

## WITTGENSTEIN ON ETHICS

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### Introduction

Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* (henceforth *PI*)<sup>1</sup>, often considered to be a book of later or mature or new Wittgensteinian philosophy, aims at rejecting and correcting "grave mistakes"<sup>2</sup> committed in his so-called early or old theories and ideas expressed in *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (henceforth *TLP*)<sup>3</sup> and its collaborative manuscripts. In fact, *PI* has rejected some of the central theories of *TLP* such as picture theory of meaning, logical atomism, solipsism etc. and has replaced it with the use theory of meaning, private language arguments etc.

Early Wittgenstein has also discussed extensively the concept of value in general and ethical value in particular. It argues that our natural impulse to seek meaning of life and our experience of moral values compel us to look for some objective moral standards. However, the attempt to describe the ethical value through propositions will fail as statements of ethics are non-truthfunctional and therefore, nonsensical. Ethical values are not *sayable*, yet they are *showable*. That makes ethical values and standards nonsensical, transcendental and mysterious. Moreover, the early Wittgensteinian philosophy has inspired many anti-normative ethical movements and has shaped some subjective and relativistic ethical theories such as emotivism and prescriptivism. No amount of factual description will help us to determine the objectivity and universality of moral value and standard. The explanation of moral values and standards in terms of factual statements will result in moral skepticism and paradox. This is what is called the problem of moral indeterminacy of *TLP*.

Considering the objectives of *PI*, one would naturally expect some drastic and new interpretation of ethics in it. However, to one's surprise, *PI* is completely silent on this matter. It has no remarks on ethics and neither contains the word "ethics" or "morality", though Wittgenstein has discussed ethical issues in other later works and his personal life was obsessed with ethical perfection. Moreover, *PI* has not shaped, inspired or influenced any school or theory of ethics similar to *TLP*.

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<sup>1</sup> Wittgenstein, L., *Philosophical Investigations* (henceforth *PI*), 1958 (2nd edition), G. E. M. Anscombe, Basil Blackwell, Oxford.

<sup>2</sup> *PI*, Preface, p. x.

<sup>3</sup> Wittgenstein, L., *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (henceforth *TLP*), 1921, Routledge and Kegan Paul, New York.

There has not been any substantial attempt to see or extract ethics from *PI*. His very personal and often aphoristic way of writing cannot simply be restated or interpreted. However, his philosophy is in need of interpretation, and interpretations are - as we all know - often controversial. The paper intends to interpret Wittgenstein's writings and insights to develop and further his views on ethics. In this short article, our main objective is to see what could be the implications of the various conceptual schemes of *PI* for a theory of ethics. In other words, how these conceptual tools can fulfill the requirement of ethics and can answer the problem of moral indeterminacy.

In section -2, we will discuss the nature of the ethical value and rules in *TLP* and the problem of moral indeterminacy in *TLP*. Section-3 draws the ethical landscape with the help of the sketch provided in the form of different tools in *PI* and their implications for ethical rules. Section-4 concludes that *PI*, by implications, maintains that ethics, as a family resemblance concept, is a language game, governed by a set of rules, whose "universality" is found in their grammars, "normativity" is entrenched in "form of life" and "objectivity" is ensured in our commitment to follow the rule.

### **1. Ethics in *TLP***

Ethics as an academic subject is concerned with the philosophical study of meaning of ethical concepts and to establish and justify norms for ethical action. The meaning and norms are directed at answering ethical questions of good and right, resolution of moral conflicts and problems of inter-subjective behaviour. The theory of ethics can be seen as a normative science of the justification of ethical decisions. Ethical issue constitutes an important part of early Wittgenstein's philosophy, in fact he acknowledges that his entire philosophy was an ethical undertaking. Early Wittgenstein has discussed ethical issues in *TLP*, in *A Lecture on Ethics*<sup>4</sup> and in *Culture and Value*.<sup>5</sup> Early Wittgenstein's ethics is rooted in "wonder about existence", in

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<sup>4</sup>Wittgenstein, L., *A Lecture on Ethics* (henceforth *LE*), 1929. Subsequently published as, "Wittgenstein's Lecture on Ethics", in: *The Philosophical Review*, lxxiv, 1965, 3-12. . *LE* was Wittgenstein's only lecture to a non-philosophical audience, his only book dealing exclusively with ethics, as well as the only lecture of his of which drafts – indeed several drafts – exist.

