Ethical Eliminativism
&
The Sense of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*

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ABSTRACT: This paper argues that Wittgenstein holds that ethical propositions are nonsense, in that they lack any meaning whatsoever, that they are redundant, in that the work they are intended to do is already being done by other features of our language, and that they are harmful, insofar as they prevent us from appreciating what is of genuine ethical significance in our lives. Its aim is to outline a sense in which Wittgenstein can be seen to be trying, through the elimination of "ethical propositions", to reconnect us with the ethical commitments embodied in our ordinary "non-ethical" language, and so the ways in which ordinary language might be taken to be ethically revealing.

§1. My claim in this paper is that Wittgenstein is an ethical eliminativist in two senses: first, he wants to eliminate ethical propositions as nonsense; second, he takes it that there is an ethical point to eliminating ethical propositions as nonsense. (And I shall want to suggest that this is not as paradoxical as it might seem.)

More fully, I will argue that Wittgenstein holds that ethical propositions are nonsense, in that they lack any meaning whatsoever, that they are redundant, in that insofar as there is some coherent work for them to do that work is already being done elsewhere by other (by contrast, "non-ethical") features of our language, and that they are harmful, in that they obstruct our ability to appreciate (and so to act upon, or in accordance with) what is genuinely of ethical significance in our lives.

What Wittgenstein calls the ethical "sense", or point, of the *Tractatus* consists in the removal of this obstacle to our appreciation of the ethical.

(Although I focus on Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* here, I think these views are also attributable to the later Wittgenstein.)

The claim that Wittgenstein is an ethical eliminativist should not be controversial, given that he writes in the *Tractatus* that "there can be no ethical propositions" (Wittgenstein 1974: §6.42). But commentators have found it notoriously difficult to come to terms with this remark and still say wherein lies the ethical point of the *Tractatus* itself (see below), commonly resorting to the idea that Wittgenstein held that various ethical propositions, while not having whatever it takes to have sense (and so to be propositions) according to what the *Tractatus* says sense is, are nevertheless somehow right-on-the-money.

But Wittgenstein, as I understand him, even in the *Tractatus*, is not concerned with developing a theory of sense at all, but with our basic capacity for making sense of a sentence. And so his claim that there cannot be any ethical propositions is not the claim that whatever sense ethical propositions have lies beyond the boundaries of sense according to whatever theory he holds there, because he does not hold a theory of sense there at all. His claim is rather that there is no such thing as an ethical proposition, and so that all those things we think of as ethical propositions are either not really ethical or not really propositions, and the sense in which they are not really propositions is the sense in which they are simply empty: we cannot make sense of them because we have not yet given them any meaning. They are, simply, nonsense.

The problem then is this: how could someone think that ethical propositions lack any meaning whatsoever? At least, that is the first problem.

The second problem is this: Wittgenstein, famously, in a letter to his potential publisher Ludwig von Ficker, describes the *Tractatus* as having an ethical point (reprinted in Luckhardt 1996: 94-5).[1] But the *Tractatus* is almost exclusively concerned with issues to do with language and logic, and does not contain anything that could be construed as an ethical proposition at all (unsurprisingly, since it claims that there can be no such thing). Worse, it ends by declaring that its own propositions are nonsense, and that understanding Wittgenstein consists in

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[1] For reasons of space, I do not reproduce the letter here.

recognizing that. Far from making an ethical point, its aim seems to be to correct our misunderstanding of the logic of language, exposing illusions of sense as such and giving us a better grasp of what we are saying when we are saying anything at all. So in what sense could such a book be construed as having an ethical point at all, and what could that point possibly be?

Its ethical point cannot consist simply in the self-understanding that such a book might help us attain: for instance, understanding of ourselves as prone to be taken in, in various ways, by the illusion of making sense where really we are making none. That alone seems insufficiently "ethical". But neither can its ethical point consist simply in the clarity of thought the *Tractatus* enables us to achieve: clarity of thought might be taken to be an ethical ideal insofar as it enables us to get clearer on the content of, and logical relations among our ethical propositions, and on the non-ethical background against which we assent to or dissent from ethical propositions. But if there can be no ethical propositions, then the *Tractatus* cannot be construed as making an ethical point in these ways. So again, the second problem is this: what could the ethical point of the *Tractatus* be?

I think we can begin to address the first of these problems by answering the second, and that is what I do here. My aim is to outline a sense in which Wittgenstein can be seen to be trying, through the elimination of "ethical propositions", to reconnect us with the ways in which ethical commitments are embodied in our ordinary "non-ethical" language, and so the ways in which ordinary language might be taken to be ethically revealing.

§2. Wittgenstein's explanation of the ethical sense of the *Tractatus* (in his letter to von Ficker) begins with a distinction between two parts of his "work": the part that he has written (in the manuscript of the book), and "everything [he has] *not* written". And Wittgenstein explains what he means by that by drawing a contrast,

implicitly, between two ways in which one might imagine one could delimit the ethical.

Wittgenstein's book does this from within, in the same way that it delimits language, by providing (in the general propositional form) a means of saying everything there is to be said. But one might also imagine that one could delimit the ethical from the outside: one might imagine that the ethical is just one part of our lives among others, that it is possible to adopt an external perspective from which to describe what ethics is. That approach would involve assuming that ethics is the subject of some propositions but not others, that there is a subset of propositions that are the ethical propositions in that they alone deal with this specific area of our lives.

