

# WITTGENSTEIN, ETHICS, AND NONSENSE

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ABSTRACT. Wittgenstein argues in his “Lecture on Ethics” that ethical statements, although in some way significant, are logically nonsense. Wittgenstein’s pronouncement about ethical statements, and the analysis which leads to it, bears similarities to his claim at the end of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* that the propositions it contains are nonsense. This paper examines the argument in the “Lecture on Ethics” in order to better understand what Wittgenstein means by “nonsense,” and suggests that his views about ethical statements bear directly upon his reasons for declaring that the *Tractatus* itself is nonsense.

In the opening remarks of his “Lecture on Ethics,” Wittgenstein claims that for him to talk about ethics would be to speak on something of much more importance than the philosophy of logic or language. Ethics is important, he says, as “a document of a tendency in the human mind” which he “personally cannot help respecting deeply and...would not for [his] life ridicule,” in spite of his view that ethical statements are nonsense and “that their nonsensicality [is] their very essence.”<sup>1</sup> To call ethics both important and nonsense—to call ethics *important nonsense*—hearkens back to Wittgenstein’s concluding remarks of the *Tractatus*, in which he declares that “anyone who understands me eventually recognizes [the propositions of the *Tractatus*] as nonsense.”<sup>2</sup>

I want to pursue two tasks in this paper. The first is to explore Wittgenstein’s argument that ethical statements are nonsense. The second task is to examine how the argument in the “Lecture on Ethics” can inform one’s reading of the *Tractatus*, since he proclaims that it, like the ethical statements analyzed in the “Lecture on Ethics,” is a work of nonsense. Wittgenstein appears to believe that the nonsensicality of the *Tractatus*, like that of the ethical tendency, does not detract from its philosophical importance. Rather, what makes Wittgenstein’s propositions

“nonsense” is not what he says but the *way* in which it is said: with the aim to suggest a particular way of looking at the world in general and at philosophical activity in particular.

### I. Absolute Value

Let us begin with Wittgenstein’s claim that the statements of ethics are nonsense.

Wittgenstein distinguishes between two kinds of value-statements: the relative (or trivial) and the absolute (or ethical). He offers the following two cases to elucidate this distinction:

Supposing that I could play tennis and one of you saw me playing and said “Well, you play pretty badly” and suppose I answered “I know, I’m playing badly but I don’t want to play any better,” all the other man could say would be “Ah then that’s all right.” But suppose I had told one of you a preposterous lie and he came up to me and said “You’re behaving like a beast” and then I were to say “I know I behave badly, but then I don’t want to behave any better,” could he then say “Ah, then that’s all right”? Certainly not; he would say “Well, you *ought* to want to behave better.” Here you have an absolute judgment of value, whereas the first instance was one of a relative judgment.<sup>3</sup>

The first judgment is a statement of relative value in that there are certain *facts* about what makes a “good” tennis player (that he hold the racket and hit the ball in a certain way), and Wittgenstein says that we could replace the statement, “Well, you play pretty badly,” with an entirely factual description of what Ludwig is doing, the sum of which constitutes his playing tennis badly.

Furthermore, when Ludwig says he doesn’t want to play (and let’s suppose, doesn’t need for any reason to play) any better, we discover that we meant nothing *morally binding* by our judgment.

Our statement that Ludwig plays badly is grounded in facts about the game of tennis and only expresses value relative to the goals which are (ideally) pursued in that game. In the second case, our likening Ludwig to a “beast” is not simply a statement of facts—beastliness would not show up in a fact-based re-description of what Ludwig has done in lying to us, except as a fact about our own reaction to what he’s done (i.e. “Matt then called Ludwig a beast, and by this he

meant...etc.”). What we are driving at is not a statement of facts about Ludwig but rather that he *ought not* behave as he has in lying to us, and perhaps that he ought to be ashamed of having acted like a “beast.” It is okay if Ludwig wishes to play tennis badly, but not for him to tell us lies. What must be noted here is that Wittgenstein draws the distinction between statements of relative and absolute value from the perspective of the *speaker* who judges Ludwig. He asks whether the speaker could say, “Ah, then that’s all right,” if Ludwig says he doesn’t want to act any better than a beast, and answers, “*Certainly* not.” From the speaker’s perspective, there is no wiggle room for Ludwig to dismiss this evaluation of his behavior; the speaker essentially draws a line in the sand with his words, which demarcates the limits of his moral world, and the force of his evaluation is meant to imply that it is *absolutely unacceptable* for Ludwig to be standing on the “wrong” side of that line. The question, then, is what justifies us in speaking this way to Ludwig, or to anyone else.

