

On Wittgenstein's claim that ethical value judgments are nonsense

Abstract Wittgenstein thought that ethical value judgments are absolute in the sense that their correctness - if they could be said to be correct - does not depend at all on how things are in the world. My purpose is to elucidate how this conception of ethical judgments is in itself a sufficient reason for regarding them as nonsense. Wittgenstein's thesis that ethical sentences are nonsensical does not need to be supported by the claim that only truth-valuable sentences can have a sense. This leads us to a reappraisal of the relevance of the *Tractarian* project of showing that ethical sentences cannot make sense.

1 Introduction

The early Wittgenstein developed a view of life that consisted in seeing one's happiness and unhappiness as independent of whatever happens in the world - happiness and unhappiness are transcendental rather than empirical conditions. Wittgenstein similarly defines other ethically significant concepts in transcendental terms. For example, the meaning of life lies outside of that world which includes not only the external circumstances but also our own bodies and mental events (1961b, remarks 5.641 and 6.41).¹

The Wittgensteinian distinction between ethical value and the world is extremely sharp. First of all, the subject whose will is the bearer of good and evil is powerless with respect to the events of the world. The world is simply fate (1961b, 6.373). Secondly, the events of the world do not have any logical or physical relation to its ethical value. "How things are in the world is a matter of complete indifference for what is higher" (1961b, 6.432).

Wittgenstein thought that if we wish to speak of ethical value (happiness, meaning of life, right way of living), our sentences cannot be anything but nonsense. In this article I will examine this idea and the reasons we have for accepting it. On the one hand I shall argue that if we understand ethical judgments of value as 'absolute' in Wittgenstein's sense of this word, he was right in claiming that these judgments are nonsensical. On the other hand I want to show that the reason for their nonsensicality is not necessarily the one Wittgenstein himself appears to give in his *Notebooks*, *Tractatus* and "Lecture on Ethics". These judgments should be seen as nonsensical even if we do not accept Wittgenstein's criterion of dividing sentences into those that make sense and those that do not.

I hope that my reflections show why Wittgenstein's effort to develop a transcendental ethic is unsuccessful. The basic difficulty is that he sees ethical value as too independent of the empirical world. This independence is so complete that he is driven to a position where the distinction between positive and negative value loses its relevance and meaning. Wittgenstein obviously had a need to find a view of life that satisfies him, but the one he found could not really be satisfactory.

2 Wittgenstein on the concept of an absolute judgment of value

One cannot understand Wittgenstein's idea that absolute judgments of value are nonsensical without prior understanding of the way he characterizes these judgments and their subject matter. Commentators of Wittgenstein's remarks on ethics have not perhaps paid sufficient attention to how strange his concept of absoluteness actually is.²

By “relative value” Wittgenstein means value in relation to some standard (1965, 5-6). For instance, a work of art can be said to be valuable in the relative sense because it fulfills certain aesthetic principles, and a road can be right in the relative sense because it will take us to a desired destination. Judgments of relative value are in Wittgenstein’s view mere statements of fact in disguise. For example, he thinks that the sentence “This is a good runner” simply means that the person in question is able to run a certain number of miles in a certain time.

Although Wittgenstein does not explicitly define his concept of absolute value, it is not far-fetched to claim that if relative value is value in relation to some standard, absolute value is not value in relation to any standard. Since absolute judgments of value are not (and cannot be) presented on the basis of any standards, they cannot be rational or irrational, reasonable or unreasonable. Ethical value judgments are essentially arational.

It might now be argued that while Wittgensteinian absolute value is not value in relation to any standard, it is itself a kind of standard in relation to which states of affairs can have value. For example, if happiness is valuable, then certain kinds of actions can perhaps be deemed rational because they are more conducive to achieving this end than some others. This interpretation would make the concept of absolute value similar to G.E. Moore’s “good in itself”.³

The major flaw of this interpretation is that whereas Moorean goodness is dependent on the content of the state of affairs in question, Wittgenstein thinks that states of affairs are absolutely good or absolutely evil independently of their contents. If good and evil are properties of the will of a philosophical subject that is the limit of the world, and if this will is physically and logically independent of the world, then there cannot be any physical or logical connections between the world and the ethical properties either. Absolute value is mystical in the sense that its existence or non-existence does not depend on how the world is but that it is (1961b, 6.44 and 6.522).⁴ Goods-in-themselves are different in this respect, because something’s being good in itself is not completely independent of what it is like: states of affairs are good or bad because of some factual features. Moore thought that values supervene on facts. For example, he would not have said that life is happy or unhappy independently of what that life is like. And if Moore had seen two exactly identical works of art, he would not have admitted that one of them can be sublime while the other is banal. The crucial point is that Moorean goods-in-themselves are relative in the sense in which Wittgenstein uses the word ‘relative’. According to Moorean principles we cannot claim that states of affairs are good or bad regardless of what kinds of value standards they fulfill.

