

## 1 Wittgenstein's Remarks on Ethics

### 1.1 Wittgenstein on Ethics: Interpretative Challenges

Ludwig Wittgenstein was a morally serious person. His diaries attest his aspiration to be morally decent and his regrets and embarrassment over what he sees as his own moral failings as well as his reflections on the task of meeting his own ethical ideals. As he writes in an entry in 1937, 'life is far more serious than it looks like at the surface. Life is frightfully serious' (PPO: 175).<sup>1</sup> For Wittgenstein, the hardest challenge was to escape the temptation of moral self-delusion and come to see his own moral standing clearly. In the diaries, he exclaims: 'How difficult it is to know oneself, to honestly admit what one is!' (PPO: 221). But even at such moments, in the middle of the pursuit of self-understanding, Wittgenstein also often doubts his own sincerity and commitment, reproaching himself: 'Self-recognition & humility is one. (These are cheap remarks.)' (PPO: 105).

We find testimonies of the same aspiration for moral earnestness and determination in many recollections of Wittgenstein. His student and friend Norman Malcolm writes that 'Wittgenstein had an intense desire for moral and spiritual purity. "Of course I want to be perfect!" he exclaimed. This was not arrogance – for he knew he was far from perfect' (Malcolm 1993: 21). And Wittgenstein's close friend Paul Engelmann also notes Wittgenstein's uncompromising approach to his own moral standing, describing him as having an attitude of 'an ethical totalitarianism in all questions, a single-minded and painful preservation of the purity of the uncompromising demands of ethics, in agonizing awareness of one's own permanent failure to measure up to them' (EN: 109). Wittgenstein's moral seriousness is also reflected in his philosophical work and his conception of the activity of philosophy, which he sees as guided by not just ideals of clarity of thinking but also ethical ideals of attention and integrity. 'Don't apologize for anything, don't obscure anything, look & tell how it really is – but you must see something that sheds a new light on the facts' (CV: 45 [39]).<sup>2</sup> Philosophy comes with an obligation to exercise rigorous and truthful attention to the phenomena in one's interest, but for the philosopher to live up to this ideal, they need continuously to reflect on their own expectations and preconceived ideas of what may deserve attention, be important or valuable and so on. 'Work on philosophy ... is really more work on oneself. On one's own conception. On how one sees things. (And what one expects of them.)' (CV: 24 [16]). In this way, Wittgenstein thought that his philosophical work should influence his own moral standing: 'The movement of my thoughts in my philosophizing should be

<sup>1</sup> For abbreviations of Wittgenstein's works, see References.

<sup>2</sup> I refer to the 1998 edition of for *Culture and Value*, but references to the 1980 edition are added in square brackets.

discernible also in the history of my mind, of its moral concepts & in the understanding of my situation' (PPO: 133).

The centrality of ethics in Wittgenstein's life and its intimate connection to his way of doing philosophy seem to be a promising starting point for an Element such as this. There is, however, one challenge that faces any attempt to write rather concisely about Wittgenstein's view of ethics, which has shaped the surrounding interpretative landscape and will also influence the layout of this Element – the challenge that Wittgenstein wrote only little on ethics. In his own writings, the remarks that explicitly address topics of ethics and moral philosophy consist mainly of a group of remarks towards the ending of *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, a manuscript published under the title 'A Lecture on Ethics' from 1929, one remark in the *Philosophical Investigations* (§77), and a number of rather scattered remarks in Wittgenstein's *Nachlass* and diaries, most of which are published in *Public and Private Occasions* and *Culture and Value*. To this, we can add at least two other sources. These are first and foremost discussions of issues related to ethics, the word 'good' and value recorded by students in notes from that Wittgenstein's lectures; now edited and published in several volumes (see e.g. LC, AWL, MWL). The second additional source is remarks that Wittgenstein made in public or personal conversations, documented by students and friends (see e.g. Waismann 1965, 1979; Rhees 1965; Malcolm 1984, 1993; Bouwsma 1986). At first sight, this may seem to constitute the foundation on which an interpreter will have to build an understanding of Wittgenstein's view of ethics. We do, however, also have a third and much more abundant resource, namely Wittgenstein's writings on other subjects such as the activity of philosophy, meaning, logic and grammar, and inner and outer. As we will come to see, these writings play a central role in the attempt to understand Wittgenstein's view of ethics and its place in the context of his wider philosophical endeavours.

