Wright and G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1979).

⁵ References to these later notebooks will be by *DB* (originally for *Denkbewegungen: Tagebücher, 1930–1932/1936–1937*) and date. L. Wittgenstein, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: Public and Private Occasions*, ed. J. Klage and A. Nordmann (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003).

regarding ethics. It is not a personal note that records a moment of insight or a meditation. (Many of Wittgenstein's diary entries concerning ethics were written in a code to prevent them from being easily read by anyone but Wittgenstein.)⁶ Rather, as Wittgenstein conceived the lecture, he intended to communicate to his audience as one human being speaking to other human beings. By this we can understand that he meant to make himself available personally to the audience without deference to his philosophical achievements or academic status. On the above basis, the Lecture has a good claim to being the most important work on ethics in Wittgenstein's body of work.

(3) If it is accepted that the lecture is important for documenting Wittgenstein's view of ethics, one could nonetheless speculate that ethics was not of much importance to Wittgenstein since he wrote so little about it compared to other philosophical topics. This speculative conclusion is not at all credible. The conduct of Wittgenstein's life, his correspondence, and the testimony of his friends and students all confirm that ethical concerns were of the utmost importance in Wittgenstein's life. Wittgenstein's diaries document his sometimes tortuous struggle to live up to his own high ethical standards. His friends recall his preoccupation with, above all else, being honest about the conduct of one's life. Neither was Wittgenstein reluctant to talk about ethical matters with his friends and fellows.

In despite of the undeniable importance that ethics had for Wittgenstein, it is striking that his philosophical work contains so little about ethics. One suggestion for this apparent contrast is that for Wittgenstein, philosophy itself was a kind of ethical endeavor. Indeed Wittgenstein advertised the manuscript of the *Tractatus* to a would-be publisher as a work whose point was ethical. (The ethical content was in the unwritten second part of the book, which

⁶ The coded entries Wittgenstein made have been published separately and reference will be made by *GT* and date. L. Wittgenstein, *Geheime Tagebücher, 1914–1916*, ed. W. Baum (Vienna: Turia & Kant, 1991).

Wittgenstein maintained was necessarily unwritten.)⁷ The suggestion that philosophy is itself an ethical undertaking could further imply that Wittgenstein had no need for a specific philosophical ethics. If sound, this would explain the dearth of writings on ethics in Wittgenstein's corpus.

There is without question some merit to this suggestion. Wittgenstein did think that philosophy was an activity that demanded many of the same virtues as living decently. Philosophy required courage and honesty and the determination to go the "bloody hard way" toward philosophical conclusions.⁸ The temptations to deceive oneself about the clarity or motives of one's thinking are constant and never lastingly silenced. Philosophy could also have results that were practical and beneficial for living decently. Going from confusion to clarity could help. Understanding that the foundations supposed for a system of thought are not as we thought can also help. The diligence and honesty required for philosophy is a potentially invaluable aid to seeing the truth about one's own life. True to his convictions in this regard, Wittgenstein's own philosophical work often suffered when he became mired in self-reproach for his misdeeds or indecent motives.

We should accept that Wittgenstein thought that philosophy was an ethical endeavor. We should accept in turn that Wittgenstein thought philosophy demanded the same virtues as those required to live decently. We can also accept that philosophy serves ethical ends in this and other ways. We should however reject as false the thoughts that philosophy *always* cultivates virtues that result in living more decently or that philosophy *always* serves ethical ends. It is evident that philosophy does not always serve ethical ends since it has sometimes been used to serve evil ends, such as oppression or division. That philosophy always cultivates the virtues is

⁷ Wittgenstein remarked on this in a letter to a potential publisher. C.G. Luckhardt, *Wittgenstein: Sources and Perspectives* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1979), pp. 94–95.

⁸ R. Rhees, *Without Answers*, ed. D.Z. Phillips (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969), p. 169.

also self-evidently false: While all ethical matters that deserve the name are serious or important, the same cannot be said for all philosophical matters. So progress in philosophy is not of itself progress in something important. Therefore, even if philosophy is an ethical endeavor in the sense accepted above, there is still a distinctive activity within philosophy whose focus and content is ethics. Wittgenstein in the Lecture suggests that ethics is, among other things, the inquiry into what is of “importance” or “really important.”⁹

(4) It remains to be explained why so little of Wittgenstein’s philosophical work concerns ethics. A most direct explanation is found in Wittgenstein’s opinion that most of what was said or written about ethics was misguided, self-important claptrap – just chatter and empty talking.¹⁰ For that reason, he would have been very wary of contributing to prevailing contemporary discussions of ethics. Wittgenstein said he would have liked to reveal ethical chatter for the claptrap he took it to be, even to put an end to it. Yet the way to silence claptrap is not obviously to join the discussion on its own terms for that would be to treat the claptrap as significant. The chatters themselves must come to recognize what they say and write as claptrap, as expressing something empty or unrelated to ethics. Here too, *more* writing about ethics seems an improbable way to stimulate the recognition of ethical writing as claptrap.

If we accept this explanation for the dearth of Wittgenstein’s writing about ethics, the need for a related explanation arises. Supposing Wittgenstein thought that talk of ethics is claptrap, what

⁹ MS 139b1,2. We indicate the page references to drafts of the Lecture by the conventionally agreed manuscript number, variant and page numbers. This reference indicates pages 1 and 2 of MS 139b, which is presented with normalized text as chapter 2.

¹⁰ Luckhardt, *Wittgenstein*, 95; F. Waismann, *Wittgenstein and the Vienna Circle*, ed. B. McGuinness, trans. J. Schulte and B. McGuinness (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1979), p. 69.

did he think of his very own lecture? Was it also claptrap? We cannot explain it as a momentary lapse. Wittgenstein made several drafts for the lecture, it was not a lecture on the spur of the moment. Neither can we explain it as a case of Wittgenstein getting cajoled into a lecture with no way subsequently to get out. Wittgenstein more than once backed out of giving lectures he had agreed to deliver. Moreover, he nowhere repudiates the lecture as a regrettable mistake. On the contrary, in contemporaneous and subsequent discussions with others Wittgenstein made similar points with similar turns of phrase as the ones he used in the Lecture.¹¹

The balance of considerations as well as the earnest character of Wittgenstein's opening remarks in the lecture urge the thought that Wittgenstein did not think he was adding to the claptrap.¹² If this is right, then the difference between what Wittgenstein said in his lecture on ethics and the claptrap spoken by others remains to be explained. Explaining the difference will require introducing Wittgenstein's view of ethics, beginning with his main point in the Lecture.

II

(1) Wittgenstein arrives at the main point of his lecture late in his discussion. He announces "the main point of the paper" and seems to emphasize the point by repeating it:

it is the paradox that an experience, a fact should seem to have absolute value. And I will make my point still more acute by saying 'it is the paradox that an experience, a fact, should seem to have supernatural value'.¹³

¹¹ See 30.12.1929 and 17.12.30 in Waismann, *Wittgenstein and the Vienna Circle*, pp. 68ff. and 115ff.

¹² Cp. MS 139b1–3, see also §II.9.

¹³ MS 139b15–16.

Up to this point, Wittgenstein had puzzled over relative and absolute senses in language. He had also given examples that elicited from him expressions used in absolute or ethical senses. For example, when wondering at the existence of the world, he felt inclined to say, "How extraordinary that anything should exist."¹⁴ These discussions of language and examples of experiences of absolute value that preceded the main point have been mere precursors to making his main point. The main point does not follow from these precedents nor is it a summation. Indeed, to understand the main point and the *purpose* of the lecture, we will have to reconstruct it by moving back and forth in the text of the Lecture. Not only will we move non-sequentially, we will have to consider the content of the Lecture that is overt and covert or latent.

For his main point, Wittgenstein gives the general form of those experiences that arouse in us thoughts of value, those that bring the ethical to mind. The form is paradoxical. At first it is difficult to see why, since a paradox arises when we are drawn toward *two* contradictory beliefs.¹⁵ Wittgenstein gives just one belief: that an experience seems to have absolute value, the kind of value Wittgenstein suggested is problematic. For a paradox, we should be drawn toward the contradictory belief that an experience does not have absolute value. Wittgenstein does think, however, that we are drawn to this belief too. Earlier in the lecture he puzzled over and denied that absolute value could be found in the world. It is not found in the description of a murder¹⁶ or of the whole world,¹⁷ viz. a state of affairs whose value was such as to coerce our pursuit of it on pain of being judged if we do not is an illusion.¹⁸ If absolute value is not found in the world, how could one seem to have an experience with it?

