

Ethics and Relativism in Wittgenstein

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1. Ethics

Wittgenstein saw ethics as transcendent, ineffable, and mystical. Ethical matters cannot be expressed in the form of propositions. They must be experienced and one had better remain silent about them. "Wovon man nicht sprechen kann, darüber muß man schweigen" (TLP 7). Ethics and value in general are not part of this world. They transcend it. "Die Ethik ist transzendental" (TLP 6.421). Ethics is not a fact among facts. Even this-worldly ideas of reward and punishment do not touch it (TLP 6.422). These views of Wittgenstein remained stable throughout his life. At least Rush Rhees, D.Z. Phillips, and Cyril Barrett have argued for this, and I think convincingly. Thus Barrett writes:

I am prepared to go so far as to say that Wittgenstein did not abandon his earlier views on ethics and religious belief with their attendant notions of the mystical, transcendental, inexpressible, viewing *sub specie aeternitatis*. I wish to state that [...] all the features of the earlier views can be fitted into the new conceptions of language-games and forms of life." (Barrett, xiii)

This fitting of views on ethics into conceptions of language games will be important in the third part of my talk. It is in this fitting, or combination, that I think problems arise.

For Wittgenstein, ethics, aesthetics, and religion were very close to each other, if not identical. Thus he wrote: "Ethik und Ästhetik sind eins" (TLP 6.421) and later (in 1946) he thought:

Es ist schwer, sich recht zu verstehen, denn dasselbe, was man aus Größe und Güte tun könnte, kann man auch aus Feigheit oder Gleichgültigkeit tun. Man kann sich freilich so und so aus wahrer Liebe benehmen, aber auch aus Hinterlist und auch aus Kälte des Herzens. Sowie nicht alle Milde Güte ist. Und nur wenn ich in Religion untergehen könnte, könnten diese Zweifel schweigen. Denn nur Religion könnte die Eitelkeit zerstören und in alle Spalten dringen. (*Vermischte Bemerkungen/ Culture and Value* 1946)

Ethics and aesthetics "are one", and ethical doubts and ethical wrongs can only be resolved and corrected by religion. Wittgenstein does not only move ethics very close to religion, he even subordinates it to religion. Thus he is reported by Friedrich Waismann to have said:

Schlick sagt, es gab in der theologischen Ethik zwei Auffassungen vom Wesen des Guten: nach der flacheren Deutung ist das Gute deshalb gut, weil Gott es will; nach der tieferen Deutung will Gott das Gute deshalb, weil es gut ist. Ich meine, daß die erste Auffassung die tiefere ist: gut ist, was Gott befiehlt. Denn sie schneidet den Weg einer jeden Erklärung, 'warum' es gut ist, ab, während gerade die zweite Auffassung die flache, die rationalistische ist, die so tut, 'als ob' das, was gut ist, noch begründet werden könnte. (WWK 115, December of 1930)

"Good is what God commands" and we better avoid trying to give explanations. Here we find again the idea from the *Tractatus* that we had better keep silent about ethical mat-

ters. Wittgenstein rejects any kind of explanation or theory in ethics. At best something can be "shown".

Wittgenstein can make his point for instance against Kant, who indeed tried to argue for the categorical imperative and its validity and value. I think Kant cannot *derive* morality and the categorical imperative. But I think he nevertheless succeeded in something that I think is important. First, Kant succeeds in pointing out the categorical imperative and its implications in our daily lives. He succeeds in making morality more visible to the reader. Second, even though he thinks morality is evident to common sense, he does not leave it there. He goes on to unfold the various meanings and implications of the categorical imperative, and he does so not only abstractly but also by giving examples and discussing concrete situations. He makes the reader undertake thought experiments in which one has to ask oneself while imagining concrete situations whether one wants a certain maxim as a universal law or not. One has to reflect and one gets involved. This I think is important. One takes a first-person perspective in such thought experiments, and in doing so one can obtain new insights and change not only one's own mind but also one's own character. I think this is due to the fact that the categorical imperative has two aspects. One is the *rational* and abstract aspect of universalizability. The other is about our *attitude*. It speaks to our attitude, our motivation, and our willingness or unwillingness, when we ask ourselves whether we really want a maxim at hand to be a law or not.