The scarcity of textual resources and the challenges connected to the developments in Wittgenstein's work generally have led to extensive and complicated interpretative discussions about how to understand Wittgenstein's view of ethics and related issues (for overviews, see e.g. Johnston 1989; Lovibond 1998; Christensen 2011a). In fact, scholarship in this field is still growing significantly and involves substantial disagreement about many central issues, even about whether it makes sense to talk about something like Wittgenstein's 'view' of ethics. Scholars also disagree about whether Wittgenstein's own remarks on ethics should take centre stage in the attempt to develop a Wittgensteinian view of ethics, or whether the more important project is to develop the ethical implications of Wittgenstein's (early or later) philosophical work, more or less independently of an understanding of his own, admittedly,

rather elusive view of ethics. Some scholars taking this stance simply turn to the task of developing the ethical implications of parts of Wittgenstein's writings that do not directly address ethical issues such as aspect seeing or his remarks on certainty (for examples, see Kober 2008; Pleasants 2008). In this Element, I will attempt to work out the best interpretation of Wittgenstein's own view of ethics, but discussions of how to understand Wittgenstein's work in philosophy more generally will inevitably also seep into and influence this interpretation.

## 1.2 Why Bother with Wittgenstein's Remarks on Ethics?

As work on Wittgenstein's view of ethics faces considerable interpretive challenges, it is reasonable to ask why we should take the trouble to even consider this view. This Element and other interpretative efforts put into Wittgenstein's remarks on ethics are, in a certain sense, attempts to answer this question, and whether these answers are sufficient is above all something for readers to decide. Still, I find it possible to offer at least two general reasons for why it may be fruitful to put in the effort of engaging with Wittgenstein's approach to ethics. The first is that the extensive interpretative debate surrounding this approach has made substantial contributions to Wittgenstein scholarship. The second is that Wittgenstein's approach differs radically from most other available approaches in moral philosophy in a way that gives us cause to challenge and rethink dominant conceptions of ethics in fruitful ways.

Still, the challenges in engaging with Wittgenstein's view of ethics persist, and they have influenced the basic interpretative principles guiding my approach as well as the way this Element is composed. The first guiding principle is to focus primarily on Wittgenstein's own sparse remarks on ethics, through close readings of central passages and consideration of their place within his wider oeuvre. This approach best reflects the importance of the original writings and enables me to ask whether and how Wittgenstein's remarks constitute a comprehensive approach to moral life. My second guiding principle is to try to place my own reading of Wittgenstein's remarks in relation to existing interpretations of Wittgensteinian ethics, especially in relation to the early writings. I thus begin the investigation of ethics in the *Tractatus* by quoting the remarks on ethics and presenting the two dominant approaches, the metaphysical and the resolute readings, before I develop what I think is the most coherent and loyal interpretation of Wittgenstein's early view of ethics. In chapter 4, I present a close reading of Wittgenstein's most sustained engagement with ethics in 'A Lecture on Ethics', together with two ideas that remain constant throughout his engagement with ethics, a critical approach to moral theorising and an emphasis on the personal dimension of ethics. In chapter 5, I discuss remarks on ethics from Wittgenstein's later writings. I will argue that

while some aspects of Wittgenstein's view of ethics stay the same throughout his thinking, the changes in his later work also result in changes in how he thought philosophy could engage with ethics, making him give up the Tractarian view that ethics is not an appropriate subject for philosophical inquiry (contrary to e.g. Richter 1996, 2019).

## 2 Remarks on Ethics in the *Tractatus*: Guides and Interpretations

### 2.1 Wittgenstein's Main Contention

At the outbreak of the First World War, Wittgenstein volunteered as a soldier in the Austrian army, and during this time, serving first behind the front and later at the very frontline, he did much of the writing of what eventually became his first main book, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (Monk 1991: 137–66). Wittgenstein developed the work on the role of logic in thinking and language that he had begun as a student at Cambridge, but during his wartime experience, his philosophical writings changed character and new themes began to appear (Klagge 2021). We can follow this development in Wittgenstein's notebooks, when in June of 1916, after a month with no entries, he suddenly writes: 'What do I know about God and the purpose of life?' (NB: 72). After this time, Wittgenstein's entries are almost as much concerned with questions related to meaning of life, self, God, and value as they are with logic, and it is writing from this period that was eventually transformed into the very last part of the *Tractatus* where we find the remarks on ethics.