<sup>5</sup>Wittgenstein. L., *Culture and Value* (henceforth *CV*), ed. by Georg Henrik von Wright in collaboration with Heikki Nyman, transl. by Peter Winch. Oxford: Basil Blackwell 1980.

the fascination “*that something exists at all.*” An ethical feeling results out of the wonder of being-in-the-world. The natural desire to describe and say something about the ultimate meaning of the world gives rise to some metaethical issues. Ethics for early Wittgenstein is an enquiry into the meaning of life, or into what makes life worth living, or into the right way of living.<sup>6</sup> Naturally, he has taken ethics as an individual and personal pursuit and has not discussed academic moral issues directly. He has not elaborated the definition, nature, scope and problems of ethics neatly, however, he has delved on the issue of the status of values in the world and the justification of our ethical commitment. He has felt the requirement of a theory of ethics to be able to make sense of ethical feeling. His pursuit of ethics is closely similar to Socratic pursuit of worthy living through rigorous examination. Socratic has undertaken the Method to look for principles and actions which can be used to make decision to lead a worthy living. He has undertaken a semantic exercise to define the virtuous action and the epistemological exercise of providing a universal and objective rule to differentiate good from bad action.

Though Wittgenstein has not employed the semantic and epistemological exercise very systematically to have a philosophical theory to understand the nature and extent of these ethical feeling, in the course of understanding the meaning and purpose of living, Wittgenstein has also discussed some of the metaethical problems such what is value, some normative ethical topics as what is the nature of ethical standard, and how do we apply them. Thus, Wittgensteinian quest for meaning of life can be boiled down to the issue of designing or discovery of such ethical rules or principles that can be used to evaluate, grade and thus to regulate and explain human voluntary behaviors as good or bad, desirable or undesirable, responsible or non-responsible.

According to Wittgenstein, an ethical standard acts like “*the absolutely right road*”, which *everybody* on seeing it would, *with logical necessity*, have to go, or be ashamed for not going. Therefore, ethical rules are universal because we all strongly feel for them. Similarly, these ethical values as the *absolute good*, because, they are followed by everyone, independent of his tastes and inclinations, would *necessarily*

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<sup>6</sup>.LE, 5.

bring about or feel guilty for not bringing about.<sup>7</sup> Hence, ethical rules are absolute. Ethical rules are also normative in nature, because, they act as constraint over an indefinite number of cases. This characterization of ethical rule makes it a normative issue. The normativity of rule puts certain constraints on usage over an indefinite variety of cases and determines the meaning independently of any particular use. Hence, an ethical rule is a “normative-regularity” or “normative-constraint”<sup>8</sup>, which regulates our actions and behaviors by providing *necessary* and *sufficient* conditions to fit a particular action as the extension of the given rule. Ethical rule is *prescriptive* and *prohibitive* in nature; it prescribes to act positively in accordance with the given rule and prohibits the unwarranted extension of the given rule. This is the “normative condition” of the ethical rule. Therefore, the main problem of ethics is to establish such rule which is normative, universal and absolute.