This double aspect (rationality and attitude) is something valuable in Kant's theory, and something that I think is missing in Wittgenstein's views. Wittgenstein falls silent right away about the nature of morality. He does not want any explanation. He does not want any theory. He rejects any such attempts of rational explanation. Thus he goes on, as Waismann reports: "Was immer man mir sagen mag, ich würde es ablehnen, und zwar nicht darum, weil die Erklärung falsch ist, sondern weil sie eine Erklärung ist" (WWK 116), and he even says "Für mich hat die Theorie keinen Wert. Eine Theorie gibt mir nichts" (WWK 117). Wittgenstein talks a good deal about himself. But this makes me wonder whether theorizing might not help others. I do not mean that ethical explaining and theorizing should be undertaken by others to help themselves. I mean that Wittgenstein should undertake such considerations so that others might benefit from this. If Wittgenstein reflected about the universalizability of maxims in concrete situations, this would most likely benefit others who are affected by what he does to them, directly or indirectly.

Wittgenstein's likening ethics to religion makes him turn to God. "*Gut ist, was Gott befiehlt*". It becomes a personal matter. Others come second. But in ethics this is different. There the other person should come first, and questions about God are left open. This of course is Schlick's point, and it is also Kant's. For Kant the categorical imperative is "holy". God is secondary. God comes in only with the question of the highest good, when God's existence is postulated by us to make our striving for the highest good realistic to us. This move depends on our human conditions and needs. God is demanded as a guarantee of proportionality between moral worth and happiness. God is

not the source of morality. Instead, morality is the source of God, or rather of our need and demand for God. For Kant morality can to some extent be analyzed and explained. He does so by discussing the criterion of universalizability and by offering the three maxims of “common understanding” (*gemeiner Menschenverstand*), namely: “1. Selbstdenken; 2. An der Stelle jedes andern denken; 3. Jederzeit mit sich selbst einstimmig denken”. (*Kritik der Urteilskraft*, section 40: 294.) Thus some work of analysis can be undertaken, abstractly and in concrete situations. The level of theory and abstraction is not left out.

Cyril Barrett thinks there is in Wittgenstein a development from ineffability to awareness of variety of language games (Barrett 247). This might be true, but this development is not good enough regarding ethics. The threat of naivety might be diminished. But the threat of relativism remains. Wittgenstein sticks to his rejection of any sort of criteria regarding ethics (Barrett 247).

2. Language Games and Relativism

In the essay “On Wittgenstein on Certainty” (Wenzel 2011) certain features of “inner relativity” of language games have been pointed out. In *On Certainty* Wittgenstein writes “Was feststeht, tut dies nicht, weil es an sich offenbar oder einleuchtend ist, sondern es wird von dem, was darum herum liegt, festgehalten” (ÜG 144). Support is given by the surrounding. In another passage he famously writes “Ich bin auf dem Boden meiner Überzeugungen angelangt. Und von dieser Grundmauer könnte man beinahe sagen, sie werde vom ganzen Haus getragen” (ÜG 248). The foundations are “supported” by what they are supposed to support. Roof and foundation walls depend on each other. Similarly, a river carries water and the water shapes the river (ÜG 96-9). Obviously there is an inner relativity here (water – river bed, foundation – house), and there is nothing wrong with that. Quine pointed out similar ideas. Also meanings of words and feelings of certainty depend on situations and contexts. Wittgenstein shows great sensitivity here, which can be seen as some progress over Moore in *On Certainty*. But Wittgenstein refrains from offering a systematic theory. He does not like the idea of meta-levels. He does not like Gödel’s incompleteness proof, which formalizes meta-talk by means of Gödel numbers.

An awareness of such inner relativity and the situatedness of one’s habits and understanding is a good thing. But I think it is not enough for an ethics. When two cultures meet, they have to agree on a common ground, say of measuring. How should such a ground be found and decided upon? Should we leave this to sheer force and evolutionary mechanisms? Wittgenstein teaches us to be aware of our habits and of where we come from, which is fine. But we also have to think of others and future generations. We have to look into the future as well, not only into the past. For that theorizing can be useful.

