

https://dspace.org/

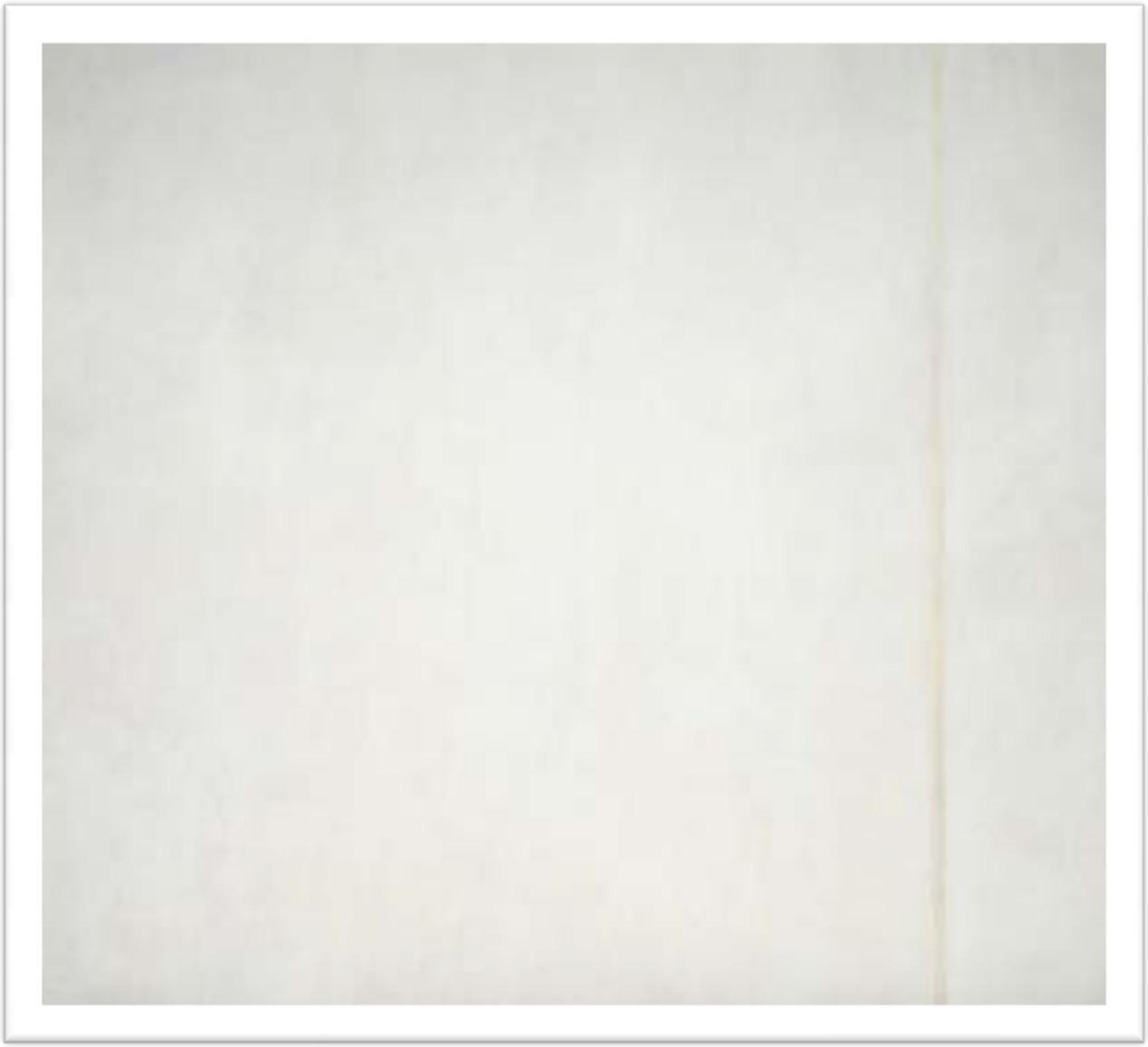
Dissolving ethics: understanding the ineffability of ethics in Wittgenstein's Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus

Irvine, John

2011-11-24
http://hdl.handle.net/10539/10854

Downloaded from a DSpace repository. https://dspace.org/

UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND | **JOHN IRVINE** | APPLIED ETHICS FOR PROFESSIONALS



DISSOLVING ETHICS

Understanding the ineffability of ethics in Wittgenstein's Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus

MA DISSERTATION 2011 | SUPERVISOR: DR DYLAN FUTTER

0

Programme

Programme 2
Explanation 3
Presentation re: representation 5
Carnival Mirrors 9
A Note on Terminology 12
If You Have Nothing Good To Say... 13
Silence and Nonsense 18
Paradoxical Investigations 22
Chasing our Tails 25
Clarification 27
Bibliography 29
Acknowledgement 30

1

Explanation

"Just as fragments of a vessel, in order to be fitted together, must correspond to each other in the tiniest details but need not resemble each other, so translation, instead of making itself resemble the meaning of the original, must lovingly, and in detail, fashion in its own language a counterpart to the original's mode of intention, in order to make both of them recognizable as fragments of a vessel, as fragments of a greater language."

Walter Benjamin – The Task of the Translator

Ludwig Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus ("Tractatus")* presents us with a singularly difficult challenge. After showing us something about the nature of language and logic, he bars the way for us to simply state the (apparent?) insights contained in that book. Why this is so will have to be demonstrated in what follows. To take Wittgenstein seriously is not to simply relate what he says but to change our stance towards *saying*. On this footing, an essay regarding ethics and its ineffability cannot use language as the precise tool we are accustomed to; now language must be used obliquely, metaphorically: as a prompt, a turning-about, a slap in the face pushing us roughly in the right direction. Philosophy then abandons the attempt to formulate a theory, and instead attempts to clarify. With that somewhat vague introduction, let us haphazardly proceed to the business of doing philosophy. In order to make myself comprehensible I am forced to talk in a certain (theoretical) way. Hopefully the inadequacy of that discussion will cast some light on ethics and on language. So: onward!

The *Tractatus* is not ostensibly a book about ethics; it is a treatise on the limits of logic and language. As it nears conclusion, however, Wittgenstein makes the astounding claim that "it is clear that ethics cannot be put into words".[1] Unexpectedly, we are confronted with an important statement about value that demands our attention. If this claim is true then the philosophical-ethical enterprise is called into question. Ethics becomes insignificant if the claim is that theoretical debate of ethical issues devolves into meaningless or nonsensical talk. Its objectives become unattainable if the claim is that ethical propositions cannot be formed at all, so that ethical talk is impossible instead of meaningless. To complicate issues, in the latter case the claim seems *prima facie* false, as we do appear to engage in ethical debate and make ethical assertions. In either case, some explanation is required to understand

[1] (Wittgenstein, Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus 1961) 6.421

the sense and significance of Wittgenstein's claim, for if there is merit in it we need to re-consider what it is that we can expect from ethical debate and, for that matter, from philosophy.

My aim is not to elucidate a comprehensive Wittgensteinian ethics. Instead I will attempt to make sense of the ethical issue at the heart of the *Tractatus* through an exegetical exercise limited predominantly to that work. Looking at the progression of Wittgenstein's thought in the *Tractatus* should point us towards an understanding of the sense and importance of his claim. I address some natural objections to the validity of his claim, as articulated by Bertrand Russell who doubted that such a position could be sensibly maintained. If it cannot be maintained then it provides the critic of the ineffability of ethics with a ready rejoinder: whenever the ineffability of ethics is asserted, the critic uses the assertion (characterised as an ethical assertion) to undermine the claim. So, to clarify what can or cannot be sensibly proposed, I step away from the *Tractatus* briefly to consider the concept of ineffability apart from Wittgenstein's discussion. I take this attempt at explanation to be philosophically important and I present its results as a method of coming to understand the sense of Wittgenstein's ethical view.

Proceeding in this way is somewhat reckless as Wittgenstein would likely not have approved of this type of theoretical discussion, thinking it self-defeating or deceptive. The performance of the argument, must, however be made, in order to clarify what we're really talking about. That kind of exercise is something that Wittgenstein found necessary in the *Tractatus*, although he attempted to refrain from saying what could not be said clearly. I want to try and remain true to the spirit of that book while translating the idea into a new form of presentation – one with a surfeit of saying. My aim is thus to give context to Wittgenstein's claim regarding the ineffability of ethics and then to discuss whether such a claim makes sense or just dissolves into nonsense under examination. Interestingly, if Wittgenstein is right about his claim, then it must be nonsense, as he recognises. We will see what this means, and what it means for the project as a whole, as we proceed.

2

Presentation re: representation

"The picture which the philosopher draws of the world is surely not one in which every stroke is necessitated by pure logic."