Statements of relative value can be justified by referring to the facts which inform these judgments. If someone asks why this is a good chair, I can talk about the quality of the seat-cushion, the angle of the back, or the sturdy material from which it was made. As for statements of absolute value, Wittgenstein claims, “no statement of fact can ever be, or imply, a judgment of absolute value.”<sup>4</sup> The world, which is constituted by facts, contains no (absolute) value. None of the facts about the world, which include facts about persons (and facts about which judgments they make, and facts that explain why they make those judgments, etc.), logically implies any absolute value.<sup>5</sup> Wittgenstein imagines an omniscient being who sets out to write a *description* of the entire world and remarks that “this book would contain nothing that we would call an *ethical* judgment or anything that would logically imply such a judgment.”<sup>6</sup> Anything that could be written in such a book about, for example, a murderous act or the psychological dispositions of

those involved in or who witnessed the murder scene would be facts about the positions of physical objects and the psychological (or neurological) states of the persons involved. If we were to write in the book, “What the killer did was *wrong*,” and to mean not that, as a matter of fact, people morally condemned the murderer, but rather to *mean ourselves* (as the writers of this book) that the murder was wrong, would be to go beyond a pure description of the world. The wrongness of what the killer did is not an additional fact like the other facts that constitute a description of the situation, for the pronouncement of wrongness is an act of the *speaker*. In this act, the author ceases to describe the world and begins to speak for himself—that is, speaks in the first person rather than in the third person. We cannot anticipate, based on the facts alone, what evaluations the speaker will make of the facts, which is to say that there is no logical connection between the facts of the world and the speaker’s expression of absolute value. The moral expression is not implied by what happens to be true in the world.

As it appears that a logical justification for the moral judgment is lacking, a question about the *sense* of the moral expression then arises, for if moral statements are not implied by facts (which have a sense), which means that moral statements are logically *disconnected* from facts, then it becomes unclear what kind of meaning is supposed to be conveyed by moral statements. Wittgenstein claims that the problem is that language is not designed to express absolute value: “Our words used as we use them in science, are vessels capable only of containing and conveying meaning and sense, *natural* meaning and sense. Ethics, if it is anything, is supernatural and our words will only express facts.”<sup>7</sup> In the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein claims that “All propositions are of equal value,” which means that, *logically speaking*, all facts that could be expressed by propositions are of equal value.<sup>8</sup> But part of the purported force—the *moral* force—of ethical expressions is that the person who uses such an expression employs it as

an *absolute* to be acknowledged and obeyed, not to be transgressed. A factual statement says how things *are*; an ethical statement says how things *ought* to be. Wittgenstein claims that since such ought-statements are not implied by logical necessity, what we attempt to express by means of them is, at best, not a fact, and at worst (logically speaking) nonsense, precisely because ethical expressions are held to express something *above and beyond* the facts themselves (which is part of what Wittgenstein means by calling ethical expressions “supernatural” or “transcendental”).

Wittgenstein realizes that we are attempting to express something important in our ethical judgments, despite their logically problematic status. He considers his own experience of *wondering at the existence of the world*. He says of this experience, “I am then inclined to use such phrases as ‘how extraordinary that anything should exist’ or ‘how extraordinary that the world should exist.’”<sup>9</sup> But, he says, “the verbal expression which we give to these experiences is nonsense!” and is a misuse of language.