The existence of varieties of language games and their inner relativities (house and foundational walls, river and river bed) leads to outer relativity (measuring in one culture and measuring in another culture, see Wenzel 2011), and for that having an awareness of inner relativity is not enough. I do it my way, you do it in your way. Here we have that legal system, there we have another. But who is right? How shall we meet? Places used to be more separate and isolated from each other, but they are less distant today. People come from all kinds of backgrounds and increasingly interact.

3. Ethics and Relativism

In moral matters the inner and outer relativisms mentioned under point 2 become obviously problematic. Who is right when two forms of life meet? Can science decide? Not so easily in ethics. Usually the more powerful will simply suppress the weaker. In science this struggle usually leads to a more powerful and in that sense “better” science. But in ethics things are different. There the powerful is not necessarily the good. It is not obvious that evolutionary mechanisms will lead to a better ethics. Maybe they will, but by then much will have been destroyed and some things cannot be fixed. Just think of pollution and the extinction of species! And with the vanishing of an environment certain values will disappear as well, and this is not always for the better. There is for instance something to be said for the beauty of nature and the value it has for us and our moral views. Kant had a theory about this (see his *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, sections 42 and 59). He argued that when we find nature beautiful, it will give us “hints” telling us that we fit into the given natural environment. Such metaphorical talk of “hints” and “traces” (*Winke und Spuren*) can be explained and justified by showing that aesthetic judgments and moral judgments have certain ingredients in common and that an exercise of one kind of judgment can help the development of the other kind. Thus we should be interested in preserving nature and the feeling of beauty it can give to us. It is an “intellectual interest” that we should take. This is theory, and it is valuable theory. Even though Kant thought of morality as *a priori*, he did not drift into mysticism.

When I think of Kant’s moral theory, I shall have reservations when someone simply says: “Für mich hat die Theorie keinen Wert. Eine Theorie gibt mir nichts” (WWK 117). Such a position might be too self-centered. What Wittgenstein has in mind as ethics proper is an “absolute” ethics, which is an experience, such as expressed by “I wonder at the existence of the world” or “I am safe, nothing can injure me whatever happens” (LE: 8). These are personal experiences, and in their light, ethics, aesthetics, and religion can indeed appear identical. But such experiences are self-centered, and I wonder whether they should be called “ethical” at all.

Wittgenstein went to war with the hope to die, while Russell demonstrated for women’s rights and against war. Wittgenstein was primarily concerned with himself and his philosophical religion, or religious philosophy. But ethics is about others. Wittgenstein rejected all ethical theories and traditional metaphysics. But I think they should not be so readily rejected. Recently Hilary Putnam came to realize this as well: “This is precisely the double standard (religious language is meaningful, metaphysical language is not – or not in any serious sense of “meaningful” – that I now find unwarranted and unfortunate in Wittgenstein” (Putnam, to appear).

What does traditional metaphysics have to offer? As I said above, Kant’s moral theory for instance reveals the ramifications and implications of the idea of the categorical imperative and makes the reader reflect about questions of universalizability in imagined situations. This includes first-person and third-person perspectives. The situations are only imagined, but still the reader gets involved and this has effects, and I think these effects are mainly positive. Wittgenstein rejected explanations in ethics due to his understanding of free will, which was informed by Schopenhauer. This is deep metaphysics, inspired by Plato, Kant, and Buddhism. But regarding morality, Kant did not only offer the transcendental-metaphysical theory as unfolded in his second *Critique*. He also wrote *Zum Ewigen Frieden*

(1795) and *Metaphysik der Sitten* with *Rechtslehre* and *Tugendlehre* (1797). Thus he tried to give concrete answers and applications in practical and legal matters. Wittgenstein could have learned something from this, it seems to me. In our modern life we need regulations and rules, and they better be explicit. Even if the deep metaphysical questions about free will, for instance, are still not solved, simply stopping our attempts to answer them seems to me to be wrong, if not impossible.

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