Morris R. Cohen – The Conception of Philosophy in Recent Discussions

The great architects of philosophy proceed carefully, building systems brick-by-brick, using only what is necessary to continue. In the tradition of Kant, Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* asks how it is that the world is capable of representation, and attempts an answer by proceeding from axioms about logic to their necessary entailments. The *Tractatus* is a work apparently centred on the logic of our grammar, and a statement in it about the nature of ethics thus seems gratuitous. However, Wittgenstein makes it because he believes it follows from his previously asserted distinction between facts (the totality of which constitute the empirical world),[2] amenable to statement in terms of propositions (i.e. expressible as a possible state of affairs)[3] and what we could call the 'pre-conditions of meaning' through which we make sense of facts, such as: logic, aesthetics or ethics.[4] Since propositions can only express possible states of affairs, which are of equal value (given that situations are as they are),[5] propositions are incapable of representing value. Value judgements are incapable of representing value within language and so are made from 'outside' of the propositional framework.[6] Or, in reverse: Wittgenstein is committed to the claim that ethics cannot be put into words because he asserts that putting something into words means formulating a proposition about it (asserting something),[7] which entails picturing a possible factual state of affairs (as propositions must do to be propositions), which requires there to be a state of affairs capable of being the subject matter of ethics, which there is not.

---

[2] Op. Cit. (Wittgenstein, Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus 1961) 1.1; 2.04
[3] Ibid. 2.201; 3.11; 4.01; 4.023; 4.1
[4] Ibid. [Logic:] 4.12; 5.61; 6.124; [Aesthetics/Ethics:] 6.41; 6.421
[5] Ibid. 6.4; 6.41
[6] Ibid. 6.41 This reference to a place outside of language is inaccurate, since really no such place exists. Instead we can imagine it to refer to a place which is part of the outer boundary of language, or a vanishing point within language (admitting of all possibilities or none). These are all metaphors to try and convey the idea that language is being misused when value judgements are attempted within it because (ethical) value is an empty referent. David Pears uses this metaphor in his discussion of the metaphysical self (Pears 1997) p76.
[7] Op. Cit. (Wittgenstein, Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus 1961) 4.022; 4.21; 5.124

To investigate whether the ineffability of ethics does indeed follow from the picture of logic Wittgenstein paints, it is important to understand that picture in more detail. To do that, let's proceed as Wittgenstein does, step by step. His general project in the *Tractatus* is to draw the boundaries of language through examining its logic, and to use the findings to demonstrate that certain modes of speech (e.g. philosophical theorising) lead to misunderstandings by attempting to state what they cannot state clearly.[8] In order to achieve this task, he proceeds by considering how representation in language is possible at all. The answer to that question helps us understand the logical structure of language (and in turn, representation) which indicates the limits inherent in it. So, as Russell puts it: "what relation must one fact (such as a sentence) have to another in order to be *capable* of being a symbol for that other?"[9]

Wittgenstein's solution is based on the concept that propositions are logical depictions of states of affairs, and correspond to them through their form. To get to this solution he has to develop a metaphysical picture of the structure of the world and then tie it to the nature of language. He begins by characterising the world as constituted by contingent facts, organised logically.[10] A fact is the existence of a particular state of affairs (in some translations "situation").[11] A state of affairs is a complex arrangement of objects (things) and it is the defining feature of objects that they are capable of various combinations and arrangements so that their relative situation always constitutes some state of affairs.[12] This is what the word 'object' means: a thing that can combine with other things in a determinate fashion.[13] This metaphysical scheme matters because in it objects form the basic substance of the world, which allows propositions to derive their sense from a relationship to that substance, rather than from comparison simply with one another.[14] If there were no correspondence with the substance of the world then we could make no sense of it – "could not sketch any picture of the world (true or false)".[15] So: an object's internal properties determine the possibility of its combination with other objects into states of affairs. These possibilities are the object's 'logical form'. Since objects combine determinately into states of affairs, and existent states of affairs are facts the totality of which we call "the world", the world displays a complex logical form.

[8] Ibid. Author's Preface, p3
[9] Ibid. Introduction by Bertrand Russell, ix.
[10] Ibid. 1.1; 1.13; 1.21
[11] Ibid. 2
[12] Ibid. 2.01
[13] Ibid. 2.0121
[14] Ibid. 2.021; 2.0211; 2.0212
[15] Ibid. 2.0212

Now, for Wittgenstein, we picture facts to ourselves.[16] This is possible by modelling a state of affairs to ourselves in a logical arrangement, where the elements of the picture correspond to objects in the world – like arranging model cars in court to represent an accident scene.[17] Just as states of affairs in the world are constituted by objects being related to one another in a determinate fashion, so pictures have their elements related in this way.[18] In other words, the form of the pictures we present to ourselves corresponds to the form of states of affairs, and this correspondence is the seat of sense or meaning (to be precise "[w]hat a picture represents is its sense").[19] So, pictures share something with reality in order to be able to represent it: the forms of both are related.[20] "Let us call the connexion of its elements the structure of the picture, and let us call the possibility of this structure the pictorial form of the picture. Pictorial form is the possibility that things are related to one another in the same way as the elements of the picture."[21]

The "pictures" under discussion are not only spatio-visual pictures; they are any representation that shares a form with the underlying reality depicted. So a spatial picture is able to picture spatial objects by virtue of its spatial form, musical notation music due to an isomorphic resemblance etc.[22] These pictures include thoughts and propositions.[23] So, to return to the theme of our discussion, Wittgenstein has provided us with the conditions under which propositions will have sense (as only propositions can).[24] To have sense: 1) *propositions must have the correct logical form* (so that, e.g. the spatial arrangement of things depicted expresses the sense of a proposition depicting them, when its form mirrors theirs)[25]; and 2) *they must have reference to a state of affairs*.[26] In other words: "[n]ames must have a *bedeutung* (reference/meaning), but they can only do so in the context of a proposition which is held together by logical form."[27] From this we can see that there will be things which we cannot sensibly depict. For example, the constituent parts of states of affairs (objects) cannot be described propositionally – falling as they do below the threshold of propositional description. We can speak

---

[16] Ibid. 2.1
[17] Ibid. 2.11; 2.12; 2.13
[18] Ibid. 2.14
[19] Ibid. 2.221
[20] Ibid. 2.17
[21] Ibid. 2.15; 2.151
[22] Ibid. 2.171; 4.014
[23] Ibid. [Thoughts]: 3; 3.01; [Propositions]: 3.1; 3.5; 4.01
[24] Ibid. 3.3: Propositions are being contrasted with simple names in this section to indicate that names (representatives of basic objects) only have meaning when arranged in the logical form of a proposition.
[25] Ibid. 3.1431; see 3.14: "[a] proposition is not a medley of words.-(just as a theme in music is not a medley of notes.)" or 3.13: "[a] proposition contains the form of its sense". A proposition has the (fixed) form of a variable, allowing it to express different things, but only through having that form, so that "[an expression] is therefore presented by means of the general form of the proposition it [makes sense of]." 3.312
[26] Ibid. 3.142; 3.144
[27] (Biletzki 2009) 2.2

about them in the abstract ("name them") but cannot 'put them into words' by saying what exactly they are.[28]

Language, being the totality of propositions, can't describe the nature of metaphysically basic objects of the universe or precisely describe the structure through which we organise it, but can talk about these things in some sense, as we have done above. To put the position more plainly: what can be meaningfully proposed ("said") is thus limited to the propositions of natural science.[29] We can only represent possible states of affairs ("reality") precisely and we fail to meet the conditions of sense when we begin to speak about what is beyond the world.[30] Importantly, when this failure becomes apparent – when we run up against the limits of what we can sensibly talk about – we have been shown something important about language, even if (indeed, *because*) it couldn't be stated. This has important implications for philosophical ethics but before we consider those, let us consider more carefully what types of nonsense can be produced when language is abused.

[28] Op. Cit. (Wittgenstein, Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus 1961) 3.221

[29] Ibid. 4.11

[30] We also fail to make sense when we structure our propositions in an illogical form. This lack of sense is not explored in any detail in what follows, because my concern is with pseudo-propositions that appear to make sense because of their form but fail to do so because of the nature of their 'objects' of reference.

3

Carnival Mirrors

"Logic! Good Gracious! What rubbish!"