¹⁴ MS 139b11.

¹⁵ Whether this is aptly called a paradox may be doubted and Wittgenstein originally called it a paradox with the admission that "I know not how to call it," MS 139a16.

¹⁶ MS 139b8.

¹⁷ MS 139b7.

¹⁸ MS 139b9–10.

Wittgenstein's reformulation of his main point to make it more "acute" makes a subtle change that makes the paradox more perspicuous by substituting 'supernatural' for 'absolute' value. This exposes a tension between natural and supernatural, or between facts and seeming experiences of value. Just before introducing the main point, Wittgenstein emphasized that experiences occur in the natural world of ordinary facts, saying, "surely, [experiences] are facts; they have taken place then and there, lasted a certain definite time and consequently are describable."¹⁹ The paradox is more acute then, because on the one hand we have an experience having something seemingly supernatural – that is, something *beyond* the natural world – yet on the other hand all experiences are within the natural world, the world of facts. In short, what makes experiences that arouse ethical thoughts seem paradoxical is that something that *occurs* in the natural world should seem to have something found in the supernatural world.

(2) The main point of his paper, Wittgenstein states, is that the experiences that give rise to thoughts of the ethical are paradoxical in form. Wittgenstein argues from this point to the conclusion of the lecture that the paradox cannot be resolved so as to retain both of the beliefs that create the paradox. The paradox is genuine. To resolve the paradox we should reject one belief. The lecture urges this rejection, as we will see below. The obvious belief to reject from the two in the paradox is that concerning absolute or supernatural value since such value was immediately, demonstrably problematic: If we reject belief in experiences having absolute or supernatural value, we accept that all experiences that have value have value that is relative or natural. And, in turn, we should also accept that the experiences that seem to have absolute value only *seem* to do so, since we accepted that all experiences have relative or natural value. Thus, whatever the origin of thoughts of absolute value, of what arouses thoughts of the ethical, these thoughts are unlike anything we call experience. However, as Wittgenstein avows in the

¹⁹ MS 139b15.

last sentence of his conclusion, this does not mean the tendency to have such thoughts, or to try to express them, is one for disrespect or ridicule. (This is another point to which we will attend below, when we consider Wittgenstein's motivation for the lecture.)

(3) Before reaching this concluding statement of respect in the lecture though, Wittgenstein considers an alternative response in which the paradox is dissolved, leaving us to keep hold of both beliefs. We could insist that the experiences that seem to have supernatural value are puzzling but not inexplicable. They just await the right analysis. If true, this would resolve the paradox.

Wittgenstein is "tempted" by this approach and considers a scientific analysis of something analogous to an experience having absolute value, viz. experience of an astounding miracle. He asks his audience to imagine a miracle in which someone suddenly grows a lion's head and begins to roar. Wittgenstein first suggests a scientific approach to this miracle.

Now whenever we should have recovered from our surprise, what I would suggest would be to fetch a doctor and have the case scientifically investigated [. . .]. And where would the miracle have got to? For it is clear that when we look at it in this way everything miraculous has disappeared; unless what we mean by this term is merely that a fact has not yet been explained by science, which again means that we have hitherto failed to group this fact with others in a scientific system. This shows that it is absurd to say 'Science has proved that there are no miracles'. The truth is that the scientific way of looking at a fact is not the way to look at it as a miracle.²⁰

A scientific response preserves neither the miracle nor the experience that inclined us to speak of it as a miracle. It fails to resolve the paradox because in the scientific way of looking at things we cannot keep our experience of the miraculous. For by investigating it scientifically we have sought to dissect the miracle into facts,

²⁰ MS 139b16–17.

albeit ones whose precise interrelation with other facts is not yet known. If the analysis were to succeed or if we presume success to be possible, what was miraculous will no longer be so. It will simply be a part of the natural order. Rather than preserving and explaining the miracle, the scientific way of looking at it will have explained it away.

This result is a return to ground Wittgenstein covered at the outset of the lecture.²¹ At that point he distinguished between words used in their relative and absolute senses. Using words like good or valuable in their relative senses – for example, this is a good chair or a valuable necklace – is ordinary and unproblematic. Good chairs are so relative to other chairs and the functions of chairs; and valuable necklaces are so relative to the price they command. By contrast, words used in an absolute or ethical sense prove problematic, because they cannot be made relative to some order. Things described as absolutely good or valuable are not just the most good or the most valuable, with something slightly less good or valuable close behind. They are outside the order of relative rankings; thus, for example, there are not little and large miracles.²² Indeed Wittgenstein points out that here too ‘miracle’ is being used with relative and absolute senses.²³ To approach the miracle scientifically just is to respond as if the miracle were relative to other happenings, but that approach seems to miss the essence of a miracle, of something being miraculous in an absolute sense.

(4) If it is the absolute sense of ‘miracle’ that we have lost by the scientific approach, then perhaps the right approach is to focus on the use of language. Instead of reanalyzing the paradox regarding experiences having absolute value by science, perhaps a linguistic analysis will reveal our conflicting beliefs are actually compatible. Wittgenstein suggests that to see the world as a miracle is to

²¹ MS 139b4–6.

²² MS 139a18.

²³ MS 139b17.

approach it in wonder:²⁴ “And I will now describe the experience of wondering at the existence of the world by saying: it is the experience of seeing the world as a miracle.”²⁵ Wondering at the existence of the world was Wittgenstein’s experience “*par excellence*” for arousing in him the urge to speak using language in its absolute or ethical sense. He had given the example earlier in the lecture along with similar experiences.²⁶ Thus by focusing on the experience of a miracle one also focuses on those experiences of wonder in which one is moved to speak in an absolute or ethical sense. How are we to describe these experiences?

Once again, Wittgenstein is tempted by a response, this time with a focus on language: “Now I am tempted to say that the right expression in language for the miracle of the existence of the world, though it is not any proposition *in* language, is the existence of language itself.”²⁷ Wittgenstein doubts whether language has the means to express in a sentence the miracle of the existence of the world. To do so, one sentence would have to encompass, as it were, the totality of possible existence. Expressing the totality of possible existence in language would seem itself to require the totality of possible sentences. So Wittgenstein suggests that the existence of language itself can be the expression of the miracle of the world’s existence.

This will not allow us to express what we want, though. The problem is that if we are to use the miracle of the existence of language to express the miracle of the existence of the world, then we must be able to see the existence of language as a miracle whenever we wish to use it for this expression. However, seeing something as a miracle is seeing it in wonder and wonder is not something that we can simply summon as we can summon more attention to some

²⁴ ‘Wonder’ and the German word ‘Wunder’ are near homophones and near homonyms, but ‘Wunder’ may also mean miracle. So it is not surprising that even writing in English, Wittgenstein naturally associated wonder and the miraculous.

²⁵ MS 139b17.

²⁶ MS 139b11.

²⁷ MS 139b17.

detail, for example, of a photograph before us. In our usual relationship with language we can express what we like when we like. By contrast, we have to experience wonder at the miracle of language's existence to use language in an absolute sense. So we cannot say what we want when we want with absolute sense, because we have to wait for this moment of wonder to arrive. This dependence on experiencing wonder at the miracle of language's existence is a reason to doubt that this is a way of saying anything. This doubt obliges Wittgenstein to conclude once again that seeking to speak with an absolute sense to one's words is nonsense. We say nothing.

(5) If we say nothing, why are we inclined still to say such things? Why do some experiences elicit this talk with an absolute sense? Surely if we are inclined to keep saying these things, we must mean something by it. It is just that we don't understand how the things we say mean what they do, if or when they do mean something. As Wittgenstein imagines this objection, we simply await the right logical analysis of this kind of language to understand its meaning.

Here Wittgenstein gives a curious response. He does not refute this objection by proving it wrong. Instead, he immediately rejects it:

Now when this is urged against me I at once see clearly, as it were in a flash of light, 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, *ab initio*, on the ground of its significance.²⁸

This is not a response with an argument. Wittgenstein sees "at once," "in a flash of light," from the start ("*ab initio*") that he will reject any description of absolute value. Each is a marker of immediate recognition without inference or deduction or reasoning. His rejection comes before he has considered any detail of what is proposed. By 'significant' Wittgenstein means 'meaningful' or sense-making. Thus, any attempt to give a meaningful description of

²⁸ MS 139b18.

absolute value – or absolute good, or ‘miracle’ used with absolute sense – is one Wittgenstein would reject solely on the grounds that it proposes a meaningful description of absolute value. Wittgenstein expands on his realization that being nonsensical – having no meaning, making no sense – is of the essence of expressions with an absolute sense. For these expressions aim beyond the natural world, they aim at the super-natural. And just as Wittgenstein had observed that experience is of the world, so too is language of the world, and so too is that of which we can speak meaningfully.