In using that contrast to illustrate the distinction between the two parts of his work – the part he has written and everything he has not written – Wittgenstein ties that phrase ("everything I have not written") specifically to the attempt to delimit ethics from the outside, to the production of "ethical propositions". And in doing that, he ties his explanation of the ethical sense of the *Tractatus* specifically to its exclusion of ethical propositions, to its not including anything that could be construed as a proposition of ethics.[2]

So Wittgenstein suggests that the ethical point of the *Tractatus* consists in its exclusion or elimination of ethical propositions. But he also suggests three further things that together illustrate what makes that elimination ethical. First, the reason for their exclusion is that they are nonsense. The only way to delimit the ethical is from within; anything else leads only to babbling, to nonsense. Second, although there is no such thing as an ethical proposition, Wittgenstein clearly does not think that there is no such thing as the ethical: his book delimits the ethical from within, and what it delimits is not nothing. Hence, not only are ethical propositions nonsense, they are also redundant, since the work that they are intended to do (here, delimiting the ethical) is already done by other features of our language (in

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[2] What is important about that second part, in my view, is simply that it is *not there*.

this case, by all of it). Third, ethical propositions themselves stand in the way of our appreciation of what is of genuine ethical significance: von Ficker, for instance, because he has a misconception of what it is to engage in ethics, will not be able to recognize that the book has an ethical point at all, even though, according to Wittgenstein, it says much that von Ficker himself wants to say. Thus, the ethical sense of the *Tractatus* consists in its elimination of ethical propositions as nonsense, as redundant, and as harmful.

I want to illustrate what I mean with three short examples. The first is from (not ethics but) logic and Russell's theory of types. Russell's theory is designed to prohibit certain combinations of words in order to prevent paradoxes such as that involved in the idea of the set of all sets that are non-self-members. But if the combination of words in question makes sense then there is no sense in prohibiting it, and it would be nonsense to try. And if the combination does not make sense, then there is nothing that could sensibly be prohibited (just a string of signs that has not yet been given a meaning) and again it would be nonsense to try. Either the combination of words already makes sense, in which case there is no sense in trying to prohibit it, or it does not make sense, in which case there is nothing to be prohibited; in both cases, the result of trying to prohibit something is sheer nonsense. But not only is the attempt at prohibition here nonsensical, it is also redundant: there is nothing that needs to be prohibited. The work the theory of types was wanted for is already done by our not having given the words a meaning. No further step is required. The idea that more is required, however, is harmful insofar as it encourages us to adopt a picture of the limits of language as limitations, making it more likely that we take nonsense for sense (and vice versa) by encouraging us in thinking that there is some substantial thing that needs to be prohibited. Its attempts to police the boundaries of language make those boundaries harder to see.

My second example is promises. There is no level of commitment conveyed in promising that cannot also be conveyed by other expressions of intentions, and in

that sense promises are only ever redundant. Insofar as promises are taken to be of special ethical significance over-and-above those other expressions, no meaning has been assigned to them. But since there is no greater level of commitment that can only be expressed in promising, any greater commitment they do carry can only come at the expense of the commitment embodied in those other means of expression. The result of that is a severing of the ties between one's words and one's actions in those ordinary cases, and since there is nothing special about promises themselves that may also come to affect promises too. So, as with Russell's attempts to police the borders of language, treating promising as specially ethically significant in this way has the opposite effect to that intended: loosening, rather than strengthening the ties between words and actions.

My final example comes from the word "duty". Sometimes we may want to justify certain courses of action by appeal to a duty arising out of other commitments in our lives. For instance, one might want to justify certain actions in times of war by appeal to one's duty to those one loves. But here again one might think that this talk of duty is both nonsense and redundant: that there is no more than, and nothing more is needed than, the emotion that grounds the supposed duty. If one loves someone, then one will behave in such-and-such a way towards them in such-and-such a situation, and the character and strength of one's love will be revealed in the ways one does behave, or in one's attitudes to the ways one did behave. There is no third thing mediating between the emotion and the action it gives rise to. But imagining there to be such a thing may itself be harmful insofar as it creates a distance between the emotion and the action and draws our attention away from what does ground our actions onto the supposed duty, thereby creating a situation in which they could potentially be construed as coming into conflict with one another so that the attempt to justify certain courses of action in this way opens the path to undermining those same actions.

§3. The outline given here is only a sketch, but it is meant to suggest an alternative to Cora Diamond's views of Wittgenstein's attitude to the ethical and to ethical propositions. Diamond describes Wittgenstein's attitude using phrases such as "an attitude to the world and life", and she takes such phrases to retain their attractiveness even after we recognize their emptiness (Diamond 2000: 153-4). I want an account of Wittgenstein's attitude to the ethical that does not depend on recognizing a continued role for such phrases but that still accounts for the sense that ordinary "non-ethical" language can be ethically revealing. My suggestion is that ethical discourse stands in the way of an immediacy between our words and actions, hindering our ability to perceive both what our words commit us to and when we do not live up to those commitments, so that removing that form of talk from our lives is a way of taking (rather than disowning) responsibility for our words. (It could be called a kind of linguistic existentialism.) Seeing that that form of discourse not only does not serve the needs or interests it is meant to serve but actually opposes them is one way of coming to see how ethical eliminativism could appear to be an attractive alternative, and so one way of understanding how the conclusion that ethical propositions are empty nonsense could be thought to be anything other than simply false.

Literature

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