E. M. Forster

What a proposition can and cannot do is neatly summarised when Wittgenstein says that: "[a] proposition constructs a world with the help of a logical scaffolding, so that one can actually see from the proposition how everything stands in logic *if* it is true. One can *draw inferences* from a false proposition."[31] A proposition is a logical picture of a possible situation. Because of its form it *shows* how things stand *if* it is true. And it *says that* they do so stand, correctly or not.[32] This is an important insight: we understand propositions without having to understand whether or not they are true.[33] We understand the sense of a proposition prior to having it explained to us, if we understand the meaning of the words used. This is because we can literally see from the composition of the proposition what situation is being represented.[34] What does the communicative work here is the logical form of the picture so that "a proposition states something *only in so far as it is a picture*."[35] This form, the logical scaffolding, is not itself capable of being re-represented so that it is said rather than shown. Wittgenstein's fundamental idea is that "'logical constants' are not representatives; that there can be no representatives of the *logic* of facts."[36] This is important because logic delimits sense and so its propositions (tautologies and contradictions) do not themselves have sense – they are not true or false but carry all or no possibilities in order for other things to make sense. Attempting to describe these constants propositionally will thus lead to apparent truths (since propositions assert that some state of affairs obtains) distorted by misapplication of their ability to represent. This is why logic is beyond sensible description and why talk of it leads to nonsense. The thing being referred to here is not capable of proper representation.[37] From our discussion above, we can say that the propositions of logic do not have reference to states of affairs: they instead display the ability to represent anything at all, which cannot itself be represented propositionally. Logic shows us how language works but cannot tell us.

---

[31] Op. Cit. (Wittgenstein, Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus 1961) 4.023
[32] Ibid. 4.022
[33] Ibid. 4.023
[34] Ibid. 4.02; 4.021: Admittedly, this is more obvious when propositions are presented in a logical form and depict basic relationships.
[35] Ibid. 4.03 (my emphasis)
[36] Ibid. 4.031
[37] Indeed it is not really a 'thing' so much as the possibility of the intelligibility of things at all.

This leads to a finer point: philosophy, which should just be the clarification of thoughts (for Wittgenstein), should not (cannot) produce doctrine.[38] It deals with topics which are not amenable to propositional determination, such as logic and metaphysics. Although I have not yet made clear the problem with metaphysical talk, it might be noticed that the current discussion is falling apart somewhat as the foundation on which it is built is being called into question. I have described a metaphysics which cannot properly be described on this account; I have discussed the logical structure of its relationship to our thought and language and then asserted that that structure cannot be properly discussed. Things are becoming unstable because the exploration of the limits of sense leads us to talk about something which cannot be properly stated – to talk nonsense. I will endeavour to show that Wittgenstein's point about ethics is that talk of its content is subject to devolving into nonsense, as is talk of logic's nature or metaphysics. The discussion of logic has perhaps demonstrated how certain propositions are not capable of statement. With the possibility of ineffability in mind, we can entertain the idea that other propositions, such as those of ethics may also be incapable of statement (although not necessarily in the same fashion). I began by considering the un-representability of logical form. Now let us consider what kind of nonsense ethics is for Wittgenstein by considering the types of nonsense he thinks are possible. What we'll be looking at are pseudo-propositions: things which are 'said' when really they can only show something through their structure. I want to begin sketching the distinction between the ineffability of logic and ethics, while drawing a comparison between ethics and metaphysics in order to clarify.

Logically, there are three types of nonsense: propositions which are meaningless (*bedeutungslos*); those which lack sense (*sinnlos*); and those which are nonsensical (*unsinning*).[39] Meaningless signs have no use in language – we can't recognise their symbols because the signs aren't used with sense.[40] This seems to be what is happening when we say "Robots' sweet is six".[41] The form is intact, this is shown, but the signs aren't used sensibly. Logic, discussed above, is *sinnlos*, lacking in sense, as it does not represent states of affairs. Its constants do not stand for objects.[42] It therefore has no reference. But its structure shows us something about how language works, regardless. It is apparent. Not everything discussed thus far is nonsense in this sense though – metaphysics is nonsense in a more profound way.[43] Here is

---

[38] Ibid. 4.112

[39] (Barrett 1991) p12. For the sake of completeness we should stipulate that there can be a fourth type of nonsense: where the logical form does not show anything about the world. This could no longer even be called a (pseudo-)proposition and would probably look something like: "als(*&jljs"

[40] Op. Cit. (Wittgenstein, Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus 1961) 3.326

[41] Biletzki subsumes Barrett's category of 'bedeutungslos' under 'unsinning'. I have followed Barrett here for the sake of exposition, but it is not essential to the point that these two are distinct categories.

[42] Op. Cit. (Biletzki 2009) 2.2

[43] Indeed, Logic is said by Wittgenstein in the current translation to "lack sense" but not be "nonsensical". Op. Cit. (Wittgenstein, Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus 1961) 4.461; 4.4611

one way of conceptualising what metaphysics does: some 'propositions' appear to describe things in the world, but in fact attempt to describe the world as a whole and thus aim "beyond the world". Metaphysics is this kind of thing, and is nonsensical (*unsinning*) insofar as it does not deal with particular contingent states of affairs. It does not do what propositions are meant to do – construct situations hypothetically, although it can appear to. Instead it attempts to transcend the world and describe it in a necessary, total way. It fails to have reference in this way – it pictures nothing in the world. Although its propositions look legitimate, they are not. In dealing with notions of absolute value, ethics attempts a totalising and necessary depiction of the (accidental) world-as-it-is, producing pseudo-propositions whose 'objects' of reference appear to be similar to those referred to in propositions of relative value, but are not. Whatever the issues metaphysics and ethics deal with are, they are not factual and contingent. Here is another way of characterising metaphysics and ethics: both are similar to logic insofar as they have problems with reference. But they are not scaffoldings through which we see the world. Where logic shows its sense through its abstract structure, metaphysics and ethics show their sense in attempting to go beyond language and say what cannot be said.[44] They are not like logic in not having anything particular to say (that trait being essential to its nature as the enabler of sense: leaving all possibilities open); instead they attempt to say something about nothing at all (their 'object' of reference is not an object: it is nothing in the world). What an ethicist is doing is not expressing an opinion of taste towards a situation (as a proposition makes it appear) but instead trying to make the listener *see the situation in a certain way* (as right, beautiful, etc.). That attempt goes beyond language. The ethical feature being pointed out is not an observable feature of the things being referred to, so the sense of 'ethical propositions' is not explained by reference to features. In fact, the sense of 'ethical propositions' cannot be explained at all, it can only be exemplified.[45] So in both logic and ethics sense must be shown, but unlike logic, ethics and metaphysics are profoundly nonsensical in that they use language to transcend the world entirely and make us see it anew.[46]

We can now see that ethics is nonsensical in a particular way. On the interpretations above, if Wittgenstein says that ethics cannot be stated, we have to understand this to mean that ethical statements result in nonsense for this reason. But could Wittgenstein literally mean that ethics cannot be put into words at all – that ethics is somehow ineffable? To understand that, let us closely consider what Wittgenstein actually says about the ineffability of ethics, and then what ineffability as a concept actually entails.

---

[44] Op. Cit. (Barrett 1991) p22
[45] Ibid. p25
[46] Cf. (Wittgenstein, Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus 1961) 6.54

4

A Note on Terminology [47]

[47] Before continuing, I should note that I have done something underhanded in sliding from a discussion of ineffability to a discussion of nonsense. This is partially because it is important to see that what Wittgenstein might mean when he says that something cannot be put into words, or that there can be no propositions of that subject, is just that such propositions would be nonsense. They thus cannot be 'said' (sensibly) and are naturally then described as ineffable. It is common enough to describe ethics in this fashion when commentators discuss the Tractatus, but the rather obvious point should be made that ineffability can mean something other than "can't be talked about at all" when understood this way. That already is enough to block some shallow objections. It still can mean "can't be proposed sensibly", which leaves many criticisms intact. I will deal with this in the sections that follow. I should also mention, in the spirit of honesty, that Wittgenstein never uses the term 'ineffability'. This is probably a function of translation to some extent, but as long as we understand the term as explained above, this should be a relatively innocent choice of terminology. Wittgenstein does talk of the mystical, he does talk of the transcendental, and he does mention things that cannot be said. This all lends itself towards talk of ineffability. While we're at it, I should note that I have not yet defined what I mean by 'ethics'. This also is in keeping with the spirit of Wittgenstein, who believed that a precise definition would not work (due to the nature of the beast). For that matter, I haven't specified what Wittgenstein actually said about ethics exactly. That will also come, but it is interesting to note how far we can go without actually knowing what we're talking about. Also, it should be noted that much of this discussion has taken place through the use of metaphors. All of this is sloppy and inexact, but the surprising thing is that we think we understand what is going on despite the bad language and lack of information. Maybe that shows us something about what we already know.

In the spirit of showing, let us engage in a vulgar discussion in the name of exposition: the reason that this section is written in the form of a footnote is partially to bring our attention back to the importance of form in our main discussion; partially to attempt an isomorphism of the title to mirror the idea of isomorphisms in propositions; but largely to simply make a joke by taking the title literally. Now explaining what makes that joke funny through analysis is a great way of killing the joke; it's a truism that the joke has failed once I have to explain it. Analysis is a method which uses precise words to dissect a subject and reveal it clearly to us. An inherent consequence of that procedure is the death of the subject being dissected, so that analysis is not good at capturing the *life* of things; it simply (and excellently) displays the parts. How do we appreciate the joke in this title? Through an insight, drawn from a sense we develop: a sense of humour. No amount of explanation is going to properly convey what is funny about a statement or event. We can *say* what we like about it, but its sense can really only be *shown* through performance – through its mode of presentation: its form. And notice also that if the reader agrees that this sort of discussion is vulgar – eliminating any subtlety that might have existed before it took place – our sense of why this is "wrong" (probably in an aesthetic sense, but that is close enough to the point) is in place prior to explanation and indeed escapes exact delineation in words.