Absolute judgments of value are similar to logical truths in the sense that their truth or falsity is not conditional. They are true or false (correct or incorrect, valid or invalid) regardless of the worldly facts. Take for instance the sentence “I am absolutely safe”, which was for Wittgenstein a description of state of affairs that has absolute value (1965, 8). Since to be absolutely safe is to be safe whatever happens, the truth or falsity of this sentence is unconditional, just as tautologies are true independently of what happens to be the case. Similarly to say that one is guilty in the absolute sense of this term is to say that one is guilty regardless of what is the case in the world (or life).⁵ But there is a difference between ethical judgments and tautologies which concerns the fact that the only possible truth value of tautologies is “true”. It seems that ethical judgments can be either true or false depending on whether the transcendental subject wills good or evil, is happy or unhappy. (In order to clarify the nature of ethical judgments I have to speak at this stage of my exposition as if sentences that do not have a sense at all could be true or false. Wittgenstein himself did so when he called tautologies true regardless of the fact that they are without sense.)

Wittgenstein himself connects ethics with logic when he compares absolute goodness to an

absolutely right road that everyone chooses with logical necessity after having become aware of it (1965, 7). He qualifies this by saying that if we don't choose absolute goodness, we feel guilty. One might wonder how it is possible to feel guilty for not choosing absolute goodness if choosing it happens with logical necessity. Is it not the case that not choosing absolute goodness and feeling guilty about this excludes choosing it and being happy? So how can choosing absolute goodness happen with logical necessity? How can Wittgenstein compare absolute goodness to a road we choose with logical necessity? These questions bring us to the problematic essence of Wittgenstein's transcendental ethics.

Let us first notice that Wittgenstein uses the word 'guilty' in its absolute and not its psychological sense.⁶ Since guilt is an absolute evil, it is not dependent on contingent worldly facts. Wittgenstein makes an attempt to use both the expression "choosing absolute goodness" and the expression "feeling guilty" in their absolute or transcendental senses. This means that their applicability to real world situations is not at all conditional on what happens: one can choose absolute goodness independently of what one chooses empirically, and one can be guilty independently of what one has done. Absolute goodness and absolute guilt do not therefore exclude each other. Since absolute value judgments are necessarily arational, anything can be called absolutely good and anything can be seen as a cause of guilt. Here is the strangeness of Wittgenstein's way of understanding ethics.

3 Why did Wittgenstein regard absolute judgments of value as nonsensical?

One possible interpretation of Wittgenstein's reason for his claim that absolute judgments of value are nonsensical is that these judgments do not have truth values. Wittgenstein believed that unless a sentence is a picture of some possible state of affairs, it cannot be true or false; and if a sentence cannot be true or false, it cannot have a sense. From this it can then be inferred that in Wittgenstein's view absolute value judgments must be nonsensical. This simple interpretation gains considerable support from the fact that Wittgenstein himself wrote in one of his letters to Ludwig von Ficker that the point of his *Tractatus* is to show why it is impossible to speak of ethical matters (Wittgenstein 1969, 35). The project of locating the limit of language in such a way that only statements of fact have a sense is precisely the project of demonstrating why ethical statements are nonsensical.

While this interpretation seems to be correct, it leaves curiously unexplained the status of the sentences of logic in Wittgenstein's thought. If absolute judgments of value are nonsensical because of the complete independence of their truth values from worldly facts, then why does Wittgenstein nevertheless regard logical truths as merely devoid of sense and not nonsensical? (There seem to be two alternative ways of removing this incoherence. First of all, Wittgenstein could have called tautologies nonsensical instead of saying that they merely lack sense. The second option would have been to say that judgments of absolute value are devoid of sense but not nonsensical.) Since the fact that a sentence does not have a truth value does not in itself appear to constitute for Wittgenstein a sufficient condition for its nonsensicality, one is left with the impression that he did not achieve full clarity on the reason for the non-existence of meaningful ethical sentences. (Actually Wittgenstein does not explicitly call ethical sentences nonsensical in the *Tractatus* but only refers to the impossibility of speaking of ethical value. However, in his lecture on ethics and in the conversations during the time he composed it Wittgenstein constantly refers to the nonsensicality of ethical value judgments in addition to saying that we cannot express absolute value judgments.⁷)