In *TLP*, Wittgenstein has tried to solve all philosophical problems, including the ethical problem, by providing an account of the logic underlying the relationship between propositions and the world. For Wittgenstein, there is a human ‘drive’ to devise ‘picture of the world’ that helps explain the world and gives meaning to life. He has tried to understand the ethical feeling and thought through language. *TLP* claims that language can “picture” the world through propositions either truly or falsely, because the logical forms of propositions and reality are same. To understand what is the case is to say that that is *sayable* in a proposition. However, ethical feeling and experience are non-linguistic experience. Wittgenstein claims, “There are, indeed, things that cannot be put into words.”<sup>9</sup> According to Wittgenstein, language cannot reach to ethical feeling as they are not *sayable*. If something is not *sayable*, then it is nonsense. For Wittgenstein, an ethical theory or doctrine can only be nonsensical. According to Wittgenstein, ethics does not delve into the empirical world. Wittgenstein claims that what gives meaning to life or what makes life happy or unhappy, does not lie within the world. Values – the ethical, aesthetic, and religious, are non-factual, unconditional and are devoid of empirical content.

Therefore, Wittgenstein expresses the inexpressibility of ethics by saying that, “the tendency of all men who ever tried to write or talk ethics ...was to run against

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<sup>7</sup>.*LE*, 7.

<sup>8</sup>.Pettit, P., “The Reality of Rule-Following”, *Mind*, Vol. 99, 1990, p. 4.

<sup>9</sup>.*TLP*, 6.522.

the boundaries of language,” i.e. to talk or write nonsense.<sup>10</sup> One of the typescripts of *TLP* even contains the statement that “there are no propositions of ethics”<sup>11</sup> and thus, “it is clear that ethics cannot be put into words.”<sup>12</sup>

Ethical propositions may be nonsensical and thus belong to the world of silence, but they are *showable*, because ethical feeling are revealed (shown) only once we realised that they are nonsense. Therefore, the nonsensicality of ethics is not really nonsense, because they prompt us to go beyond or to run against the boundary of language and fact. The impossibility of the formative doctrine of normative ethics means the ethical feeling and experiences are to be treated as transcendental. Here, we do not require the justification for ethical feeling and impulse.

Values such as ‘good’ and ‘evil’ are not the properties of the world; they are placed outside the world. The world is bereft of the ethical values as it contains nothing more than the facts. The world is nothing more than a series of the happenings of facts. Hence, no value exists in the world, and “if it did exist, it would have no value.”<sup>13</sup> Ethical values and standards are transcendental.<sup>14</sup> In the world everything is as it is, and everything happens as it does happen. And the entire happening in the world is completely causal and logical in nature. Ethics being beyond the world is viewed as supernatural which cannot be captured within the network of natural world and natural language.

Wittgenstein further argues that, if we try to explain value in terms of fact, it will lead to a paradox. According to him, value experiences seem to express absolute (or supernatural) value, yet experiences occur in the world, and nothing in the world can have absolute value. For a state of affairs to have absolute value would mean that no one could abstain from pursuing it (or, as Wittgenstein puts it at one point, no one could abstain without feeling ashamed); however, no such state of affairs could exist. Wittgenstein’s solution to the paradox was to declare that the attempt to articulate the experiences in question (or to attribute value to them) is nonsensical.

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<sup>10</sup>.Quoted in Richter, Duncan J., “Ludwig Wittgenstein”, *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <<http://www/utm.edu/research/iep/wittgens.htm>> Accessed on January, 2019.

<sup>11</sup>.McGuinness, Brian, “The Other Side of Silence”, *Times Literary Supplements*, June 14, 2002, p. 3.

<sup>12</sup>.*TLP*, 6.421.

<sup>13</sup>. *TLP* 6.41.

<sup>14</sup>.*TLP* 6.42, 6.421.