That interruption was meant to pull us away from a logical mode of thinking for a moment – to jar us out of philosophy momentarily. This being a philosophy essay though, let us return to the Tractatus and consider further 'argument' about the subject.

5

If You Have Nothing Good To Say…

"And now I must say that if I contemplate what Ethics really would have to be if there were such a science, this result seems to me quite obvious. It seems to me obvious that nothing we could ever think or say should be the thing. That we cannot write a scientific book, the subject matter of which could be intrinsically sublime and above all other subject matters. I can only describe my feeling by the metaphor, that, if a man could write a book on Ethics which really was a book on Ethics, this book would, with an explosion, destroy all the other books in the world."

Ludwig Wittgenstein – Lecture on Ethics

What on earth is Wittgenstein talking about in the above quotation? I am not so bold as to conjecture why all the books in the world would explode if we wrote a true book on ethics, but let us feel our way around Wittgenstein's views on ethics to try and make sense of why we could not write such a book.

As we have discussed, there is a broad category of things that cannot be meaningfully spoken about, including: logic, metaphysics and ethics. It's time now to clarify what we mean by 'ethics' and then see why speaking about it results in nonsense. Wittgenstein does not go out of his way to define ethics in the *Tractatus*, equating it simply with 'value', and indeed with aesthetics.[48] Our best source for a definition is his *Lecture on Ethics*, given in 1929, before he had re-worked his position to that found in the *Philosophical Investigations*. In the lecture, he defines ethics simply enough as "the general enquiry into what is good".[49] But he immediately undermines his definition by saying that he will use the term more broadly, in a way that will spill over into aesthetics.[50] In other words, he seems concerned with broad questions of value. To clarify what he is talking about, he provides examples of what ethics concerns, aiming to leave an impression on the recipient made by the diverse things he mentions:[51] "the enquiry into what is valuable"; or "into what is really important"; or "into the meaning of life"; or "into what makes life worth living"; or "into the right way of living".[52] What all of these expressions have in common is that they can be used in a relative-value ("trivial") sense or an absolute-value ("ethical")

[48] Op. Cit. (Wittgenstein, Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus 1961) 6.4; 6.421
[49] (Wittgenstein, A Lecture on Ethics 1965) p4, following Moore's definition.
[50] Ibid. p4
[51] Ibid. p4-5
[52] Ibid. p5

sense. If I say that a chair is good, the word 'good' has meaning only insofar as a purpose is served by the chair. It has a value relative to that purpose and Wittgenstein says that 'good' in this sense just means meeting a predetermined standard. If we use value expressions in this way we encounter no problems, but ethics does not use them like this: it makes absolute statements independent of chosen standards. Like Kant's hypothetical and categorical imperatives, we cannot choose to ignore the imperative emanating from the absolute sense, so that if someone says "your behaviour is evil" and I reply "I know, but I don't want to change it", they can say "but you *ought* to want to", which they couldn't say in a discussion of relative value. In other words, I am not free to choose evil as an end, it is absolutely wrong, unlike the choice that I don't want to improve at a sport when I am "not good" at it. But the ethical-absolute statement illegitimately uses the form of a proposition to appear analogous to the trivial statement. On analysis, it produces nonsense. The statement "this is the right road" makes sense if I mean it in a relative-value sense (the right road to somewhere) but falls apart if I mean it absolutely (something like, "the road that everyone should always, with logical necessity, take, or be ashamed").[53] There is no state of affairs corresponding to this absolute sense of value expression.

The distinctive Wittgensteinian point here is that what differentiates the trivial sense from the ethical is that the former is essentially a statement of facts (translatable so that it loses all appearance of value, e.g. "this is the right road to take if you want to get to the station in the shortest time").[54] The latter is a value-judgement proper, incapable of ever being reduced to a statement of facts. If God wrote a book containing the full description of the world in every way, it would contain only facts – descriptions – but no ethical judgements or anything that implied one. It would have to be written in terms of propositions describing facts standing on the same level, and in that way themselves standing on the same level. No proposition is intrinsically sublime (or trivial, or even important). Its referents just are, and it just is. To create an (impossibly) sublime proposition capturing absolute value would be to unravel the world by changing its logic. So "[e]thics, if it is anything, is supernatural and our words will only express facts…"[55]

All this talk of exploding books, unravelling worlds and supernatural entities may sound a bit manic. But the point is very simple: there is no absolute value in the world (or: absolutely no real value in the world). Perhaps the best way to see what exactly Wittgenstein wants to say about the ineffability of ethics is to provide a close reading of his words in the *Tractatus*. Keeping the above in mind, he says that:

---

[53] Ibid. p7

[54] Ibid. p6: I am aware that there is current philosophical debate about whether relative value claims can be paraphrased without normative remainder. Wittgenstein's example here still uses the word 'right' and arguably any translation will not reach a state of pure description. It is not, however, absurd to think that Wittgenstein may be correct here and the exegetical point is simply to clarify that Wittgenstein sees ethical expressions as concerned with 'objects' which are not translatable into states of affairs.

[55] Ibid. p7: supernatural in the literal sense of being 'above nature'.

"[6.4] All propositions are of equal value."

There is no inherent distinction in value between different propositions and there is no distinction in value between their referents (states of affairs). Value does not come from inside the propositional system (language), or from some inherent feature of the world that is being referred to.[56]

I think Wittgenstein makes this point to forestall an argument that different propositions may be of different worth (regardless of the value of their subject matters) thereby surreptitiously introducing a way of referring to value from within the world. There is no class of propositions that is more valuable than any other, as even the fundamental 'propositions of logic' are of equal status, being completely derivable from elementary propositions. Complex propositions of logic are just tautologies produced by reflective operations.[57] All propositions, being the products of the logic of our language, are produced this way. But the fundamental direction of the ensuing discussion is that *states-of-affairs* are not inherently valuable, that what is, is. The sense, the meaning, of the world is not a feature of its facts…

"[6.41] 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 it did, it would have no value. If there is any value that does have value, it must lie outside the whole sphere of what happens and is the case. For all that happens and is the case is accidental. What makes it non-accidental cannot lie within the world, since if it did it would itself be accidental. It must lie outside the world."

Value instead comes from 'outside of the world'. We must remember that 'the world' means the totality of facts (existent states of affairs). Facts by themselves are value-free, so that "in the world everything happens as it does happen". There is no prescription, only description. If such a thing as "value" makes sense – if it matters – it must be something different from a state of affairs. If it wasn't, then it would be something accidental and would lose that special feature that makes it matter – its sense of the absolute. So what makes value what it is is precisely that it is not a part of the world – that it is co-extensive with it, determining what it means, providing a way of understanding brute events.[58] But we can't have it both ways: if it is not a part of the world then reference to 'it' is reference to nothing at all.

---

[56] This Wittgensteinian point is asserted, as far as I can tell, as self-evident. I recognise that there is philosophical debate on whether states of affairs may be inherently valuable. Perhaps value is somehow immanent in things or facts. Wittgenstein would see this as confusion – what valuing means is inherently tied up with the concept of attribution (judgement) and that must be done from a logical point 'above' the facts being valued.

[57] Op. Cit. (Wittgenstein, Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus 1961) 6.127

[58] Wittgenstein says that "the limits of my language mean the limits of my world" [*Tractatus,* 5.6] in explaining how logic is not of the world but determines what the world is. It doesn't say that the world has this or that in it, because it is ultimately general and cannot make this determination from some privileged place outside of the framework. It instead admits of all possibilities and *is* the framework (which is why it is tautological) [5.61]. This is important to realise because it is useful in understanding other topics. The metaphysical self, for example, is also

"[6.42] And so it is impossible for there to be propositions of ethics. Propositions can express nothing of what is higher."