The situation is analogous to the paradox that Wittgenstein says is the main point of his paper. There we had an experience that seemed to have absolute or supernatural value. Here we have a use of language that seems to have an absolute or supernatural sense. In each case, we are inclined toward a contradictory belief, viz. that experiences are part of the natural order or that language is part of, and can solely speak of, the natural order. The contradiction between these beliefs is the paradox. Here too, Wittgenstein proposes that we resolve – rather than dissolve – the paradox by rejecting the belief we have that language with an absolute sense is meaningful. Though people are drawn to speak and write in this way, we should accept that what they appear to say and write does not make sense, at least not in the way other uses of language do. Similarly, even though people may have experiences that incline them to speak this way, the content of these experiences cannot be described in language. Indeed, these experiences only seem to have absolute or supernatural value.

(6) Wittgenstein considered above that the problematic language of absolute value might yet receive a logical analysis that explained how it was meaningful. This he rejected immediately. Wittgenstein’s rejection is curious and unsatisfying. On its face, it seems a peremptory or dogmatic refusal even to consider an explanation, solely because it is an explanation. Why does Wittgenstein respond this way? We will see below that his response serves his main purpose in the lecture, which is to warn against the false hope that any analysis could make ethics less demanding.

One way one could make sense of Wittgenstein's response is to allow that there are some things that are not to be explained. To seek to explain such things is to misunderstand them from the outset. So any attempt to explain them should be rejected solely on the grounds that it is an explanation and thus, necessarily, a misunderstanding. This understanding of Wittgenstein's response is illuminating. Consider miracles. His point in claiming that the scientific approach explains away their miraculousness accords with holding that miracles are not only presently inexplicable, but that miracles are not (by their very nature) to be explained.

There is a relevant parallel with the absolute. If someone wants something's absolute character explained, they misunderstand the absolute. Absolute is not the most of something, like the extreme end of a spectrum. For example, to adapt Wittgenstein's example of feeling absolutely safe in the lecture,²⁹ absolute safety is not the most safe someone can be, with another extremely safe state close behind. Absolute safety is another condition altogether that could not be achieved by maximizing or optimizing safeguards against contingent happenings. To feel or be absolutely safe is to feel that no matter what happens physically through chance or otherwise, one will be alright. Of course this kind of safety is quite outside the order of physical happenings, of chance events. There is, as it were, no relation between the physical world and the safety of absolute safety. So it is misdescription to think that an absolute is simply not-relative. One misunderstands something as absolute if one understands it as part of an order in which things are relative to each other.³⁰

A parallel can be drawn with wonder, for wonder too is not relative, nor does it admit explanation, nor is it a compounding or intensifying of other qualities. When someone gazes in wonder, it is idle to ask them for an explanation of the wonder. A natural response is, "Just look." If the object of wonder does not elicit

²⁹ MS 139b11.

³⁰ One might think that everything must at least be temporally related. But what of temporal miracles, e.g. being in two places at once?

wonder from them, there is no way to bring them to see it by explanation. Consider the innocence of a child, the purity expressed in guileless delight. One can describe the guileless delight or the purity, but there is no fault of understanding if these fail to elicit wonder. Indeed, to try to explain would be to transmute the wondrous to something improbable or unusual – if this is possible. In other cases, for instance wondering at the existence of the world, it may be that the person resistant to the wonder of it – for example, a cosmologist – sees nothing.

(7) A further way to make sense of Wittgenstein's seemingly peremptory response is by his motivation, rather than an argument – since he gives none. I suggest that Wittgenstein's motivation for rejecting any explanation from the outset is that for Wittgenstein an explanation must be in terms of facts. An explanation places something in the natural order of facts and their descriptions. This in turn casts explanations into the realm of science and language. Wittgenstein will not countenance this move to science and language for the ethical and this motivates his rejection of explanations of the ethical.

In the final three sentences that form his conclusion to the lecture, Wittgenstein is clear that insofar as ethics springs from a desire to speak in an absolute sense it can be no science. More, Wittgenstein insists our attempts to speak in an absolute or ethical sense cannot add to our knowledge in any way – presumably because he holds science is the route to knowledge.³¹ Much of the lecture labored the point that language with an ethical or absolute sense is nonsense³² – so much so that many mistakenly think that is its main point.³³ Nevertheless, Wittgenstein heralded his overt conclusion in an early interjection in the lecture when he said, “if I contemplate what

³¹ MS 139b19.

³² MS 139b4–7 and MS 139b11–15 and *passim*.

³³ See, e.g., T. Redpath, “Wittgenstein and Ethics,” in A. Ambrose and M. Lazerowitz (ed.), *Ludwig Wittgenstein: Philosophy and Language* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1972), pp. 95–119; E.D. Klemke, “Wittgenstein's Lecture on Ethics,” *Journal of Value Inquiry* 9.2 (1975): 118–127.

ethics really would have to be if there were such a science [. . .]. It seems to me obvious that nothing we could ever think or say should be *the* thing."³⁴ This seems to him "obvious" – like the subsequent flash of light – which he knows is hardly an argument. Therefore he continues by describing his feeling with a curious metaphor – as he puts it – that if there really were a book on ethics it "would, with an explosion, destroy all the other books in the world."³⁵ It seems likely that this image is meant to convey the idea that if there were a language that could describe ethics it would be wholly unlike language as we know it.

Wittgenstein's motivation in the lecture is to isolate ethics from the realm of fact. Since, on his view, language speaks of facts when it is meaningful, he must also seek to isolate ethics from the realm of language. This motivation originates from Wittgenstein's own ethical outlook. Even without knowing his outlook, clues to his motivation can be found in the lecture. The first clue is Wittgenstein's discussion of a state of affairs that is absolutely right or good. If some facts collected into a possible state of affairs were describable as absolutely good, they would be such that anyone recognizing them as such "would, *necessarily*, bring [them] about or feel guilty for not bringing [them] about."³⁶ One would seek to realize the state of affairs irrespective of one's own preferences or inclinations on pain of guilt and shame. These states of affairs would therefore, in Wittgenstein's view, have a "coercive power" akin to the authority of a judge, whose critical judgment we seek to avoid.³⁷ Thus, if ethics consisted *in* states of affairs (facts), humans would be constrained by their coercive power, like being answerable to an authority. Responses to the ethical would occur, as it were, under coercion

³⁴ MS 139b8.

³⁵ MS 139b9. Wittgenstein's metaphors and the logic that underlay them are explained in more detail in L. Wittgenstein, *Lecture on Ethics: Introduction, Interpretation and Complete Text*, ed. E. Zamuner, E.V.D. Lascio, and D.K. Levy (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2007).

³⁶ MS 139b10.

³⁷ MS 139b10.

or obedience to authority, not by a subject's will. This conclusion Wittgenstein will not accept.

The second clue to Wittgenstein's motivation is implied by what we can do with experiences that can be described. If we can describe, for example, an experience of pleasure, Wittgenstein believes we make it "concrete" and "controllable" and thereby susceptible to scientific analysis.³⁸ This analysis would be part of the psychology of pleasure. (Wittgenstein thought of psychology as a natural science.) Scientific analysis is the analysis of natural fact. By becoming concrete rather than abstract, something – pleasure in this example – becomes apt for analysis, becoming as it were more substantive. In part, its becoming concrete is how it becomes controllable. It is clear though that in becoming controllable the control is not gained by the person whose pleasure it is. The person's will-power or sensibility is not augmented, for example, such that they have new control over their pleasure. Anyone can control someone's pleasure once it has been described and analyzed, for example pleasure can be dulled or intensified by chemicals. Indeed euphoria can be chemically induced selectively. In the realm of language, psychotherapy or rational argument can be used to control the sources and natures of the pleasures that one can and does experience. For example, the pleasures to which an addict is susceptible can be treated by numerous medical manipulations.