Ordinarily, when we wonder at something, we do so because we find that thing—Wittgenstein’s example is a very big dog—extraordinary. We find it extraordinary because we can imagine it not existing and are able to compare it to other things of similar kind which are not extraordinary. Extraordinariness is a matter of *contrast*. To express an experience as “wondering at the existence of the world” is a misuse of language because there is nothing with which to contrast the world. We have no frame of reference in which we may regard the world as extraordinary, and thus no frame of reference which would make sense of our “wondering” at the world as analogous to wondering at a very big dog. We are unable to specify the context in which wondering at the world could be meaningful, and thus we are unable to say what it is

about our experience which makes it *important*, even though Wittgenstein claims, for his part, that the experience seems to *him* to have this “intrinsic, absolute value.”<sup>10</sup>

This is, Wittgenstein says, a paradox: “that an experience, a fact, should seem to have supernatural value.”<sup>11</sup> We could say that our experience has *deceived* us into ascribing absolute value to it—that because the experience *seemed* important, we credit it with absolute importance. We could then conclude that these feelings of absolute value are simply a kind of experiential illusion. Wittgenstein takes a much different approach to the paradox by drawing a distinction between two perspectives: the perspective we occupy while in the grips of the experience and the perspective we occupy when we try to give expression to the experience. He says that to wonder at the existence of the world “is the experience of seeing the world as a miracle,” and that to see the world in this way precludes the possibility of giving a verbal expression to our experience which conveys *sense*.<sup>12</sup> From a scientific perspective, there are no miracles, but only unexplained phenomena. When we attempt to analyze our paradoxical experience—to find out what it *means* and what we can *say* about it—we come up empty-handed, we speak nonsense, because we are no longer situated within the perspective from which the feeling of absolute value got hold of us. In attempting to give a definite, factual (sense-making) meaning to the words by which we intend to express this experience, we have already “stepped out” of the experience of wonderment, and have begun to look at it in the “wrong” way.

This is what Wittgenstein means by calling nonsensicality the “very essence” of ethical expressions.<sup>13</sup> Any attempt to find “the correct logical analysis,” which is to say, the *right words*, for our expressions, will invariably place us back within a framework in which all propositions, all expressions, and all experiences are of exactly equal value. Thus, the very act of speaking seems to confound the goal of ethical speech, which is “to go beyond the world and that is to say

beyond significant language” by expressing something which is of greater value than what is expressed by a non-ethical statement.<sup>14</sup> Statements of absolute value are nonsense precisely because we purport to say more with them than language logically allows. Such statements are an attempt to throw a “supernatural” order onto the facts of the world—i.e. an order which is not given in the world itself. Although ethical judgments are provoked by facts, they are not implied by those facts. The existence of the world does not imply that Ludwig, or anyone else, will wonder at its existence, or exclaim that it is good that the world exists. Such exclamations are nonsense precisely because the existence of the (whole) world is either not itself a fact, but a precondition of the possibility of there being any facts, or the world is just the sum total of all the facts there are. And again, the facts are all of equal value. Similarly, statements like, “lying is wrong,” are nonsense because an instance of lying (or murdering, etc.) can be expressed as a fact (or set of facts) to which the predicate “is wrong” appears to add an absolute value which is not implied by the facts themselves.

## II. The “Ethical” Aim of the *Tractatus*

Now we are in a position to see how Wittgenstein’s comments in the “Lecture on Ethics” offer guidance in reading the *Tractatus* as a work containing nonsense. Wittgenstein wrote in his *Notebooks*, “What has history to do with me? Mine is the first and only world! I want to report how *I* found the world. What others in the world have told me about the world is a very small and incidental part of my experience of the world. *I* have to judge the world, to measure things.”<sup>15</sup> The world, for Wittgenstein, is the sum total of facts. Sentences show, or picture, these facts. The only sentences which have a sense are those which picture facts.<sup>16</sup> The rules (or logic) of language set the limits of what may be done with sentences, how we may combine them in