Or, stated in Wittgenstein's terms: propositions of ethics will have no reference to a state of affairs in the world and will thus be *unsinning* – nonsensical, since "[t]he sense of a proposition is its agreement or disagreement with possibilities of existence and non-existence of states of affairs".[59]Perhaps the best way to understand this is to consider the following interpretation: 'ethical propositions' express agreement or disagreement, rather than truth or falsity. They have no truth value in the logical sense (disqualifying them as propositions). They express their 'tastes' absolutely, similarly to the way logic deals with the world – things are right or wrong in all possibilities, hence the unique feeling of obligation attached to ethical judgements. Logic enables sense; maybe it is useful to say "ethics enables meaning". But unlike logic, the signs used in ethical pseudo-propositions lack signification.[60] We can discern this because not only does Wittgenstein's system produce this result, but because we experience a sense of not being able to formulate what really matters about the absolute. A sense of ineffability is always present, and that shows us something. I like to interpret this to mean that when a feature of the world is said to be absolutely good or beautiful, a boundary has been crossed in language because the referent is contingent, factual, non-absolute but the expression is treating it as absolute, as sublime. Sense is being conveyed because the listener sees the form of a proposition, assumes the proposition is analogous to those dealing with trivial value, and assumes something is being said about truth or falsity (similes, it would seem, of right and wrong). But the proposition does not express anything of what is higher – of the absolute. Insofar as it purports to do so, it produces nonsense. Instead its performance is intended to change *the listener's view*. Value is conveyed by exemplifying something – by showing – but not through saying what is true, although that appears to be the case.[61]

"[6.421]It is clear that ethics cannot be put into words. Ethics is transcendental…"

So, the attempt to provide true/false propositions about questions of value must fail. Ethics is transcendental in that it attempts an evaluation of the world from a place which cannot be said to be in it – it attempts to say a supernatural thing and putting *that 'thing'* into words won't work because the only words we are able to use are natural. This is why…

---

co-extensive with the limit of the world, manifested by the fact that the only language I can utilise determines those limits. That self is not 'outside' the world literally, that 'self' is something we can't refer to properly (it is not the human being or body or soul – it is not something that is or is not subject to my will). It is a vanishing point – a limit [5.62; 5.631]. Ethics is also 'outside of the world' but I think we can understand this to mean something like 'concerned to do something language is incapable of doing because it is within the world'.

[59] Ibid. 4.2

[60] We could say they are 'insignificant' but jokes like these flirt with paradox and are not recommended.

[61] This interpretation is Barrett's: Op. Cit.(Barrett 1991) p23-25

"[6.43] If good or bad acts of will do alter the world, it can only be the limits of the world that they alter, not the facts, not what can be expressed by means of language. In short, their effect must be that it becomes an altogether different world. It must, so to speak, wax and wane as a whole…"

Ethics cannot be put into words, there are no propositions of ethics, and our language is the totality of propositions. There are no propositions of ethics because it is transcendental, forming part of what my world means, rather than being another fact within it. If we go with the interpretation provided above then changing a person's ethical view means changing their *way of seeing* absolutely, so that what they see – the world – is seen 'aright'. Cora Diamond urges us to interpret Wittgenstein as steering us away from confused talk of "moral propositions".[62] Diamond interprets Wittgenstein to mean, in the *Tractatus*, that "ethics" is not a subject matter alongside others, similar to the way in which "logic" isn't. Logical propositions are superfluous: inference is part of our lives simply as thinking beings in a world. The *Tractatus* attempts to show this through the limits of logic and language. Since their sense can be displayed – shown – it need not be said. In fact, it cannot be said.[63] Ethics, similarly, comes just from our having a world and a will. Ethics and logic are not areas in which we mean some kind of fact by using signs with some specific meaning. Their propositions are not characterised by their subject matter (which is illusory). Instead, everything we say carries their structure so that there is no such thing as a moral vocabulary distinct from normal vocabulary. Using ethical words does not indicate that we are speaking about ethics, and in this sense, there is no "speaking about ethics". There is just speaking, which means logical/ethical speaking. Ineffability, it seems on this account, is only present in so far as we ubiquitously speak "ethically". On this account, ethics is nonsense if we think that including 'ethical' particulars in propositions allows them to tell us truths about value.

Diamond would thus probably consider a characterisation of ethics as strictly ineffable to be misguided. But it is natural to wonder whether Wittgenstein's position precludes any form of talk about ethics in a strong sense. Is it impossible to say something ethical? Meta-ethical talk aside, can we ever pronounce an ethical truth? To clarify, let's look at the concept of ineffability, and create finer distinctions between ineffability and nonsense. This is a small shift: we've posited that ethics may be ineffable, now we're going to consider the possibility of consistently making that claim as a first step towards defending it.

[62] (Diamond 1996) p252
[63] Op. Cit. (Wittgenstein, Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus 1961)4.1212

6

Silence and Nonsense

"All philosophies, if you ride them home, are nonsense. But some are greater nonsense than others."

Samuel Butler

André Kukla distinguishes various situations under which we may call something 'ineffable'. It could be that: 1) a state of affairs cannot be represented in language; 2) it could be represented but no suitable sentence for it ever comes to mind for us; 3) a suitable sentence could come to mind but it would always be inappropriate to say; 4) we are incapable of performing the required speech act; or 5) speaking it would be incompatible with it being true.[64] This is helpful in clarifying what Wittgenstein means. Many of these divisions seem to be applicable: regarding "4" above: we can read Wittgenstein as saying that we cannot perform the speech act required to say something ethical. This is because with no 'ethical' referent, the speech act cannot technically be completed – no true ethical word can be spoken. But this characterisation can be misleading because it *appears* that such speech acts are performed all the time (hence criticisms such as Russell's, addressed later), when in fact they are enabled by a confusion in language. This helps us understand why Wittgenstein may have preferred the term 'nonsense' – it shows us that where silence should exist, something masquerading as sense is running amuck. Regarding "5": an 'inability to put ethics into words' does not mean that 'saying something ethical would make it untrue' (like saying "I am eminently humble" would). But regarding "3": it is, in a sense, 'inappropriate' to say, so that the saying results in nonsense. It is not however, inappropriateness which is the *cause* of the ineffability; it is not that we are logically forced to avoid saying something ethical because it is not quite right. That is a corollary of the fundamental thesis: that ethics is ineffable because there is no sentence such that some (ethical) state of affairs is the truth condition of it (sense "1" above). Stating an ethical truth is impossible because there is nothing which would make it true, and from this fundamental sense, the other (apparently progressively weaker) senses derive. As a last example, regarding "2": it is not that we cannot find suitable sentences, although this comes close to the *Tractatus* position because it *is* difficult (impossible) to formulate something we experience as sublime or absolutely valuable appropriately. So on Kukla's hierarchy, it seems that the lower-numbered orders of ineffability entail the others, making Wittgenstein's claim highly stringent.

[64] (Kukla 2005) p135-149

As a further sophistication, we can examine the scope of the un-representability by asking whether ethics is un-representable in all conceivable scenarios, or in a limited sense. I mean to say that it could simply be that there is a state of affairs un-representable in one language rather than another or, it could be that no human language or, even, no logically possible language could represent it.[65] On this model it seems that Wittgenstein would be committed to the most stringent, logical variety of ineffability since his conception of language in the *Tractatus* is such that all language should be equally capable (or incapable in this case) of representing the world. We cannot escape the hermeneutic bind by switching to Greek or French, and we cannot escape it by asking aliens with different brain-structures whether they can make ethical propositions. No being can put ethics into words because it is logically un-representable. Things aren't going to change.

Kukla suggests that we can further understand the concept of ineffability by defining an ineffable thing as some subject in language that no predicate can attach to (some*thing*, that is, which we cannot ascribe a property to). This shift in perspective allows us to explore what we mean by "un-representable" ineffability. It could mean that the properties of the ineffable thing are extraordinary, in that they cannot be formulated (the "first gloss"); or it could mean that the subject actually has no properties (the "second gloss").[66] In the case of the first gloss, there will be facts about the subject which cannot be expressed in language. In the case of the second, there are no facts to express. As we discussed above, in terms both of Wittgenstein's conditions for sense, and in terms of the nonsensicality of ethical 'propositions', what is happening in ethical discourse is that we are referring to something which is not part of the factual matrix of the world. This lack of reference to a state-of-affairs results in a lack of sense. So ethics is ineffable on this schema in the sense of the second gloss: there are no facts to express (making it un-representable in all logical scenarios).