The point then is that if an experience is describable, it becomes controllable by human techniques (technology) and subject to human reasoning. A technique – mechanical, chemical or rational – can be learned to manipulate the experience and its objects. If this were so for experiences that give rise to ethical thoughts or speaking with an ethical or absolute sense, then these experiences and their objects could be made concrete and controllable. Once this was accomplished, techniques could be found and used to determine what is ethically required of a subject as well as inducing acceptance or a disposition to do so. In short, mankind could discover the knowledge of how to be better, ethically better. To be better, anyone

³⁸ MS 139b10.

could learn the knowledge and apply its techniques, just like any other area of human endeavor. Most significantly, this knowledge and these techniques could be used by one person to make another person better: to determine for them what is ethically required of them and induce them to accept it. The possibility that someone's ethical bearing could be decided or enacted independent of a subject's will is not one Wittgenstein can accept.

I have suggested elaborations of two indications (clues) of Wittgenstein's ethical outlook in the lecture. The first emerged in Wittgenstein's asserting the impossibility of a state of affairs that could coerce us ethically. The second was latent in Wittgenstein's remarks about how description and analysis facilitated control. Both reveal commitments he has to the nature of ethics. Both are oriented toward the idea that whatever ethics may be, it must leave an ethical subject with solely his own resources with which to face what is ethically demanded of him. He can respond neither in obedience to coercion or authority, nor with the aid of techniques borrowed from the storehouse of human technology, knowledge and reason. As it were, he must depend solely on his heart and soul; or what comes to the same thing, his will and his virtue.³⁹ In other words, in Wittgenstein's ethical outlook, an ethical subject's response must be wholly and solely personal.

(8) With this sketch of the roots of Wittgenstein's motive, his seemingly peremptory and dogmatic response toward the close of the lecture becomes intelligible as a principled response. He will not consider anything that purports to explain ethical experiences or their descriptions in language. It misunderstands their nature to suppose they can be explained. More fundamentally, Wittgenstein conceives of ethics as a personal challenge that must not be evaded. Anything but recourse to one's own will and virtue is an evasion

³⁹ Ethical failure or weakness is no error that might be corrected or overcome, *DB* 19.2.[37]. Earlier Wittgenstein had emphasized that the will alone is bearer of the ethical, of ethical predicates, *NB* 21.7.16.

of personal responsibility for one's own response.⁴⁰ This is a serious response insofar as Wittgenstein is moved by his convictions about the nature of the ethical situation of subjects. This is not tantamount to abandoning his argument. On the contrary, Wittgenstein's response is also a demonstration of his viewpoint. It is the natural conclusion of his argument. Once the argument has run its course, in the matter of the ethical, according to Wittgenstein, there is only the expression of personal conviction as a basis for speaking. There can be no further recourse to techniques of argument or analysis.

By rejecting any possible explanation or analysis of ethical experience or its description in language, Wittgenstein resolves the paradox that is the main point of the overt content of the lecture. He rejects the belief in experiences seeming to have absolute value, which was the source of the paradox. By rejecting this belief Wittgenstein accepts the ethical is beyond explanation or analysis. Effectively, he accepts we are on our own when each of us confronts our ethical situation in the world. Accepting this shows Wittgenstein's own commitment not to evade the ethical demand on him. His revealing his acceptance serves Wittgenstein's overarching motivation for giving the lecture. His motivation is to warn his audience about the false hope that describing and analyzing ethical experiences and expressions will help them to satisfy the ethical demand each subject must answer.

(9) Attributing this overarching motivation to Wittgenstein makes sense of three puzzles regarding Wittgenstein's lecture. These are his introductory remarks in the lecture; his respect for the urge to speak ethical nonsense; and his willingness to give the lecture when he thought talk of ethics was claptrap. Making sense of these will make sense of the lecture overall.

Wittgenstein begins the lecture by explaining his "reason for choosing the subject [he had] chosen."⁴¹ He did not want to "misuse"

⁴⁰ An extended illustration of a struggle of this kind for Wittgenstein is noted in *DB* 19.2.[37].

⁴¹ *MS* 139b1.

his opportunity to address his audience by giving a lecture on logic, but rather wished to speak about something he was “*keen*” on “communicating” to his audience.⁴² In his first lecture draft, he wrote that he wished “to say something that comes from [his] heart [. . .]”⁴³ He would not gratify any interest in physics, psychology or logic. Rather, he wrote:

[. . .] I should use this opportunity to speak to you not as a logician, still less as a cross between a scientist & a journalist but as a human being who tries to tell other human beings something which some of them might possibly find useful, I say useful not interesting.⁴⁴

Contrary to this introduction, the lecture proceeds – overtly – as if it were a lecture on the logic of language, beginning with G.E. Moore’s definition and explanation of ethics, further analyses of these and posited conclusions.⁴⁵ If Wittgenstein were true to his introductory remarks and was not giving a lecture on logic; were communicating something that he was keen to communicate; and had meant it to be one human being telling others something useful, then the content of the lecture must serve a purpose contrary to overt appearances. The overarching motivation attributed to Wittgenstein above – viz. to warn his fellows – is certainly consistent with his prefatory remarks. Indeed, covertly seeking to warn others of the false succor in explanations of ethics would be well served by an overt demonstration of the knots and confusions that result from attempting such explanations. It is just this demonstrative role that should be assigned to the content of the lecture from the point when Wittgenstein says he will “now begin”⁴⁶ the lecture until the point when he rejects any explanation just because it is an explanation.⁴⁷ If we give the bulk of the lecture the role of an exer-

⁴² MS 139b2.

⁴³ MS 139aII. The first five pages of MS 139a were numbered by Wittgenstein using roman numerals.

⁴⁴ MS 139aII.

⁴⁵ MS 139b3.

⁴⁶ MS 139b3.

⁴⁷ MS 139b18.

cise in explanatory futility, we can be true to Wittgenstein's introductory remarks: He does not give a lecture on logic. Moreover, the futility, rather than the detail, is precisely what Wittgenstein is keen to communicate. That is his warning. Recognizing that explanation – and the techniques attendant on it – is futile is useful to anyone who hoped to evade personally facing the ethical demand in his situation in life.

(10) The second puzzle concerns the respect Wittgenstein maintained for people's tendency to produce nonsense. At the end of the lecture Wittgenstein states his belief that "the tendency of all men who ever tried to write or talk ethics or religion was to run against the boundaries of language."⁴⁸ That is, it is inevitable that people produce nonsense because language is unfitted to express something beyond fact, beyond the natural world in which we use language. However, Wittgenstein continues:

Ethics, so far as it springs from the desire to say something about the ultimate meaning of life, the absolute good, the absolute valuable [. . .] 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.⁴⁹

If Wittgenstein were saying that he respects nonsense, this would be peculiar. Nonsense, by its nature, speaks of nothing. What would there be to respect? Wittgenstein's focus is not on the nonsense, but on the human "tendency" to produce it. The tendency indicates something that Wittgenstein deeply respects and would not ridicule.⁵⁰ It indicates generally that humans are capable of an awareness of their situations that is very different from what is usual. Usually, our perspective is shaped by the immediate, contingent situation in which we live, work and desire to achieve our goals. It is the perspective of the here and now, of the familiar, often habitual,

⁴⁸ MS 139b18.

⁴⁹ MS 139b19.

⁵⁰ Waismann, *Wittgenstein and the Vienna Circle*, p. 69.

goings-on in a life. By contrast, sometimes one's perspective or awareness can shift from the usual here and now into one encompassing *all* of existence: what is, what was, and what will be. Contemplated this way, the world seems very different. It seems perhaps timeless or immutable or singular, without relation to anything else, that is, absolute. Another possible manifestation of this perspective is the wonder seen in a miracle. This is also the perspective in which the ethical appears to us, in which we become aware of it. One might say this was awareness of the timeless, immutable, absolute realm of value or worth or good – though saying as much is strictly nonsense on Wittgenstein's view.

In a particular person, the tendency for someone to speak of the meaning of life or related ideas indicates that person's effort to attend to an awareness of existence as absolute, as described above. This tendency is important, for if someone did not have it, he would be ethically incapable or apathetic. Wittgenstein does not think that the ethical demand must be attended by actions – for these would have as their aims states of affairs. However, effort is required of someone as an ethical subject. The effort is directed to awareness and consideration of his situation, of what is ethically demanded of him. The tendency to desire to speak nonsense about the meaning of life is a symptom of the awareness essential to someone's being an ethical subject.