order to produce, or deduce, other sentences. Note that this very brief sketch of Wittgenstein's view in the *Tractatus* does not tell us what we *will* do with these sentences and rules, or what we *should* do with them. The very act of picking our particular facts, of focusing upon them, of giving them a specific place and priority in one's expressions, begins to *show* us something about the *speaker* which transcends the facts expressed. What the speaker shows us is what he cares about, what he finds worthwhile or of importance in the world. So, when Wittgenstein says, "I have to judge the world," he is not confessing of some personal obsession but stating a truism—one *must* judge the world for oneself, for this is something no one else can do. In doing this, we are always, Wittgenstein thinks, reading value *into* the world, and revealing ourselves, our own values, to others. In "finding" the world to be a certain way, we do two things: we discover (find) facts and we evaluate them—*find* them to be good or bad, relevant or irrelevant, say. As we find the world, we are also giving shape to it: we are projecting a moral dimension onto the world, which the world itself does not contain. The moral dimension belongs to us, and lies outside of the world of bare facts.<sup>17</sup>

In the preface to the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein claims that the value of the *Tractatus* is that "thoughts are expressed in it." "A thought," he tells us, "is a proposition with sense."<sup>18</sup> But then by announcing at the end of the book, "anyone who understands me eventually recognizes [my propositions] as nonsense," Wittgenstein generates a paradox.<sup>19</sup> Let us recall the paradox Wittgenstein identified in his lecture on ethics: "that an experience, a fact, should seem to have supernatural value." A thought or an experience becomes another fact among a world of facts. Wittgenstein tells us that his aim in the *Tractatus* is to "draw a limit...to the expression of thoughts."<sup>20</sup> Thus, the activity of the *Tractatus* consists in showing the reader the limits of sense—sense is limited to the facts. But the expression of thoughts consists in more than simply

the activity of expressing facts; judgment about how to go on with the facts is *always* implicit in the expressions one uses. Facts do not tell us what to do with them, and “the problems of life”—how to *get on* with the facts—“remain completely untouched.”<sup>21</sup> Wittgenstein’s propositions are “nonsense” insofar as they are recommending to us a particular way of getting on with the facts: to say clearly what can be said, and to pass over in silence what cannot be said. This is, as it were, Wittgenstein’s categorical imperative. But now it should be clear that insofar as the “Tractarian imperative” expresses an absolute value, the expression is nonsense. The absolute value which is placed upon making sense in the *Tractatus* is itself nonsense and thus cannot be given a justification *within* language!

Because the thoughts Wittgenstein expresses about language and sense are said with the intention of getting the reader to “see the world aright,” his words contain an ethical aim (broadly speaking) which cannot be logically justified. The distinction Wittgenstein marks between our understanding his propositions and our understanding *him* suggests that to understand the propositions is simply to know what sense they convey, but that to understand *Wittgenstein* is to understand what he wants us to take away—beyond his picture of language and logic—from the experience of reading the *Tractatus*. It is something like this: we cannot quite put our ultimate values into words or justify our normative claims. But our values will emerge through *how* we express what can be said of the facts (including which facts we attend to). Similarly, justification is not a matter of showing how the value we point toward is (logically) implied by the facts (since the facts don’t work that way), but rather of getting the reader (or hearer) into a position, via our way of laying out the facts, to undergo an experience that is similar to our own.

## REFERENCES

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2. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. David Pears and Brian McGuinness, London: Routledge (1961) §6.54. Hereafter cited as *TLP*.
3. *LE*, 5.
4. *LE*, 6.
5. See *TLP*, §1-§1.2, §6.4-§6.41.
6. *LE*, 6.
7. *LE*, 7.
8. *TLP*, §6.4.
9. *LE*, 8.
10. *LE*, 10.
11. *LE*, 10.
12. *LE*, 11.
13. *LE*, 11.
14. *LE*, 11.
15. Wittgenstein, *Notebooks 1914-1916*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, New York: Harper & Row (1961), 82e.
16. See the opening sections of *TLP*.
17. *TLP*, §6.41.
18. *TLP*, §4.
19. *TLP*, §6.54.
20. *TLP*, Preface.
21. *TLP*, §6.52.