The purpose of Kukla's distinctions is to ultimately decide whether the concept of ineffability is coherent, or whether it cannot be entertained because of internal inconsistencies (such as the seeming problem of auto-refutation when we say that a thing has no properties, thus ascribing properties to it). He ultimately defends some form of ineffability as coherent: he concludes that "[i]n the balance, it's currently rational to believe in the actual occurrence of weak and human ineffabilities. By contrast, nomological and higher [e.g. logical] ineffabilities are merely speculative possibilities. But it's not crazy to entertain them."[67] We could therefore go through an exercise of defending the coherence of Wittgenstein's claim about ineffability, drawing on Kukla, as a means of anticipating and meeting an objection that it cannot get off the ground. That would, I think, be a necessary step in a theoretical

[65] Ibid. p136: I use these terms for ease of understanding in the quotation to come.
[66] It could of course also mean that the subject-property model has failed to capture something we have an insight into and that it is inappropriate as a tool for understanding. I present it here for perspective but I do not mean to suggest that this is the definitive way to understand Wittgenstein's claim.
[67] Op. Cit. (Kukla 2005) p96

defence, although insufficient to prove Wittgenstein's claim. But I am not going to do this, for two reasons: First, in our case, this seems not to be quite appropriate because Kukla is concerned to establish whether there are "truths or facts or states of affairs in the world that cannot be expressed or represented by linguistic means". Our exegesis puts this enquiry outside of the realm of Wittgenstein's claim which is not concerned to determine whether there are things in the world incapable of representation by propositions but to state that there are transcendent 'things', not facts or states-of-affairs, not things capable of being true or false, which for that reason cannot be proposed.[68] Kukla makes it clear that he is concerned with 'things in the world' when he says that: "... I want to say that the second gloss, according to which nothing can be said of God because He has no properties to represent, doesn't have anything to do with ineffability".[69] Presumably, this is because 'it' doesn't have so much to do with ineffability as with non-existence.

Putting ethics in this position may appear to have cost too much because now ethics is just nothing at all - discarded. We could perhaps retreat and argue that ethics concerns subjects which have properties which are extraordinary (i.e. retreat to the 'first gloss' position), not that it is empty. The former claim can be modified to be less severe (and less contradictory) if we say that we cannot speak about *certain features* of ethics or can only speak about ethics in a *highly abstract* or maybe *meaningless* way. Then the statements are not self defeating by virtue of saying something substantive about (i.e. ascribing predicates to) the subject they claim is ineffable. So it might be that the ethical claim that "the good is the beautiful" is neither true nor false (i.e. truth concepts don't apply to it) in the same way that the mathematical claim that 5 x 5 = 25 is neither green nor not-green (colour concepts don't apply to it).[70] Whatever can't be said about it then, at least we can refer to it. Kukla demonstrates that there is no entity that cannot be described at all – we can at least refer to its formal attributes even if we cannot say something substantive about it. So an 'ineffable mystical experience' can still be described as a "state of insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect".[71]

A savvy response, but I think that we should take Wittgenstein seriously and treat ethics as properly not of the world, incapable of reference – although this will probably lead to a paradox.[72] What is clear is that Wittgenstein's claim is not that it is impossible to say 'words' about ethics but rather that there is

---

[68] It has been pointed out to me that Kukla's use of "truths, facts or states-of-affairs in the world" may simply be necessary placeholders enabling reference to the subject of his enquiry: the true ineffables (in the same way as I have to use the word 'things'). Kukla may then be concerned with an un-representable 'something' in the barest possible sense, as I am. I'm unconvinced that this is his concern, or at least that his is the same concern as Wittgenstein's, for the reasons proposed in the ensuing discussion.

[69] Op. Cit. (Kukla 2005) p4

[70] This may suggest that Wittgenstein was a non-cognitivist, a false characterisation according to Rush Rhee, who would have denied that the cognitivist/non-cognitivist divide was genuine for Wittgenstein. Cf. (Gaita 1989) p125.

[71] Op. Cit. (Kukla 2005) p9: quoting (James 1902) p380

[72] ... a systemic paradox that would presumably crack the surface of the writing continuously if we looked for it.

some form of ineffability inherent in the attempt to formulate ethical propositions which reduces theoretical discussion of it to nonsense. And this is my second reason for not plumbing the depths of Kukla's defence of ineffability: I think that it would be misguided to attempt an in-depth theoretical defence of the concept of the ineffability of ethics for Wittgenstein. Taking him seriously means keeping quiet.

Let's acknowledge the elephant in the room: if ethics is ineffable how is it that I am speaking about it? "What causes hesitation is the fact that, after all, Mr Wittgenstein manages to say a good deal about what cannot be said, thus suggesting to the sceptical reader that possibly there may be some loophole through a hierarchy of languages, or by some other exit. The whole subject of ethics, for example, is placed by Mr Wittgenstein in the mystical, inexpressible region. Nevertheless he is capable of conveying ethical opinions."[73] To answer this we could make use of the formal/substantive distinction above, disclaiming attempts at stating substantive ethical truths; characterising our discussion as regarding the formal attributes of ethics. This is similar to saying that we are making meta-ethical claims in this discussion while avoiding ethical ineffabilities. I don't think that's what Wittgenstein was driving at – I think that a more Wittgensteinian response would be to acknowledge that I have tried to convey ethical opinions but to indicate that they are not strictly ineffable: words were said, they have "sense" in that we think we understand them, though upon analysis they are nonsensical, having no reference. Or, perhaps closest to the truth (there's that word!) is to capitulate: I am simply talking nonsense – I can do no other because of the subject. Whatever answers I appear to give are chimeras. This is properly ineffability-as-nonsense, not as enforced-silence. The problem is the lack of silence! Nonetheless I think we can still maintain that something is being shown about ethical discourse. That thing is the truly ineffable – it is the thing which is never said in this essay because it can't be said. It is what remains in the life of the reader once the words are gone, it is the use of words to push and shove.

This talk of ineffability is hard to swallow. Perhaps, to help the skeptic, we can find an example of ineffability which we demonstrably have some insight into. This is basically what is being claimed in the *Tractatus*: that there is an ineffable thing (ethics) which should nonetheless not simply be jettisoned. It is apportioned separately precisely to be preserved as important, but the sceptic will not want Wittgenstein to have it both ways. So, let us attempt to find an accessibly mystical experience to evaluate. Normally, appeals are made to mystical experiences which are incommunicable to the un-enlightened. But we may have access to more prosaic forms of ineffable insights in another form: logical paradoxes. Let's see how far we can get…

[73] Op. Cit. (Wittgenstein, Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus 1961) Bertrand Russell's Introduction, xxi

7

Paradoxical Investigations

"Let w be the predicate: to be a predicate that cannot be predicated of itself. Can w be predicated of itself? From each answer its opposite follows. Therefore we must conclude that w is not a predicate. Likewise there is no class (as a totality) of those classes which, each taken as a totality, do not belong to themselves."

Bertrand Russell writing to Gottleb Frege, 1902 – Published in Van Heijenoort's 1967 "Source Book"

What Russell is indicating in the above quotation is an instance of an impredicative definition (a definition incapable of having properties predicated to it – as discussed in "Silence and Nonsense" above; a self-referencing definition in mathematics). We encounter a paradox when we ask whether a set of all sets which do not contain themselves contains itself. If that set ("R") does not contain itself, then by definition it should, and vice versa. For example: Call all sets which do not contain themselves "normal", and those that do "abnormal".[74] Consider the set of all barbers. That set is not a barber, and is therefore not a part of the set of all barbers. It is therefore normal. The set of all non-barbers, however, is also not a barber and therefore does contain itself as a member: it is an abnormal set. Now we attempt to determine whether the normal set is itself normal. To be normal it would have to not contain itself, by definition; but to be normal it would also (as a result of being normal) be part of the set of normal sets (i.e. itself). If it were abnormal it would not be contained in the set of normal sets, and then be normal by definition. The set's normality is thus indeterminable when we speak about it in this way (or any other logically translatable way, such as: "let $R = \{x \mid x \notin x\}$, then $R \in R \Leftrightarrow R \notin R$").

Speaking of the set R results in contradiction. Because of the paradox we cannot determine (i.e. we cannot state) whether such a set exists or not. If some logical truth is being indicated here, it cannot be formulated.[75] The obvious thing to do here would be to simply deny that such a set exists, as demonstrated by the incoherence of the attempt to discuss it. But, according to A.W. Moore, and Rudy

[74] This example is adapted from the excellent discussion found on the Wikipedia page for Russell's Paradox. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Russell's_paradox)

[75] In narrower Wittgensteinian terms we have elicited a contradiction, and contradictions cannot be 'said', since they can never be true or false (admitting of no truth conditions) and since a proposition says something by depicting a state of affairs as obtaining. No state of affairs corresponds to the object of the paradox here.