4 The independence of ethical nonsensicality and the Tractarian view of language

I believe that absolute judgments of value are nonsensical even if it were not the case that only true

or false sentences can be meaningful. (In this context the expression “nonsensical sentence” does not of course mean “a sentence which does not represent any possible state of affairs” but simply “a sentence that cannot be understood”, “a sentence that makes no sense” or “a sentence which has no meaning”. Sometimes the word ‘nonsense’ is used to mean “false” or “incorrect”, but I intend to exclude these meanings here.) Consider for example the sentences “Life is happy” and “The world is good” and assume that these are intended as absolute judgments of value in Wittgenstein’s sense. Their absoluteness implies that even if two possible worlds are exactly identical, these judgments can be true with respect to one while being false with respect to the other. Or suppose someone says that he is absolutely safe and intends the word ‘safe’ to be understood in Wittgenstein’s absolute sense. This means that he is safe whatever happens to him - the safety is in this sense unconditional. So how does an absolutely good life (or world) differ from an absolutely evil one? There is necessarily no difference at all. Similarly, an absolutely safe condition does not necessarily differ in any way from an absolutely vulnerable one, and an absolutely right road does not necessarily differ at all from an absolutely wrong one.

Wittgenstein himself says that the happy world is completely different from the unhappy one (1961b, 6.43). But can there be any genuine difference of value between a world that is absolutely happy and a world that is absolutely unhappy if we are allowed to assume that they are exactly identical? One must not think of the transcendental subject as another empirical subject that can be either happy or unhappy. The latter distinction may have a meaning because it can be based on some difference in one’s life, but the transcendental distinction between happiness and unhappiness makes no sense, because there cannot be any basis for it.

The reason for the nonsensicality of absolute judgments of value is that there cannot be any criteria for deciding whether a life is absolutely valuable or not, whether a condition is absolutely safe or not, etc. Since there cannot be any such criteria, all absolute value judgments must of necessity be completely arbitrary, and instead of saying that life is good and happy one could as well say that it is bad and unhappy. Wittgenstein makes judgments of absolute value nonsensical by his own characterization of the concept of absoluteness. Consider once more the locution “absolutely right road”. Since the absoluteness of a value implies that facts do not have any relation to its existence or non-existence, this phrase would have to refer to a road on which we are regardless of where we are going. If our actual destinations did have some relevance to whether we are on the right road, then that road could not be the absolutely right one. The reason for one’s incapability of imagining an absolutely right road is not the insufficiency of one’s powers of imagination but the conceptual impossibility of the road in question. Similarly it makes no sense to say that someone acts rightly whatever he does, because the possibility of acting rightly implies the possibility of acting wrongly. Evaluative concepts such as rightness are essentially spatial and temporal in the sense that there is always a possibility of one’s not being on the right road.⁸ Just as it makes no sense to say that someone has hit the truth in science if one does not admit of the possibility of making an error, it is nonsense to say that someone has found the right way of life if one does not allow for the possibility of his not finding the right path.

Wittgenstein calls both logic and ethics transcendental (1961b, 6.13 and 6.421). The transcendental nature of logic implies that no one can speak contrary to it.⁹ Illogical speech would be something which is not made possible by that logic which Wittgenstein regards as the condition of the possibility of the world and of our representations of it - and in that case transcendental logic would not really be transcendental. There is an important connection between this fact and the nature of transcendental value. Let us namely ask: in what sense is it possible for us as empirical subjects to think or act contrary to absolute goodness? By acting in an evil manner and making ourselves guilty? This answer cannot be correct, because our actions do not have any logical or physical

relation to transcendental goodness or its opposites. It seems that there is nothing we can do which entails in any way that we have done something evil. Transcendental goodness is just as inviolable as transcendental logic. But if we cannot act contrary to transcendental value, then in what sense can we act according to it? I think that the answer is “in no sense”. This is just another way of stating that speaking of absolute or transcendental value is nonsense, because anything we do can be made to both agree with it and to contradict it.

To claim that absolute judgments of value are nonsensical is not to claim that nothing is absolutely valuable. If the sense of “X is absolutely valuable” is missing, then so is the sense of “X is not absolutely valuable” and “Nothing is absolutely valuable”. We are not denying the existence of anything by referring to the fact of nonsensicality of absolute judgments of value.

One might say (somewhat provocatively) that Wittgenstein was aware of the fact that the presence or absence of absolute value does not make any difference in one’s life: nothing in one’s life itself is different even it is good instead of evil. For instance, he emphasizes in several contexts that happiness and unhappiness are not features of life itself. Rewards and punishments in the absolute sense of these concepts are similarly not any kind of events in the world, and absolute guilt is not a fact in one’s life.