Moreover, the ethical dimension is extracted from the field of facets that are described in words. That leads to the paradox that acting in the world cannot contain any statements on the ethical quality of action, although the ethical dimension is meant to be linked to the sense of action and the actor's status. This paradoxical situation can be sated by the fact that the same action can be performed by any number of different "selves", that is to say, the same action can be described at one time as "evil" and at another as "good". "What is good is also divine. Queer as it sounds, that sums up my ethics. Only something supernatural can express the Supernatural".<sup>15</sup>

*TLP* has inspired the Logical Positivists to develop a relative and subjective moral standard. For example, A. J. Ayer argues that ethical statements are nothing but expression of our emotions of approval or disapproval. Suppose one says to a cannibal, "you acted wrongly in eating your prisoner." Ayer thought one is not stating anything more than if one had simply said, "You ate your prisoner". Rather, one is evincing moral disapproval of it. It is as if one had said, "You ate your prisoner" in a peculiar tone of horror, or written it with the addition of some special exclamation marks.<sup>16</sup> Emotivism has been further developed into prescriptivism. For example, Stevenson has argued that normative judgments express attitudes and invite others to share these attitudes, but they are not strictly speaking true or false.<sup>17</sup>

*TLP* argues against the possibility of a normative standard which is universal, objective and normative. The problem about ethics raised in *TLP* may be termed as "moral indeterminacy": the thesis that any given moral rule can be extrapolated in an infinite ways and equivalently, any set of behaviors can be held to fit the same ethical rule. The offshoots of *TLP* like emotivism and prescriptivism, by denying uniformity, regularity and objectivity in ethics, further strengthen the moral indeterminacy.

## **2. Ethics in *PI***

*PI* is a collection of remarks on different subjects/topics set out unsystematically. Neither it propounds a single philosophy, let alone an ethics, nor has the attempt to find out the unity among its remarks in *PI* succeeded. Michael

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<sup>15</sup>.*CV*, 3.

<sup>16</sup>.Ayer, A. J., 1936, *Language, Truth and Logic*, Penguin, 107–8.

<sup>17</sup>.Stevenson, Charles, 1944, *Ethics and Language*, Yale University Press, Ch. 5.

Dummett's observation that "we have yet to come terms with Wittgenstein"<sup>18</sup> still stands true. However, *PI* provides a set of tools for drawing the "sketches of landscapes" for us "to travel over a wide field of thoughts"<sup>19</sup>. The sketches can be helpful to travel over other unraveled areas. However, we should keep in our mind the fact that his aphoristic way of writing cannot simply be interpreted in a coherent manner and will lead to controversies and disagreement.

The central philosophical tools *PI* provides are: language games, private language argument, family resemblance, rule and rule-following, grammar, forms of life. The tools used are not to build a philosophy but how to philosophize. *PI* should be taken more as a book on how to do philosophy than a book of philosophy. It provides a set of philosophical tools and skills to resolve different philosophical issues and problems. It is not surprising to note that the landscape of ethics can be drawn on the basis of the remarks on the central issues of the *PI*, though it does not directly deal with ethical issues.

Later Wittgenstein has rejected the general explanation of issues and definition of concept based on sufficient and necessary conditions. According to him, there is no reason to look, as we have done traditionally - and dogmatically - for one, essential core in which the meaning of a word is located and which is, therefore, common to all uses of that word. Instead of philosopher's 'craving for generality', he points to 'family resemblance' as the more suitable analogy for connecting particular uses of the same word. We should, instead, travel with the word's uses through "a complicated network of similarities, overlapping and criss-crossing"<sup>20</sup> Family resemblance also serves to exhibit the lack of boundaries and the distance from exactness that characterize different uses of the same concept. Such an approach has been adopted in the *Tractatus*, but Wittgenstein has discarded in favor of appeal to similarity of a kind with family resemblance in *PI*. Applying the concept of 'family resemblance', we can argue that ethical concepts cannot be defined in terms of some necessary and sufficient conditions as they do not refer to some essential objects or some underlying commonalities. Rather ethical concepts are just family resemblance concepts.

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<sup>18</sup>.Quoted in McGuinness, Brian, *op. cit.* p. 3

<sup>19</sup>.*PI*, Preface, p. ix.

<sup>20</sup>.*PI*, § 66.