Rucker[76] the apparent fact that we possess some understanding of the properties of R is suggestive that this conclusion would be incorrect. Now, obviously, I cannot directly say what this understanding consists in, but it seems strange that we *do* understand that the set of all barbers is a member of R, despite not being able to say anything about the existence of R. Moore and Rucker urge us to conclude that we have an understanding of the matter at hand, but that that understanding is ineffable. If the above discussion conveyed any understanding about the existence of R, it could not have done so literally, since "strictly speaking, there is no set of all sets that are not members of themselves".[77] Pause for a moment and consider this claim: we know something about something we cannot speak about![78]

I have conducted this discussion to trigger an insight which would give us a reason to accept the possibility of ineffable truths. This is because lurking continuously is the accusation that an 'ineffable ethics' makes no sense because it is constantly referred to; because appeals to mystical insights are inaccessible; etc. I take the discussion above as a promising way of rehabilitating the concept. But Kukla warns us that we haven't arrived at a *theoretical proof*. The sceptic has no reason to reject the orthodox view – that R does not exist, as demonstrated by the incoherence of the discussion. Whatever insights we may have could well be illusory since there may be nothing to have an insight about. R neither contains nor fails to contain itself if "it" doesn't exist, and talk of "it" is simple nonsense. Furthermore, it is prudent to consider it the default position that linguistic incoherence indicates incoherence of the underlying thought, since if there is a malign sort of incoherence (where no underlying situation is referred to, despite appearances, as in the case of *unsinning* statements) then contradictions may be our only way of picking this out. Perhaps we can defend against this by appeal to the perspicuity and accessibility of the above example: it seems to differ from plain incoherent talk by presenting something which feels profound. But still there is no theoretically compelling reason to accept this, and the criticism stands. It seems to me that the real profundity here is that a critical-theoretical response will *always* be valid. That should open our eyes: contradictions and paradoxes *prove* nothing.

And finally, to kick the other leg out from under this example, Wittgenstein himself "solved" Russell's paradox by attempting to demonstrate that in the logic of the *Tractatus* the problem did not arise at all.[79] If Wittgenstein is correct then, somewhat ironically, whatever ineffable insight into the 'paradox'

---

[76] Op. Cit. (Kukla 2005), p89 referring to Moore (1990) and Rucker (1982)
[77] Ibid. p89
[78] This is not the question-begging claim that we know what we cannot speak about on Wittgenstein's view. It is the claim that we know something about what we cannot speak about on the view of Moore and Rucker, and that it is readily apparent how we cannot speak about it, and readily available to us to acknowledge what we know.
[79] I am not going to pretend that I fully understand Wittgenstein's solution to Russell's paradox, but some sort of explanation is called for. The solution is based on a reformulation of the paradox into an explicit notation which is meant to demonstrate that "a function cannot be its own argument" [*Tractatus,* 3.333]. Russell's solution to his paradox was to introduce a 'theory of types' which proposed a hierarchy of propositions, so that the lowest level

we feel we might have obtained turns out to be based on a misunderstanding, since no paradox existed to have an insight about! – So much the worse for our theoretical proof of mystical insights.

Where are we now? We have derived a claim from Wittgenstein's book: the claim that ethics cannot be put into words. That claim is presumably made as a necessary corollary to a system of logic that Wittgenstein asserts obtains, although he cannot say what exactly it is. Even if it is true that his system produces the result that ethics cannot be put into words, we face the apparent counter-argument that it can, since we constantly do write things about ethics. So we develop a nuanced understanding of what ineffability means and say that either we are not transgressing the rules of logic because we are referring to ethics in a benign way (formally, hierarchically, etc.) or we admit that we have said the unsayable, but prevaricate by saying that 'just' means that we are talking nonsense so that it is still sayable, but upon examination is not worth saying. Nonetheless, what would be the point if we didn't claim some sort of important insight into this unsayable thing? But given the collapse of our position so far, the critic doesn't think that such an insight exists, and wants proof. So we have attempted a proof: by selecting an accessible candidate for ineffability (commentary on a paradox) and claiming insights into it. This got us no further, as the critic could claim that the paradox showed a lack of anything to have an insight about. And to make matters worse, Wittgenstein then claimed that there was no paradox at all, so our claims to insights were not about something ineffable, even if the critic was wrong. That's as far as I want to go with theory because really, we're at a dead end. So let's dissolve the requirements a little and question whether the demand for proof is legitimate. I want to question whether all this theoretical questioning helps us at all. To do that, I want to try and consider what it would be like to adopt an anti-theoretical stance towards ethics through a discussion of Zen Buddhism.

---

referred only to objects, the next highest sets, the next highest sets of sets etc. (Cryan, Shatil and Mayblin 2008) p69. This was aimed at preventing a misapplication of propositions from one level to the next so that e.g. "mortal" and "Socrates" belonged to different levels in a way that disallowed the substitution "Mortal is Socrates" instead of "Socrates is mortal". The theory of types was a set of rules regarding correct formation. But Wittgenstein declared it superfluous once we realise that by understanding symbols properly the problem disappears. Using his notation he argued that the way the symbols combine is *visible* from the notation itself, preventing misapplication. He writes the paradox: "F(F)(fx)) (where the outermost F is introduced when we let F(fx) be its own argument – e.g. where we loop the argument so that we ask whether the set of all normal sets is itself normal). In that formulation the outer function F and inner function F have different meanings, and only the letter 'F' is common to them both. That letter, in itself signifies nothing [*Tractatus,* 3.333]. We can *see* that the two serve different purposes, despite sharing a common letter, by their positions in the statement, and so their apparent reflexivity which leads to the paradox is resolved. So F(fx) and (F(F(fx)) are different propositions, and shouldn't be signified by the same sign, which leads to the confusion above. So Wittgenstein can say "No proposition can make a statement about itself, because a propositional sign cannot be contained in itself…" [3.332]. For an excellent discussion on this point see (Jolley 2004). For a more difficult and thorough discussion on various approaches see (Sutrop 2009). (A broader point is that we use words which have different meanings under the same sign all the time, and Wittgenstein's larger concern is to avoid this confused way of speaking by clarifying and distinguishing superficially similar signs through logical syntax [3.324, 3.325]).

8

Chasing our Tails

"Kōan: *'Goso said: 'When a buffalo goes out of his enclosure to the edge of the abyss, his horns and his head and his hoofs all pass through, but why can't the tail also pass?' …* Mumon's Commentary: *If anyone can open one eye at this point and say a word of Zen, he is qualified to repay the four gratifications, and, not only that, he can save all sentient beings under him. But if he cannot say such a word of Zen, he should turn back to his tail. …* Mumon's Poem: *If a buffalo runs, he will fall into the trench; if he returns, he will be butchered. That little tail; is a very strange thing."*

Mumon – The Mumonkan

Having failed in our paradoxical investigations above, let us change tack and consider what happens when we abandon the search for a theoretical proof regarding ineffable insights. Kukla cuts-off one possible theoretical alternative: to speak figuratively instead of literally to convey the ineffable: "[i]t's hard to resist the conclusion that the introduction of figurative effing is not so much an addition to literal effing as it is a change of topics. In fact, the notion of conveying a message slides seamlessly into nonverbal causings-to-entertain… the same job can be done by a judiciously timed slap in the face, or by the right sort of brain surgery".[80] Even if there is no magic in the figurative mode of speech, it is a false dichotomy to characterise our alternatives as literal or figurative speech. We can avoid silence in another way, the way Kukla riles against: through causings-to-entertain. What I suggest here, is that we can do this verbally (where that comes close to meaning 'physically') by speaking nonsensically.

We have seen that for Wittgenstein, ethics cannot be put into words. It resists formulation. "No matter what verbal space you try to enclose ethics in, it resists, and spills over. It might seem, then, that all efforts to explain ethics are complete wastes of time. But that is not the attitude I have adopted. For instance, paradoxes have been used to examine ethics, verbal though they are. Paradoxes are meant to be "triggers" which, though they do not contain enough information in themselves to impart insight, may possibly be sufficient to unlock the mechanisms inside one's mind that lead to insight. But in general, the Wittgensteinian attitude is that words and ethical "truth" are incompatible, or at least that no words can display ethical significance." Douglas Hofstadter wrote this, discussing Zen instead of

[80]Op. Cit. (Kukla 2005) p18. I'm not sure that the term 'effing' is a word instead of a joke, but it is Kukla's choice, not mine.

ethics.[81] I replaced some words such as "Zen" with "ethics" and "Zen master" with "I" to demonstrate Zen's affinity with our discussion and suggest that considering Zen 's method might be fruitful.[82]

Zen abandons the attempt to convey ethical sense through language by making explicit the fact that language is an obstacle to understanding rather than an aide in such cases. It deeply abuses language in the form of Zen kōans. Kōans place obstacles in our path - obstacles to logical analysis. They place them there to show us something about what they're trying to say, and they abuse the words which normally point in a direction so that they point in no direction. They attempt something impossible: they try to un-ask questions. Their *form* shows us something about their subject matter, which is, ethics (issues of value). Paradoxically, it is the placing of obstacles in the way of understanding what is being said that allows it to be understood. The opposite way of characterising this contradiction is more profound, and is properly Wittgensteinian: it is the lucid discussion of the mystical which leads us away from understanding because it falsely characterises its nature as ordinary, as capable of discussion.