The aim of this section and the next is to present Wittgenstein's early approach to ethics, and entries in the *Notebooks* offer us a valuable insight into the development of this approach. Still, I will not discuss these for two reasons. Most importantly, the *Tractatus* is comprised of remarks chosen and organised by Wittgenstein for publication, and it thus constitutes the most authoritative presentation of his view of ethics at this time. Moreover, involving the *Notebooks* almost inevitable gives rise to a discussion of whether or how the *Notebooks* remarks, the result of Wittgenstein's immediate and unedited first struggles with ethical issues, relate to the published work, and these reflections will inevitably divert attention from my main aim of trying to unfold the view of ethics that Wittgenstein intended to offer to readers of the *Tractatus*. I therefore focus on remarks published in the *Tractatus* together with remarks made by Wittgenstein in discussions following the publication of this work as well as the manuscript 'A Lecture on Ethics', which in my view marks the end of and a partial departure from the early period of Wittgenstein's thinking on ethics.

Even if Wittgenstein wrote very little on ethics in the *Tractatus*, it is also evident that he considered ethics important and, in some way, central to his philosophical work. After finishing the manuscript for his book, Wittgenstein

searched – for a period in vain – for the right place to publish it, and in a letter to a potential publisher, Ludwig von Ficker, he highlights the central importance of ethics for his work:

The book's point is an ethical one. I once meant to include in the preface a sentence which is not in fact there now but which I will write out for you here . . . . My work consists of two parts: the one presented here plus all that I have *not* written. And it is precisely this second part that is the important one. My book draws limits to the ethical [*das Ethische*] from the inside as it were, and I am convinced that this is the *ONLY rigorous* way of drawing those limits. In short, I believe that where *many* others today are just *gassing*, I have managed in my book to put everything firmly into place by being silent about it. (EN: 143; translation amended)

The letter is quite surprising. Wittgenstein writes that, despite the fact that he has written only a few pages relating to matters of value and ethics at the very end of *Tractatus*, the engagement with these issues is a driving motivation behind the work. Moreover, he insists that the best way to honour this motivation is by *not* writing about ethics, and in contrast to others writing about ethics, that this is the only way to draw limits to what is ethical and to do so in the right way, by being silent.

To take Wittgenstein's letter seriously is to develop an interpretation of the *Tractatus* that begins from the acknowledgement that he approaches ethics as something that is quite distinct from what we normally talk *about* when we take ourselves to be talking about moral matters in an ordinary sense of 'talking about something'. It is also to acknowledge that in developing such an interpretation, we are in a sense working against Wittgenstein's concern with staying silent, because we will only be able to engage with his remarks on ethics by talking – or writing – about them. The present interpretative endeavour thus comes with an inbuilt conflict or even inconsistency at its very core because it, like other attempts to understand ethics in the *Tractatus*, necessarily goes beyond the silence recommended by Wittgenstein. In fact, a similar dilemma arises in relation to the *Tractatus* itself because, as Chon Tejedor notes, 'if ethics cannot be put into words . . . , how can a book – something that is, on the face of it, made up of words – have an ethical dimension?' (2010: 86). I will return to this tension between investigation and silence continuously in my engagement with the *Tractatus*.

The letter to Ludwig von Ficker is also interesting because Wittgenstein goes on to offer a form of 'guide' for reading his work, writing: 'Only perhaps you won't see that it is said in the book. For now, I would recommend you to read the *preface* and the *conclusion*, because they contain the most direct expression of the point of the book' (EN: 144). Wittgenstein thus seems to assume that it is possible – at least to some extent – to approach his view of ethics without having

to engage in any substantial way with the main part of the *Tractatus*. This advice comes with an interpretative challenge, however. It is quite easy to identify the preface of the *Tractatus*, to which we will turn in a moment, as this is clearly marked and quite distinct in character from the rest of the work. However, the rest of the *Tractatus* consists of main remarks marked with numbers from 1 to 7, each followed by commenting remarks marked with decimal numbers. The problem is that none of the numbered remarks is singled out in any way; there is no special section titled ‘Conclusion’, and there is no other indication of what Wittgenstein could be alluding to here. One convention within Wittgenstein scholarship is to understand ‘conclusion’ as referring to the remarks beginning from 6.4, where Wittgenstein turns to discussions of value, ethics, the problem of life, death, God, what is mystical, and the right method of philosophy. In my view, an equally viable interpretation is to understand Wittgenstein’s mention of conclusion as covering all of the remarks from 6 and onwards, both because the 6s constitute a whole section and because 7 is solitary, not followed by any remarks. This interpretation is supported by the fact that Wittgenstein, after the introduction of the general form of a proposition in 6, has a general undertaking. He works through the implications of his logical analysis for *philosophical* treatments of logic (6.1s), mathematics (6.2s), law (or necessity) and contingency (6.3s), and value (6.4s). In what follows, I therefore take all these remarks to constitute Wittgenstein’s ‘conclusion’, and I place my main focus here, even if I also draw in other sections of the *Tractatus*.