In giving the meaning of a word, any explanatory generalization should be replaced by a description of use. In *PI*, Wittgenstein proposes the “use theory of meaning” as, “the meaning of a word is its use in the language”,<sup>21</sup> because, if we had to name anything which is the life of the sign, we should have to say that it was its *use*. Rather, when investigating meaning, the philosopher must “look and see” the variety of uses to which the word is put. So different is this new perspective that Wittgenstein repeats: “Don’t think but look!”<sup>22</sup>; and such looking is done *vis-a-vis* particular cases, not thoughtful generalizations. Therefore, based on the use theory of meaning, one can say that the meaning of ethical concepts is known through their use in the language. In order to know their meaning, we have to look for their multiplicity of uses in different “part of an activity.” Therefore, one can say that meaning of ethical concepts is to be mapped out by looking their uses in the context of activity they are part of.

Wittgenstein introduces the concept ‘language-game’ to map out the different uses of a concept. He never explicitly defines it but some properties of language-games can be noticed in Wittgenstein’s several examples and comments. Wittgenstein concept of language game is based on the over-all analogy between language and game. Still, just as we cannot give a final, essential definition of ‘game’, so we cannot find “what is common to all these activities and what makes them into language or parts of language.”<sup>23</sup> The concept of language-games points at the rule-governed character of language and points to the conventional nature of human activity. Therefore, extending the tool of language game, we can say that to be ethical is to play some kind of language game.

One of the issues most associated with the language-game is the concept of rule and its following. Playing a game require certain rules. However, rules are mostly conventional and man-made. Therefore, the following a rule is subjective and arbitrary and anything based on rule is not necessary and universal. According to Wittgenstein, the grammar of rule helps us to provide the necessity to the act of rule-following. He believes that the investigation into what is expressed by a rule and following of it is an investigation into the grammar of the word “rule” and mastering

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<sup>21</sup>.*PI*, § 43.

<sup>22</sup>.*PI*, § 66.

<sup>23</sup>.*PI*, § 65.

the technique of how to follow a rule. The grammar of rule is an investigation to clarify the grammar of the expressions of rule, i.e. what is to act in accord with a rule? Wittgenstein has used a number of analogies and examples as a part of philosophical grammar to make clear the use of the expression of rule and what it is to be calling an action as a consequence of the rule.

The grammar of rule points there cannot be hidden, mysterious and transcendental rule; nothing would be counted as a rule independently of being used as a rule. There is nothing as our following a rule without our being able to explain or justify our actions by reference to them, for the calculus of rule is nothing but the uses of the rule. Wittgenstein comments, “Every sign by itself seems dead. What gives it life? - In use it is alive. Is life breathed into it there? - Or is the use its life.”<sup>24</sup> Further he says, “One cannot guess how a word functions, one has to look at its use and learn from that.”<sup>25</sup> For example, “the signpost is an order - if, under normal circumstances, it fulfills its purpose”<sup>26</sup> The grammar of the expression involving rule will render a rule senseless which we cannot use or in principle it is impossible to violate, for “what is hidden to us is of no interest to us.”<sup>27</sup> Thus Wittgenstein says, “‘obeying a rule’ is a practice. And to think one is obeying a rule is not obeying a rule. Hence it is not possible to obey a rule ‘privately’: otherwise thinking one is obeying a rule would be the same as obeying it.”<sup>28</sup>

The practice and custom are essential for the understanding a rule and how to follow it. Wittgenstein validly argues that “a person goes by the sign-post only in so far as there exists a regular use of sign-post, a custom”<sup>29</sup> The mastering of the technique is possible because we have a common language and some uniform practices. The other frameworks within which the successful following of the rule is dependent are that, the world is substantially an unchanging and uniform in nature, there is harmony between language and reality and human beings have their own limitations. This commonality or framework is what Wittgenstein says the “forms of life”. However, the forms of life don’t define or constitute rule-following, it provides

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<sup>24</sup> *.PI*, § 432.