Take, for example, the kōan quoted above. Ethical philosophers are like buffaloes, exploring the limits of language and logic to cast light on the ethical enterprise. We run up against these boundaries, against the abyss as we go out of our enclosures, but we can never escape the necessity of language. Our tails cannot pass beyond, however close we skirt to this place of no-saying. We cannot make a true ethical proposition, and so, we should be honest and turn back to our tails, acknowledging the limits of language. Either way, we are getting nowhere. Is that the solution to the kōan? No. How do I know? Because it is a *solution*. I engaged in what seemed to be a lucid discussion of the mystical. It makes it seem like I have "solved" ethics, but if we understand what that means it is obviously ludicrous. Zen recognises the limits of language and doesn't pretend that it has an answer to what lies beyond. Good kōans make nonsense of the idea of solving the problems of life through their stubborn nonsensicality – instead they show the limits of language and then leave us further to go. So a possible method of "doing ethics" is to study explicitly ridiculous combinations of words purporting to tell us something about life until we stop studying them and begin living. Philosophical confusion arises from the misuse of language, says Wittgenstein. To appreciate that, Zen kōans might show us the way.

So Zen aims at reducing us to a state of perplexity. That is the starting point for re-evaluating our approach. Our theoretical attempts to define ineffable insights above failed, bombarded on all sides by theoretical criticisms. Perhaps that makes them weak attempts; perhaps the examples chosen need to be changed. We could just accept the critic's criticism but there's something about what we're discussing that seems important, making the criticisms sit uneasily. All this talk is getting us nowhere.

---

[81] (Hofstadter 2000) p246

[82] I won't suggest that this is exactly the position I've reached, especially as it falsely characterises what I've done.

9

Clarification

"And now at last the highest truth on the subject remains unsaid; probably cannot be said; for all that we say is the far-off remembering of the intuition. That thought, by what I can now nearest approach to say it, is this. When good is near you, when you have life in yourself, it is not by any known or accustomed way; you shall not discern the foot-prints of any other; you shall not see the face of man; you shall not hear any name; - the way, the thought, the good, shall be wholly strange and new. It shall exclude examples and experience."

Ralph Waldo Emerson – Self-Reliance

It boils down to this: ethics is not a problem in search of a definitive solution; it is nothing less than the 'problem' of living life and its 'solution' lies in the living. It is an activity, like philosophy, rather than a body of doctrine. Ethical propositions tell us nothing, they do not generate answers but they purport to do so because of their form: ethics is a labyrinth and Wittgenstein wants to show us the way out. Ethics is ineffable because its pronouncements are nonsensical. They lead us nowhere – they turn us about. That is the solution to the problem of how to live life, expressed in words. But, so obviously, that does not 'solve' anything. The fact that we have expressed a solution which obviously falls short – which requires the further step of actually living – *shows* us the limits of what can be achieved through theoretical discussion. This conclusion can therefore never be a neat ending because whatever finality is artificially introduced through these words is clearly inadequate. So we use phrases like 'ineffable insight' to indicate that we know something important beyond what has been proved here, although these phrases are also misleading. There is nothing mysterious to know – what Wittgenstein shows us is just that we are facing the wrong direction, beguiled by language, expecting something ridiculous.

I have tried to do two contradictory things in this essay: provide a text which is lucid enough to act as an exemplar of the ethical-philosophical enterprise; and continuously undermine that enterprise. This is cheating – attempting a short-cut which can lead nowhere: by consciously undermining the enterprise I have assumed the truth of Wittgenstein's claim and then used rhetoric to get the reader to see it. I have simulated a cage of language and then performed a faux-collision with its walls which will only convince those already convinced. Wittgenstein does the opposite: proceeding clearly, bumping against invisible barriers, *showing* the limits. He creates a system brilliant in its perspicuity and breathtaking in its boldness and presentation and then… *doesn't* speak about ethics! There, the undermining of the text is more subtle, and is left until the end. That is how it should be, for "a concealed framework needs a

penetrating investigation",[83] but I couldn't help trying to do it the other way: presenting nonsense, and hoping for some clarity to emerge; preaching a useless sermon to the converted.

Clearly, what I haven't done is criticise Wittgenstein. It may be that the ineffability of ethics doesn't follow from what he presents in the *Tractatus*. Criticisms presented in this essay may be fatal to the theoretical enterprise. I have let them stand, only questioning their right to criticise. In some ways I have attempted to present a contra-*Tractatus*: where Wittgenstein attempts to simplify, to state clearly, I have complicated issues and muddied the waters; where he presents a controlled and thoughtful treatise on logic and leaves the larger part about ethics unsaid, I have spoken loosely about logic and talked incessantly of ethics; and where he treats philosophy, ethics and logic respectfully, I have roughly thrown them up for presentation. But I hope that the spirit has been the same: to use inadequate language to demonstrate something about philosophy and life. So, to return to our starting point and formulate a philosophical conclusion: can we put ethics into words? Obviously, ethics can be spoken about, but not-obviously, that speaking is a tortuous activity which always leads us away from what actually matters. Ethics is fundamentally nonsensical. Let me conclude by quoting Wittgenstein's poetic thoughts at length, spoken in the first person, as a confession, with responsibility – "ethically":

"Now the answer to all this will seem perfectly clear to many of you. You will say: Well, if certain experiences constantly tempt us to attribute a quality to them which we call absolute or ethical value and importance, this simply shows that by these words we don't mean nonsense, that after all what we mean by saying that an experience has absolute value is just a fact like other facts and that all it comes to is that we have not yet succeeded in finding the correct logical analysis of what we mean by our ethical and religious expressions. Now when this is urged against me I at once see clearly, as it were in a flash of light, not only that no description that I can think of would do to describe what I mean by absolute value, but that I would reject every significant description that anybody could possibly suggest, ab initio, on the ground of its significance. That is to say: I see now that these nonsensical expressions were not nonsensical because I had not yet found the correct expressions, but that their nonsensicality was their very essence. For all I wanted to do with them was just to go beyond the world and that is to say beyond significant language. My whole tendency and I believe the tendency of all men who ever tried to write or talk Ethics or Religion was to run against the boundaries of language. This running against the walls of our cage is perfectly, absolutely hopeless. Ethics so far as it springs from the desire to say something about the ultimate meaning of life, the absolute good, the absolute valuable, can be no science. What it says does not add to our knowledge in any sense. But it is a document of a tendency in the human mind which I personally cannot help respecting deeply and I would not for my life ridicule it." [84]

---

[83] Op. Cit. (Pears 1997) p52
[84] Op. Cit. (Wittgenstein, A Lecture on Ethics 1965) p11-12

10

Bibliography

Barrett, Cyril. *Wittgenstein on Ethics and Religious Belief.* Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1991.

Biletzki, Anat. "Ludwig Wittgenstein." *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.* 2009. http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/wittgenstein/ (accessed March 28, 2011).

Cryan, Dan, Sharon Shatil, and Bill Mayblin. *Introducing Logic: A Graphic Guide.* Cambridge: Icon Books, 2008.

Diamond, Cora. "Wittgenstein, mathematics, and ethics: Resisting the attractions of realism." In *The Cambridge Companion to Wittgenstein*, by Hans Sluga and David G Stern, 226-260. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

Gaita, Raimond. "The Personal in Ethics." In *Wittgenstein: Attention to Particulars*, by D Z Philips and Peter Winch, 124-150. London: Macmillan Press, 1989.

Hofstadter, Douglas R. *Godel, Escher, Bach: an Eternal Golden Braid.* London: Penguin, 2000.

James, William. *The Varieties of Religious Experience.* London: Penguin, 1902.

Jolley, Kelly Dean. "Logic's Caretaker: Wittgenstein, Logic and the Vanishment of Russell's Paradox." *The Philosophical Forum* (Wiley) 35, no. 3 (2004): 281-309.

Kukla, André. *Ineffability and Philosophy.* New York: Routledge, 2005.

Pears, David. *Wittgenstein.* London: Fontana Press, 1997.

Sutrop, Urmas. "Wittgenstein's Tractatus 3.333 and Russell's Paradox." *Trames*, 2009: 179-197.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. "A Lecture on Ethics." *The Philosophical Review* 74 (January 1965): 3-12.

—. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus.* Translated by D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuiness. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961.

Acknowledgement

I would like to thank my supervisor, Dylan Futter, for his endless patience, insightful suggestions and good humour; my father and mother for their support; and my brother for discussions about some of the themes presented here. The final product may not address all that it should and is presented in a consciously uncomfortable way, but the clarity of my interlocutors' thought greatly helped me consider my material. This is not a long essay but what it considers matters in my life, and so I thank all those involved in its production.

Cover illustration: "The Voice" by Barnett Newman, (1950)

Newman presents us with a frame containing white space: a picture ostensibly picturing nothing. The viewer slowly becomes aware of the narrow discolouration near the border, running the length of the picture. Once noticed, this sight is insistent and changes the way in which we are able to view the picture. Of course the picture can't literally work by both picturing nothing and presenting an emerging voice; it attempts to do so through sleight of hand, and in doing so tells us something about ourselves, what can be shown and the way we can use pictures to convey meaning.