There are other places where Wittgenstein mentions his general aim in writing the *Tractatus*. In response to some questions from Bernard Russell to a draft of the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein writes that his ‘main contention’ is ‘the theory of what can be expressed (*gesagt*) by propositions – i.e. by language – (and, which comes to the same, what can be *thought*) and what can not be expressed by prop[osition]s, but only shown (*gezeigt*)’ (CL: 124), and he goes on to say that this is also, in his view, ‘the cardinal problem of philosophy’ (CL: 124; for discussion see Anscombe 1959: 161; Kremer 2007). This brings us to Wittgenstein’s most important mention of the aim of the *Tractatus*, in its preface. This is important, not only because the preface has the textual authority of being Wittgenstein’s most direct instrument in framing readers’ approach to the *Tractatus*, but also because of his advice to von Ficker that attention to the preface is vital for an understanding of its ethical dimension. In the preface, Wittgenstein notes that ‘the book deals with the problems of philosophy’ (TLP: 3), and that he is confident to have found the solution to these problems but also that the *Tractatus* ‘shows how little is achieved when these problems are solved’ (TLP: 4). Furthermore, Wittgenstein again highlights the need to draw limits, now the limit of language, of ‘the expression of thoughts’ (TLP: 3),

and he writes that the ‘whole sense of the book might be summed up in the following words: what can be said at all can be said clearly, and of what we cannot talk we must pass over in silence’ (TLP: 3; translation amended). This remark mirrors the very last sentence of the *Tractatus*: ‘Of what we cannot speak we must pass over in silence’ (TLP: 7; translation amended).

If we compare Wittgenstein’s guides for reading, it becomes clear that they all present the *Tractatus* as revolving around a distinction between what can be said, and said clearly, and what cannot be said and not only has to be but also *ought to be* left in silence. Moreover, we learn a little more from each of the three guides, that this distinction sums up the ‘sense of the book’; that ethics, as part of what cannot be expressed, can *only* be shown; that ethics is among what should be left in silence; and that in drawing attention to a connection between ethics and silence, Wittgenstein is trying to draw limits to the ethical ‘from the inside’, without assuming it possible to somehow see ‘beyond’ it (cf. CV: 22 [15]). These are Wittgenstein’s suggested points of attention that we will take with us in the attempt to understand the role that ethics plays in the *Tractatus*.

## 2.2 The Remarks on Ethics

After having looked at Wittgenstein’s guides for reading the *Tractatus*, it is time to turn to the remarks on ethics. These remarks are part of what I earlier singled out as part of the ‘conclusion’ of the *Tractatus*, the remarks from 6 onwards. We find the remarks on value in the 6.4s, and in the main sentence of this section, Wittgenstein writes that: ‘All propositions [*Sätze*] are of equal value’ (TLP 6.4). In the *Tractatus*, propositions or *Sätze* are meaningful sentences saying something about the world, and according to this remark, whatever we say about the world cannot stand out in terms of value. In the first commenting remark to 6.4, Wittgenstein elaborates on this point, writing: ‘The sense of the world must lie outside the world. In the world everything is as it is, and everything happens as it does happen; *in it* no value exists – and if did exist, it would have no value’ (TLP 6.41). On the picture of the world presented here, whatever happens *in* the world is a fact, and as such, it is contingent and does not matter in terms of value because value is something other than, and distinct from, contingency and facts. If we managed to find value in the world, it would also be contingent and thus not of value at all. Instead, Wittgenstein continues, value ‘must lie outside the world’ (TLP 6.41), connecting it to the sense or meaning of the world (TLP 6.41). As Iris Murdoch observes, it appears as if Wittgenstein is trying to avoid a devaluation of value by keeping it out of the world, ‘to segregate value in order to keep it pure and untainted’, separating ‘the area of valueless contingency . . . from the thereby purified ineffable activity of value’