Now it would perhaps be appealing to argue as follows: “Wittgenstein did certainly think that absolute goodness (guilt, safety, etc.) is not a fact in the world, but does it follow from this that it ‘does not make any difference in one’s life’? At least Wittgenstein himself seemed to think that while everything else is in itself banal and trivial, absolute value is sublime and important.”

If Wittgenstein understands by “absolute value” what he says he understands by it, then the idea that absolute value matters or makes a difference in one’s life is logically excluded. The transcendental subject is independent of the world and as empirical subjects we have no cognitive, volitional or affective relation to it. Moreover, all ascriptions of absolute value are arbitrary and there is no reason for calling one’s life absolutely good instead of calling it absolutely evil. It of course does make a difference whether one is happy or unhappy, but only if happiness and unhappiness are understood as states of affairs that are not unconditional. It makes no sense whatever to say that one’s happiness or unhappiness is completely unconditional, because this move erases the very difference between happiness and unhappiness one wants to defend.

The points I have tried to formulate also concern Wittgenstein’s famous view that even if we cannot speak of absolute value, it shows itself in the world. If there cannot be any criteria for determining whether a world is absolutely good or evil, this view does not really make sense. The meaningfulness of the idea of something showing itself or making itself manifest in the world presupposes that there is some criterion on the basis of which one can find out when it does make itself manifest and when it does not. (If we speak of “values in themselves”, there are such criteria.)

Meaningful judgments of value are always ‘relative’ in Wittgenstein’s sense of this word. This does not mean that when people present judgments of value, they always specify the standards of value that they use. Neither does this mean that they are able to do so. The statement that all meaningful evaluative judgments are relative means that their truth (correctness, rightness, validity) depends on what the world is like. They are not true or false “whatever happens”.

Wittgenstein says that judgments of relative value are actually mere statements of fact. This does not seem to be true. For example, if we understand “My life is happy and meaningful” as a sentence that refers to something which is good in itself, we do not have to see it as referring to something

which is absolutely valuable in Wittgenstein's sense of this expression. The sentence is nevertheless a genuine value judgment and not a "mere" statement of fact. Or consider the sentence "I have found the right way of life". This can similarly be taken as a sentence that refers to a good-in-itself. And it is a genuine statement of value. One must bear firmly in mind the difference between Wittgenstein's notion of absolute value and the ordinary concept of good-in-itself. At least statements that refer to goods-in-themselves are statements of value.

5 The relevance of the above considerations in the wider context of evaluating the success of the *Tractarian* project

Wittgenstein's regarded the point of the *Tractatus* as ethical. His purpose was to show that there cannot be any meaningful ethical sentences.¹⁰ But locating the limit of language and thought in a *Tractarian* manner is in fact quite unnecessary if one's conception of ethical sentences is the one that Wittgenstein himself had. This follows from the fact that absolute judgments of value are nonsense independently of whether only truth-valuable sentences can have a sense. Wittgenstein's project of locating the limit of language is based on a concept of value that does not make sense in the first place. If the purpose of presenting the so-called picture theory of language was to show that absolute judgments of value are nonsense, then there was no reason to present it.

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¹ Apart from saying that ethical value is outside of the world, Wittgenstein also writes quite unambiguously that ethical value is a property of the transcendental subject; and this subject is the limit of the world. (See for instance the remarks he makes on the 2nd of August 1916 in his *Notebooks*.) I think that the only way of reconciling these two points of view is to claim that if ethical value is at the limit of the world, it is outside of the world in the simple sense that it is not inside of it. It is not fact of any kind.

² See for instance Rhees 1965, Redpath 1972, Hudson 1975, Canfield 1986, Johnston 1989, Barrett 1991, Linhe 1996, and Jacquette 1997.

³ Paul Johnston (1989, 75) interprets Wittgenstein's distinction in this way.

⁴ In his lecture on ethics Wittgenstein says that the existence of the world can be seen as a "miracle".

⁵ In his *Tractatus* (5.621) Wittgenstein identifies the world with life.

⁶ Wittgenstein (L, 10) sees quilt as a miraculous experience whose description is nonsense.

⁷ The conversations are included in Waismann 1967.

⁸ In his *Tractatus* (6.4312) Wittgenstein says that the meaning of life lies outside of time and space.

⁹ Wittgenstein presents several remarks that either state or imply that it is impossible to say or think anything contrary to logic. See for example remarks 3.03-3.032.

¹⁰ See Wittgenstein 1969, 35.