Vindicating Wittgenstein's respect for this human tendency to produce nonsense about the ethical makes clear how his response relates to his overarching motive for giving the lecture. The tendency is the source of the linguistic expressions of the experiences that gives rise to the paradox that is the main point in the lecture. In resolving the paradox, we must disregard these experiences, their putative expressions in language, and the tendency that is their origin. For so long as we attend to the experiences and their expressions in hope of an explanation, we will be attending the wrong thing. Our awareness will be oriented to these worldly experiences and worldly attempts to express or describe them. We will thereby be drawn away from an awareness oriented to the extrawordly that is the prerequisite for attending to what is demanded of us ethically.

Wittgenstein's goal therefore is to show the tendency for what it is: a hopeless "running against the walls of our cage."⁵¹ The paradox must be resolved by rejecting our experiences and their expression as candidates for explanation. No amount of analysis or explanation will produce the slightest progress. There is no answer to be given in language to the riddle of life, to life's meaning. Our attention must be focused elsewhere if one is to confront the situation of an ethical subject.

Notwithstanding that it produces nonsense, the tendency indicates something.⁵² It should not be suppressed, for example as an unhelpful reflex or pathology. What the tendency indicates is important because it is a manifestation of the capacity for ethical response. To suppress the tendency would be to cultivate ethical apathy. Wittgenstein dismisses any such suppression by avowing his deep respect for the tendency. This is wholly consistent with an overarching motive of warning his audience away from the false hope that explanation and analysis will help in meeting the ethical demand, yet it avoids advocating any ethical disinterest.

(11) Finally we can address the question that led us to consider Wittgenstein's ethical outlook and the main point of the lecture. If Wittgenstein thought that talk of ethics was claptrap, why is his own lecture not more of the same? Superficially it is more of the same, just as overtly it appears as the lecture on logic Wittgenstein said he would not give. Superficially it is a lecture in which definitions of absolute good and value are offered, analyses of the same are considered, and knowledge arising from these posited. If Wittgenstein had held that these analyses met with any success, then the content of the lecture too would have been more claptrap by his own lights. For it is precisely claims of this kind – claims to have defined the good or to have analyzed the nature of value – that Wittgenstein believes should not be made. Making such claims misdirects our attention and bolsters our hopes that the personal

⁵¹ MS 139b18.

⁵² Waismann, *Wittgenstein and the Vienna Circle*, p. 69.

challenge of ethics will be relieved by recourse to techniques and methods for answering ethical demands.

Wittgenstein's lecture does not end with even a qualified claim of success. On the contrary, it ends with a rejection of the very possibility of an explanation, definition or analysis. Immediately, one should doubt its superficial appearance or that Wittgenstein is offering more claptrap. Instead, we are better to suppose that Wittgenstein is using this apparent claptrap for a different purpose. Specifically, by demonstrating that it is an exercise in futility, he shows what comes of setting off on this path, viz. nothing but nonsense. The demonstration would thus urge abandoning further attempts. Notoriously, Wittgenstein had used a similar strategy in his book *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. After setting out an apparently cogent theory of logic, Wittgenstein declared that it was all strictly nonsense. If one understood him, understood the thoughts he communicated, one would jettison the theory.⁵³ Ten years later, he seems up to something similar. Wittgenstein again says he aims at "communicating" his thoughts, though he says it will be difficult to understand how he is doing so by his lecture.⁵⁴ Notwithstanding pessimism about the likelihood his strategy will succeed, it seems clear that Wittgenstein is not himself adding to the claptrap about ethics by giving his lecture. On the contrary, if the warning he aims to communicate were heeded by those who heard him, it would put an end to any more claptrap about ethics.

III

(1) The interpretation of the Lecture given above suggests that Wittgenstein had conceived the lecture to convey an aspect of his ethical outlook. Specifically, in his ethical outlook, an ethical challenge is personal such that no progress can be made with the challenge through analysis, explanation or theory. Nonetheless,

⁵³ See the Foreword of the *Tractatus* and §6.54.

⁵⁴ MS 139b1–3.

Wittgenstein agreed to give the lecture because he hoped to communicate something useful and valuable to those attending the lecture. Supposing this interpretation is correct, one might yet wish to ask why Wittgenstein did not make his point directly? Why give a lecture whose apparent subject is ethical *language* if his covert intent is to warn his audience about the proper focus for ethical attention?

One explanation for focusing on language is that Wittgenstein's ethical outlook was shaped by his view of language, so language should be focal. After all, Wittgenstein up to this point had spent the large majority of his adult life concerned with the logic of language. For Wittgenstein, the logic of language did not address solely language. The nature of logic had an expansive scope that included the nature of reality and the limits of science, experience and thought. Perhaps logic determined Wittgenstein's views on ethics too. With this explanation, if Wittgenstein's view of language were to change, so too could his ethical view. For example, if Wittgenstein were to accept that language could describe more than facts, he could also accept that language could describe value or the absolute. Interpretations of the Lecture with this implication have been advanced by some interpreters of Wittgenstein.⁵⁵ This interpretation is probably false, as will be argued below. If it is false, we should reject an explanation in which the lecture's focus on language proceeds from Wittgenstein's ethical view having been determined by his view of language.

(2) Though The Heretics had an academic aura from having been founded in Cambridge, his invitation to speak did not require explicitly or implicitly that Wittgenstein give an academic lecture on logic or language. Virginia Woolf – no academic, for example – had spoken five years earlier about modern fiction in a talk that was nearly half imagined narrative. Nothing about the occasion

⁵⁵ See, e.g., Redpath, "Wittgenstein and Ethics"; Klemke, "Wittgenstein's Lecture on Ethics"; H.-J. Glock, *A Wittgenstein Dictionary* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), pp. 107–111.

precluded Wittgenstein giving a lecture stating his views on ethics and why he thought his views correct. However, given his ethical outlook, there are three obstacles to his doing any such thing: it would be pointless; he had no authority from which to speak; and, even if he could speak with authority, anything he said would be too general to be useful.

What would be the point of setting out his ethical outlook? Suppose, setting aside the Lecture, that Wittgenstein had thought his ethical outlook could be described. What would be the point in describing it? By Wittgenstein's lights, grasp of his view of ethics and its basis would not of itself be an aid to anyone in the audience. He did not have a theory of ethics to offer, the use of which could decide someone what to do ethically. If he had an analysis of the nature of the ethical, it would be counterproductive to pay attention to it by wondering whether it was correct or what its implications were. Wittgenstein's goal is, by contrast, to subdue the allure or interest in a theory or analysis. Liberated from these, one could more readily attend to the perspective in which the ethical challenge of life appears, certain that there were no aids outside one's own resolve. Thus, for Wittgenstein simply to state his view of ethics would serve no purpose. If Wittgenstein were to communicate something useful to his audience, it could not be a view of ethics that was *itself* an object for attention; that would be just the distraction against which he sought to warn. Instead, he could communicate where we should *not* attend. That would be some use.

In any case, supposing Wittgenstein could describe his ethical outlook, from where would his authority come to speak about ethics? For by his own lights, ethics is radically personal. As he put it later, the most he could do was speak in the first person.⁵⁶ As he wrote in a draft of the Lecture, he will speak as one human to another human.⁵⁷ Plainly this is meant to disclaim authority. Neither could he speak with authority about what *we* do ethically, as if it were a matter of reporting patterns of behavior. Certainly Wittgenstein

⁵⁶ In 1930, Waismann, *Wittgenstein and the Vienna Circle*, p. 117.

⁵⁷ MS 139aII.

lacked the standing or authority to command obedience from the audience. Neither had he the authority to present a universal moral truth that fixed what anyone should do. (On any view of ethics, it would be puzzling if someone could be morally responsible for something decided for them.) Wittgenstein could not draw on the authority of any expertise he might possess. It was after all part of his moral outlook that there is no expertise or technique one can use to resolve what to do ethically. More, ethically there is nothing in which one can be expert. There is no domain of ethics with which – though difficult to describe – one nonetheless could become more familiar than others or more observant or more practiced. Ethical challenges are not challenges concerning ineffable entities *in* a supernatural realm about which we cannot speak. An ethical challenge relates a particular person's life to the world as it is now and as it is always: for example, revealed by a tension between momentary expedience and what is decent. We will return to this dynamic below. What is plain is that Wittgenstein both lacked and disclaimed the authority to state his moral outlook as if it were correct.