<sup>25</sup> *.PI*, § 340.

<sup>26</sup> *.PI*, § 87.

<sup>27</sup> *.PI*, § 126.

<sup>28</sup> *.PI*, § 202.

<sup>29</sup> *.PI*, § 198.

the minimum requirement to conduct our rule-governed activity smoothly. The forms of life provide the frame work thorough which we operate our grammar and achieve the necessary agreement. However, this is “not an agreement in opinions but in the forms of life.”<sup>30</sup>

How does the rule which is so much depended on the form of life can provide the necessity to its following, since forms of life is conventional and relativistic in nature? A rule heavily dependent on the conventional practice of the members of the community is whimsical, subjective and is subject to change at will, therefore, it is natural to wonder how such relativistic framework can provide the ground for the justification for meaning and communication. However, rules formulated within this framework provide the necessity for two reasons: First, rules are stipulated for certain purposes, approved and followed in the community by its members after deliberation. Therefore, rules are very much objective and collective in nature and there should be no problem of inter-subjective communication. Though the community view of justification is arbitrary and fallible, does not force us to embrace relativism, a very common charge leveled against any theory based on convention. This is because, once we invoke a rule, we are committed to follow it; are supposed to be faithful to it. Thus, Wittgenstein would say though rules are arbitrary, their applications are not.<sup>31</sup> The application of a rule becomes a social necessity. The community view of rule, and faith to honor it acts as a *normative constraint*. Systematic and consistent use of rule along with commitment to rule gives us the required parameters to judge the epistemic behavior of other members in the community. Rule, thus is predictable, it tells us in advance which behavior would fit which rule. In this sense, a rule determines its extension. On the strength of the knowledge of the rule used in the communities, one member understands the behavior of the others in the society. The commitment to rule is essential part of our very institution of language is best exemplified by the fact that one has no freedom to question the truth of a statement expressing a definition. Therefore, one can argue that *Philosophical Investigations*, by implications, maintains that ethics, as a family resemblance concept, is a language game, governed by a set of rules, whose “universality” is found in their grammars,

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<sup>30</sup>.*PI*, § 241.

<sup>31</sup>.*PI*, § 241.

“normativity” is entrenched in “form of life” and “objectivity” is ensured in our commitment to follow the rules.

### **Conclusion**

What we can conclude is that ethics is a set of rules designed to regulate the human behaviours. However, these rules are not based on some inner and private reality of the followers. These rules are not even found in the nature. Wittgenstein’s later writings help us see that if there is any value that are essentially linguistic and social phenomenon and ethical concern can only arise in the social practices people engage in the form of a language game. In order to understand the various language games, including talk of right and wrong, we must understand the practices and forms of life in which these are embedded. To understand these ethical issues or in some cases to even understand them as ethical issues may require considerable background and filling out of the context.

There is no single quality that characterizes the all that we call ethical. To be ethical is to follow or not to follow a rule that we have given ourselves. What does it mean to conceive of ethics as a practice? First of all, it means that it is a constellation of learned activities, dispositions, and skills. We learn to engage in complex practices through observing and emulating others who are more skilled than we; through our own practice, trial, and error; through making mistakes, and learning from them; through deliberation and reflection on what we are doing and why; through creatively responding to new and unexpected situations; and so on. From the framework we are sketching here, ethics is no different: we *learn* to be good and to do well; we are initiated into a form of life that values these activities and that supports us in enacting them. This background of conditions is true even when we seem to be deliberating and acting entirely on our own; for however autonomous and self-directed our efforts might appear at that moment, we could not have been capable of such deliberation and action without a substantial set of interactions with others from the earliest stages of our lives. In this sense ethics always exists against the background of a form of life. Thus, Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations* will not place value outside the world or “passing over it in silence”. However, Wittgenstein will not change his earlier view on the radical distinction between “fact” and “value” and that an ethical conclusion cannot be derived from any factual argument.