(3) Suppose – contrary to the lecture – that Wittgenstein had the authority to state his view of ethics and that it were possible to describe his outlook. What could he say? Since ethics is personal, anything he said would either be peculiar to his life or hopelessly general. Aiming for generality and based on the ethical outlook implicit in the lecture and Wittgenstein's other writings, we can make a conjecture at his view.

First, some lives are decent and of some worth, while others are indecent and wasted.⁵⁸ Second, the perspective in which a life has

⁵⁸ The word decent translates 'anständig' which has a broader, somewhat stronger meaning in German. It was a word to which Wittgenstein frequently turned when describing what made a life worthy or creditable, e.g. in *DB* 2.5.[30], 2.10.[30] and 12.3.[37]. Living a decent life was a preoccupation throughout Wittgenstein's life; see the discussion in the postscript to R. Rhees (ed.), *Ludwig Wittgenstein: Personal Recollections* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1981), pp. 212ff. In the footnotes that follow, indicative but not exhaustive references are given for written expressions of Wittgenstein's ideas.

worth is one outside of time, outside of how things are here and now. Worth, whatever it is, is not a hostage to chance.⁵⁹ What was worthy cannot become unworthy because of a change of circumstance. This atemporal view – atemporal because outside time and change – is central.

Third, each person alone can make their life worthy or a waste.⁶⁰ Someone's bearing in life makes his life worthy. It is by a person's will that he bears himself as he does. Our willing is our ethical center.⁶¹ Fourth, a good will – or good willing – is so when it is lucid and pure, not a masquerade to dissemble one's self-serving interests.⁶² These points collect and restate the radically personal nature of ethics, which is also central.

In sum, a worthy life is so regardless of how things turn out and the purity of resolve behind someone's bearing in life amounts to that person's life's worth. This summation is hardly a revealing insight. On the one hand, in an ordinary context, who would dispute that this, broadly, is ethics' basic idea? On the other hand, it is notably unlike much of the moral philosophy of the last 150 years. There are no definitions of good or right. There is no focus on actions and their assessment. There is no earnest attempt to unravel a postulated puzzle about what we are doing when we make an ethical statement or judgment, for example that one ought to strive to live a worthy life. Wittgenstein offers no foundation for ethics, nothing to block the doubts of a sceptic about ethics.

Of course, just this outcome is the point. Wittgenstein has nothing revisionary to offer about the basic ideas of ethics, viz. virtue, vice, temptation, cowardice, courage, good and evil, etc. The starting point for his outlook is the shared culture of the audience with its Judeo-Christian foundation – even if it was dubitable aspects of this that The Heretics meant to question. He is not trying to persuade

⁵⁹ §6.41.

⁶⁰ Wittgenstein moves back and forth explicitly over this idea over a few days. *DB* 18.2.[37], 19.2.[37], 20.2.[37].

⁶¹ "I will call 'will' first and foremost the bearer of good and evil." *NB* 21.7.16.

⁶² Wittgenstein called self-serving dissembling, evasion and self-deception, "antics." *DB* 19.2.[37].

his audience to be moral or convince them that there is a difference between a life of worth and life wasted. He presumes that these are standing convictions for his audience. Their (possible) mistake is to hope that an analysis of cowardice or an explanation of temptation will help to meet ethics' demands. Wittgenstein's warning is that this hope is in vain.

(4) Though Wittgenstein is conservative rather than revisionary, he is not urging passivity or apathy. It is difficult to adopt the atemporal perspective in which absolute worth appears to someone; sometimes the perspective must come unbidden. Equally difficult is for someone to know whether their motives are pure, as opposed to serving one's, for example, anger, vanity or cowardice. Ethics is a struggle against the relative and self-serving. The struggle admits little respite.⁶³ The activity of philosophy is an aid, insofar as it demands honesty in seeking elucidations and moments of clarity. Understanding the logic of thought, experience and language is a means to clarity. But clarity of itself is not an ethical demand, for there is no realm of the ethical – a supernatural or spiritual world – about whose structure, contents or nature we are struggling to become clear. The ethical realm is not unknown to us, it is the realm of decency, worth, virtue, good, and so on. The struggle is to attend solely to this realm by ignoring the distractions of demands to attend to the here and now presented with the urgency of the relative and self-serving. However much philosophy and the logic of language foster the honest pursuit of clarity, they do not constitute the activity of the struggle *to respond* to what is demanded of us ethically.

(5) For the above reasons, Wittgenstein could not just state his view. We can consider the alternative explanation for why Wittgenstein focuses on language in his lecture, even though within his ethical outlook there is nothing to gain from attending to

⁶³ Striving to live well is like saying it is a "battle through life toward death, like a fighting, a charging soldier. Everything else is wavering, cowardice, sloth, thus wretchedness." *DB* 20.2.[37].

language. The alternative explanation – which we will argue is doubtful – is that Wittgenstein’s view on ethics was determined by his view on language. The guiding insight in this explanation is that Wittgenstein’s account of language in the *Tractatus* committed him to the view that language could describe solely facts, not value. Therefore, Wittgenstein had to give an account of ethics in the Lecture that placed value outside the world of fact and beyond a language that describes facts.

One reason to doubt this explanation is that Wittgenstein acknowledged as influences on his ethical outlook several thinkers whose ethical views do not derive from considerations about language, viz. William James, Kierkegaard, Schopenhauer and Tolstoy among others.⁶⁴ Thus, at best, Wittgenstein’s ethical outlook could have been part-determined by his view of language, since some part must have been determined by these other influences. This leaves open *which* parts of his ethics were determined by which influence. Even if the particular effects of Wittgenstein’s influences remain indeterminate, it is possible that Wittgenstein’s views on fact and value were determined by something other than his view of language.

However, the thesis that Wittgenstein’s ethical outlook was determined by his view of language can be doubted directly. For it seems a corollary of this explanation that if views on language determine views on ethics, then some changes in a view on language should change a view on ethics. If *no* change in a view on language could change a view on ethics, then it would appear idle to claim that a view of language determines a view on ethics. Wittgenstein’s view on language did change substantially, but his view on ethics did not change. Therefore it is improbable that Wittgenstein’s view on language determined his view on ethics.

Highlighting the considerable continuity in Wittgenstein’s ethical outlook from the notes he made in 1916 to the Lecture to the notes

⁶⁴ These and similar influences are recalled by those who knew him, see Rhees, *Ludwig Wittgenstein*, and in remarks scattered in his working papers, see Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*.

he made in 1937 will show that Wittgenstein's outlook did not change. It will also bring out the importance of the atemporal perspective essential to ethics. By contrast with this continuity, there can be little question that Wittgenstein's philosophical views on the logic of language changed from the *Tractatus* to the views developed in the 1930s and posthumously published in the *Philosophical Investigations*. Scholars can debate the extent of the change, but not that there was change. Without question, the change came in stages, but it is beyond doubt that Wittgenstein had accepted major change by 1936.⁶⁵ Wittgenstein returned to philosophy at Cambridge in early 1929 already alive with the need to revise his former philosophical views. Arguably, Wittgenstein had already given up the *Tractatus* account of language when he drafted the Lecture.⁶⁶ If true, this would urge the rejection of any link between the *Tractatus* view of language and the Lecture's view of ethics.

(6) To show the independence of Wittgenstein's view on ethics from his view on language, we can establish the former's unchanging continuity during the period of change for his view on language. The first written record of Wittgenstein's thoughts on ethics is in his notebooks from 1916 during his military service in the First World War. His thoughts had turned to the purpose of life.⁶⁷ They cover just eight months of short notes comprising around a dozen pages. In them Wittgenstein writes that ethics concerns the absolute and non-contingent⁶⁸ and that ethics is personal because bound up with one's willing.⁶⁹ He writes that ethical concerns appear in an

⁶⁵ Wittgenstein recorded that his thought was completely different from fifteen years earlier, *DB* 28.1.32. A semipublic precipitate of this change is in L. Wittgenstein, *Preliminary Studies for the "Philosophical Investigations," Generally Known as the Blue and Brown Books*, 2nd edn., ed. R. Rhees (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1960).

⁶⁶ J. Hintikka, "The Crash of the Philosophy of the *Tractatus*: The Testimony of Wittgenstein's Notebooks in October 1929," in Enzo De Pellegrin (ed.), *Interactive Wittgenstein: Essays in Memory of Georg Henrik von Wright* (London: Springer, 2011), pp. 153–169.

⁶⁷ *GT* 28.5.16.

⁶⁸ *NB* 24.7.16, 30.7.16, 2.8.16, 10.1.17.

⁶⁹ *NB* 1.8.16, 2.8.16, 5.8.16, 12.8.16, 2.9.16, 17.10.16.

atemporal perspective:⁷⁰ “the good life is the world seen *sub specie aeternitatis*. [. . .]”; “The usual way of looking at things sees objects as it were from the midst of them, the view *sub specie aeternitatis* from outside.”⁷¹ The phrase ‘*sub specie aeternitatis*’ is philosophically well known, meaning under an aspect of eternity or from the perspective of eternity, that is, an atemporal perspective. The commonality in ethical outlook between the 1916 notebooks and the Lecture is immediately apparent since both have the same points of reference as in the précis given above (§III.3), viz. the personal concern with a worthy life and the atemporal perspective. The 1916 notebooks contain additional themes that are not germane here, because they do not appear in the *Tractatus*.⁷² Thus continuity is evident from 1916 to 1929. What about after the lecture, that is, after 1929?

(7) Wittgenstein’s notebook entries on ethics in 1937 have similar points of reference to those in the Lecture and the 1916 notebooks. An extract from Wittgenstein’s diary in 1937 will show this, as well as further defining the contours of Wittgenstein’s ethical outlook. The extract was written when Wittgenstein was unhappy, in Norway with his philosophical work not going well.

Do I find it right that a person suffers an entire life for the cause of justice, then dies perhaps a terrible death, – & now has no reward at all for this life? After all, I admire such a person, place him high above me & why don’t I say, he was an ass that he used his life like that. *Why* is he not stupid? Or also: *why* is he not the “most miserable of human beings”? Isn’t that what he should be, if now that is *all*, that he had a miserable life until the end? But consider now that I answer: “No he was *not* stupid since he is doing well now *after* his death.” That is also not satisfying. He does *not* seem stupid to me, indeed,

⁷⁰ NB 6.7.16, 8.7.16, 7.10.16.

⁷¹ NB 7.10.16, also used at §6.45 and MS 109, 28 (22.8.1930) in Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, p. 7.

⁷² For detail see D.K. Levy, “Wittgenstein’s Early Writings on Ethics,” in Wittgenstein, *Lecture on Ethics*.

on the contrary, seems to be doing what's *right*. Further I seem to be able to say: he does what's right for *he* receives the *just* reward and yet I can't think of the reward as an award after his death. Of such a person I want to say "*This human being must come home.*"⁷³

The passage is not a statement of fact nor an answer to the question with which Wittgenstein began. Instead, it ends with Wittgenstein exclaiming. The question was whether it is right that someone should live a miserable life in the cause of justice and have nothing to show for it?⁷⁴ We can imagine someone who has struggled against a cruel, unjust regime without living to see its fall or any significant effects of his struggle. Wittgenstein allows that a commonsense thought is that this man is a stupid ass, who has endured a misery that is now all there will have been in his life. He has squandered the chance of happiness during the time allowed to him.

This thought, though common sense, contrasts with Wittgenstein's esteem and admiration for such a man. He is inclined to reply by saying that the man was not stupid, because, after his life has ended, in death he is doing well. This does not quite satisfy Wittgenstein, as if the words do not quite make sense. Though it seems the man was not dumb, though it seems he did what was right, though it seems he received what was right, Wittgenstein cannot accept that the man has been rewarded for his life.⁷⁵ Wittgenstein is constrained by language, seeming to say something, but unable to mean it; to say it as if it were true, to believe what he says. Wittgenstein cannot confute the commonsense thought that the man has made a wrong choice in his life with nothing to show for it. He wants to do so. There is something also right about how the man lived, but

⁷³ DB 15.2.[37]. The final sentence quoted was originally "Dieser Mensch muß heimkommen," with a single underline under the whole sentence and a double underline under "muß."

⁷⁴ Wittgenstein discounts the possibility of reward or punishment in an afterlife at the outset of the same diary entry.

⁷⁵ Cp. §6.422.

Wittgenstein cannot say what. Instead, he is drawn to exclaim, almost cry out; not answer, not decide.

This example so far shows several things. Wittgenstein considers an ethical matter and is blocked by language, he struggles to make sense. On the one hand, there is considerable intuitive sense to what is commonly said about the man who dies justly but without reward or recognition – that he has lost in life. On the other, Wittgenstein cannot accept that the man has lost – on the contrary! – but neither can he express his resistance by saying what would contradict or confute the common assertion. Frustrated, instead he exclaims. The exclamation Wittgenstein makes – declaring that the man must be returned from life back whence he came – is borderline nonsense insofar as it is neither an order on which someone could act nor a description of how things are. It is at best personal, serving some purpose for Wittgenstein.

The Lecture unquestionably aimed to make clear that talk of ethics is nonsense in its very essence. Talking about ethics ends in a frustrated attempt to run against the boundaries of language.⁷⁶ The repeated attempts to do so are at best personal expressions or symptoms of a struggle. At this level of generality, the example above recapitulates the pattern described in the Lecture. Wittgenstein begins with ethics, gets tied up in language and winds up with frustrated nonsense. A year and a half after giving the lecture Wittgenstein addressed exclamations in ethics thus, “an ethical proposition is a personal act. Not a statement of fact. Like an exclamation of admiration.”⁷⁷ Indeed, Wittgenstein ended the lecture with an exclamation, viz. expressing his admiration by exclaiming upon the tendency to produce nonsense while thinking of ethics.

(8) A commonality between Wittgenstein’s view that talk of ethics is nonsense in the Lecture and the extract from 1937 is immediately evident. It shows that Wittgenstein was concerned with a worthy life. There are further points of commonality. Chief among these is

⁷⁶ MS 139b18.

⁷⁷ DB 6.5.[31].

the contrast between the temporal character of mundane life and the atemporal character of the ethical (itself an aspect of the absolute). Already we noted that Wittgenstein made an association between seeing things under the aspect of eternity and the ethical from his earliest philosophy. For Wittgenstein, understanding the ethical aspect required apprehending it outside time, outside the relative, like a miracle.

Consider again the example of the just man who has lived and died miserably. If it were possible to confute the commonsense view that he has wasted his life, it would have to be because his reward outside life was greater. To see it as greater, we could suppose his reward is eternal and therefore far greater than the misery of his, by contrast, brief life. This supposition implies covertly comparing the *relative* durations of life and eternity, that is, it makes a temporal comparison. Frustrating this supposition, however, is Wittgenstein's rejecting any temporal comparisons in the continuation of the same notebook entry: "One imagines eternity (of reward or of punishment) normally as an endless duration. But one could equally well imagine it as an instant. For in an instant one can experience *all terror & all bliss*."⁷⁸ Someone's reward or punishment can be had "in an instant" and in this sense does not occur as an event in time, with a beginning and an end. Therefore the kind of reward or punishment we can imagine for good or bad living should be understood as atemporal and not within life or after death, since temporal comparisons are of no import.

Wittgenstein continues by discussing the consequences of living badly as leading at its extreme to an abyss of hopelessness, but notes, "*The abyss of hopelessness* cannot show itself in life," by which he means the flow of time within a life.⁷⁹ Indeed, Wittgenstein continues that when someone is in a state of hopelessness "in a certain sense time does not pass at all in it." Wittgenstein's idea seems to be that when one is truly without hope one does not even hope that things will or could change. Hopelessness, when it is the real thing,

⁷⁸ DB 15.2.[37].

⁷⁹ DB 15.2.[37].

must be understood atemporally for the person who experiences it or contemplates it. This is in contrast to pain, where Wittgenstein notes that one can always ask when the pains will stop or wish that they could.⁸⁰ Unlike hopelessness, nothing about being in pain precludes thinking of one's pain as an event, with a duration in time, within one's life.

(9) Wittgenstein struggles as he continues to describe what happens to the just man on his death, struggling with the (temporal) idea that the the man's life will "come to a head." He tries various phrases for what must occur for the just man, such as his becoming immediately one with the "light." The struggle itself is not as important as Wittgenstein's recognition that the phrases for which he is groping are religious language. He concludes, "It therefore seems that I could use all those expressions which religion really uses here."⁸¹ Immediately, though, he recoils from using them:

These images thus impose themselves upon me. And yet I am reluctant to use these images & expressions. Above all these are not *similes*, of course. For what can be said by way of a simile, that can also be said without a simile. These images & expressions have a life rather only in a *high* sphere of life, they can be rightfully used only in this sphere. All I could really do is make a gesture which means something similar to "unsayable," & say nothing.⁸²

Directly the parallel with the Lecture is apparent. In the lecture Wittgenstein describes how ethical and religious language draws us toward similes or allegories but he rejects them for the identical reason that a simile can always be re-expressed without a simile to describe a fact directly.⁸³ Second, Wittgenstein describes this language as having a use solely in some higher sphere, echoing the lecture's claim that using this language is trying to go "*beyond* the

⁸⁰ DB 15.2.[37]

⁸¹ DB 15.2.[37]

⁸² DB 15.2.[37]

⁸³ MS 139b14–16.

world.”⁸⁴ Third, the explicit conclusion of the Lecture is that what we wish to express about experiences that arouse thoughts of ethics is unsayable. The passage above makes the same point, making vivid that we are left with solely a gesture that indicates nonsense.

The discussion of passages from one day in Wittgenstein’s 1937 notebook shows the significant commonality between Wittgenstein’s ethical outlook then and in the Lecture. More comparisons in the same vein are possible. However, one is sufficient to show the continuity in Wittgenstein’s view on ethics from 1916 to 1937, during which his view on language changed considerably. This outcome is a strong reason to reject as improbable the claim that Wittgenstein’s view on ethics in the Lecture was determined by his view on language – that the lecture’s content was constrained by the *Tractatus* account of language.

(10) We noted that Wittgenstein’s ethical outlook precluded describing his outlook directly. The lecture’s explicit conclusion is that ethical language is nonsense. Taken together it seems that Wittgenstein thought that language is of no account and has no use for ethical subjects. Is Wittgenstein denying the obvious, that we do speak to each other using ethical language? If he thought that ethical language is nonsense, surely he contradicts himself when giving examples drawn from what we do say, for example when, in the lecture, he distinguishes between tennis and beastly behavior.⁸⁵ On the contrary, we will conclude that Wittgenstein thinks there is nothing wrong with our ethical language, except our understanding of it.

The question we had been considering was why give a lecture whose apparent subject is ethical language if the lecture’s true purpose is to warn the audience about the right focus for ethical attention? An obvious answer is suggested by our earlier interpretation of the lecture. Wittgenstein thought that most of what was said

⁸⁴ MS 139b18.

⁸⁵ MS 139b5–6.

or written about ethics was pernicious claptrap that should stop. If one showed that the language used for this claptrap was nonsense, that would be a good start to shutting up the claptrap.⁸⁶ This claptrap – by moralists, churchmen, and intellectuals – is pernicious because it purports to be the real essence of ethics: a description of what is good, valuable, really important, or the meaning of life and the sources of its worth.⁸⁷ Wittgenstein wants to stop it because it misunderstands the limits in language. We want our language to encompass the essence of ethics because doing so gratifies the desire to evade the personal challenge of the ethical. It feeds the hope that ethics could be a science. Striving for a language that describes ethics in its essence is a persistent symptom of a craving for something to help make life easier where it is, and must be, hardest.

Wittgenstein's persistent claims about the impossibility of expressing anything about the essence of ethics by language are not concerns with language per se. The undoubted importance of language to Wittgenstein's philosophy has obscured this. The mistaken view that the Lecture is a consequence of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* account of language intensifies the obscurity. For Wittgenstein, the attack on language is a proxy for his conviction that the ethical challenges of life cannot be solved by science, by scientific method, nor indeed by anything plausibly conceived as a technique that could be learned, discovered or known.

Wittgenstein attacks the philosophical focus on moral language – perhaps initiated by Moore, now assuming the guise of meta-ethics – because it is another refuge for the idea that ethical problems might be described such that they had solutions or could be *solved* – for example, by realizing optimal states of affairs or assessing the warrants for the truth of propositions about ethics. So it is not language as such that is the target of Wittgenstein's animus. It is the misunderstanding that language can encompass the essence of ethics. In this misunderstanding is harbored the hope that ethics

⁸⁶ Perhaps Wittgenstein recalled the paper he had heard at The Heretics on March 2, 1913 by W.L. Scott in which he critiqued Moore's book on ethics, *Principia Ethica*.

⁸⁷ MS 139b4.

will yet be subdued into a domain of human technology, by breaking down the ethical using the prism of logical analysis. If ethics did yield to technique, the difficulty in living a decent or worthy life would have an altogether different character. A human subject's freedom, for example, would cease to be a source of ethical anxiety.

The misunderstanding of ethical language Wittgenstein perceives is not one that requires a new language to clarify. Our present language is fine as long as we accept it cannot do more than it can or all that we want – viz. describe the essence of ethics. Much of our ethical language *relates* to the ethical without describing it. The misunderstanding is in not seeing that some ethical language is relative instead of absolute or that some of it exclaims rather than describes. Much of what we call ethical judgment is tacitly relative, for example, relative to a political or social ideal or shared norms of prudence. In his later philosophy, on the few occasions when he speaks of 'good' in relation to ethics, he is careful to limit its use to calling attention to something. It is not used to settle an argument or provide justification for the application of a technique, such as a decision-making technique.⁸⁸ Indeed, use of religious or ethical language can even limit the possibility for people to contradict each other, thus making it of little use in argument or even assertion.⁸⁹ Language that relates to the ethical or language used in a relative sense is language with a meaningful use.

Therefore, it would be a mistake to suggest that Wittgenstein believes that all language that borders or relates to the ethical is nonsense, of no account or useless. This ethical language's use is not to describe the *absolute* good, absolute valuable and so on. It may be exclaiming, drawing attention, marveling, confessing and so on. Wittgenstein's specimen reproach, "You are behaving like a beast," relates to ethics in that it brings the dialogue to an absolute

⁸⁸ L. Wittgenstein, *Wittgenstein's Lectures, Cambridge, 1932–1935: From the Notes of Alice Ambrose and Margaret Macdonald*, ed. A. Ambrose (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1979), p. 36.

⁸⁹ L. Wittgenstein, *Lectures & Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*, ed. C. Barrett (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1978), pp. 53ff.

value judgment.⁹⁰ It is also obviously meaningful, not nonsense. Language that borders the ethical may also be used to show, among other things, fellowship, support or pity. As an example: one could say to a man who faced a difficult ethical situation, “Well, God help you.”⁹¹ Language is a part of how we constitute living together and relate to each other. It is integral to the human organism, so to speak.⁹² Notwithstanding his views of language used with an absolute sense, Wittgenstein would not deny the use and meaning of language relating to the ethical – itself a kind of ethical language.

Wittgenstein’s views on language throughout his work include the idea that we speak of a natural reality that is amenable to control, to techniques, analysis and so on. Facts and factuality are not his targets – nor therefore a fact–value divide – but rather whether of what we speak can be controlled. Some things, including facts, must be accepted as beyond control.⁹³ These are among the limits of a subject’s will and very important to the character of the ethical demands someone will confront. Wittgenstein’s conclusion in the lecture is that language cannot overcome or alter the limits that give the ethical demand its intrinsic character. He sought to preserve the personal, absolute and otherworldly character of this demand by securing it from the other ways we use language, from the perspective in which worldly descriptions make sense. What we can do with ethical language remains within similar limits, however much we might hopefully seek to overcome the limits. Limiting ethical language to speaking in the first person is one form of a limit on what can be done in language. It would not preclude confession of one’s vices for example. However, neither does the language of confession confer control over anything but the confession, which in a simple sense cannot be contradicted by fact or authority or

⁹⁰ MS 139b6.

⁹¹ R. Rhees, “Some Developments in Wittgenstein’s View of Ethics,” *Philosophical Review* 74.1 (1965): 23.

⁹² §4.002.

⁹³ See Wittgenstein’s talk of “rage against facts” in *DB* 19.2.[37].

another person.⁹⁴ What this example shows is that Wittgenstein's view of ethics in the lecture is serious and severe, but is contrary neither to common sense nor to the common idea of the character of ethics.

We can restate the closing of Wittgenstein's lecture as follows. Talking about the essence of ethics – the absolute good – is strictly nonsense but it indicates something in each of us to which, if one is an ethical being, Wittgenstein relates with, possibly silent, respect.

⁹⁴ Cf. §6.422 on the nature of punishment for wrongdoing.