Eliminating Ethics: Wittgenstein, Ethics, and the Limits of Sense

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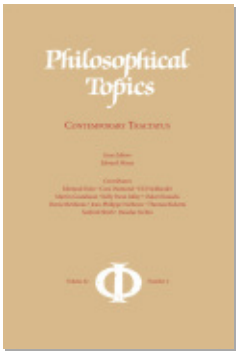

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Eliminating Ethics: Wittgenstein, Ethics, and the Limits of Sense

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ABSTRACT. This paper is about what might be called the philosophical tradition of ethics, and Wittgenstein's opposition or hostility to that tradition. My aim will be to argue that ethics, or a large part of what we think of as ethics, is nonsense, and in doing so I shall be developing the line of argument that I take to lie behind Wittgenstein's claim in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* that there can be no ethical propositions. That argument has its basis in the simple thought that value is not arbitrary or accidental, and what I shall show is how thinking through what is involved in that thought leads to a radically different conception of the possibilities open to ethical thinking than that which is assumed within the prevailing conception of ethics today.

> *The sense of the world must lie outside the world. In the world everything is as it is and happens as it does happen.* In *it there is no value—and if there were, it would be of no value.*
>
> *If there is a value which is of value, it must lie outside all happening and being-so. For all happening and being-so is accidental.*
>
> *What makes it non-accidental cannot lie* in *the world, for otherwise this would again be accidental.*
>
> *It must lie outside the world.*
>
> *Hence also there can be no ethical propositions.*
>
> —*Ludwig Wittgenstein,* Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, *6.41–42*[1]

I

My aim in this paper is to try to convince you to give up a large part of what we think of as ethics, and to give up the idea that in giving it up we would be giving up anything substantial, anything of any significance (quite literally). Not because it is somehow metaphysically queer, as Mackie claimed.[2] And not because we no longer subscribe to a framework of beliefs against which our central ethical concepts gain their currency, as Anscombe thought.[3] But because it is, in my view, entirely empty of content: it is merely nonsense.

Convincing you of this will of course involve some quite peculiar difficulties, and I want to mention briefly two of those difficulties now, before I go any further. The first is just that in arguing for this claim, in trying to bring out what I take to be the essential emptiness of these attempts at using language, I shall be more or less obliged to treat them as not being empty, as being something we can all grasp and understand, even just to identify those attempted uses of language that I will want to talk about. I will return to this difficulty at the end of the paper.

The second difficulty I want to mention is just that some of you may want to claim that this view is itself unethical—that it is in some way abhorrent or would lead to terrible consequences, or whatever, and so that any other view of ethics, no matter how implausible, would be preferable on ethical grounds—and as a result I would be unable to convince you of anything at all here.

There is a lot that I would want to say in response to this kind of objection, but I am not going to say it here. For now, all I am going to say is that, in getting rid of ethics, I do not think that we are getting rid of anything important, and that what we are left with is, in my view, everything we need.

II

The thought that ethics, or a large part of what we think of as ethics at any rate, is nonsense is hardly new. Nietzsche, for instance, writes in his *On the Genealogy of Morals* that "to talk of intrinsic right and wrong is absolutely nonsensical."[4] And some of Kant's attempts to articulate what is involved in the concept of absolute value can seem so self-consciously absurd that it might be tempting at times to attribute such a view to him as well.[5]

But I want to focus not on Kant, and not on Nietzsche, but on Wittgenstein, and on a line of thought from Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* that I think contains, in a highly abbreviated form, the argument that I shall be trying to make at somewhat greater length in this paper.

The claim of Wittgenstein's that I want to focus on is the claim, at *Tractatus* 6.42, that "there can be no ethical propositions," and so that all those things that we think of as ethical propositions are either not really ethical or not really propositions.

That claim has I think been widely ignored, even by most self-identifying Wittgensteinians,[6] and one reason for that, I want to suggest, is that it is typically

thought to be an outcome of an overly narrow or restricted theory of meaning or of sense that is articulated elsewhere in the *Tractatus,* so that unless one accepts that theory of meaning—and very few do—there is no reason to give any credence to this claim about ethics at all. More than that, such a claim, coming as an outcome of a theory of sense, might well be considered to be good grounds for rejecting the theory of sense itself. As I hope will become clear, I think such an understanding of the *Tractatus,* and of the grounds for this claim in particular, is hopelessly misguided.[7]

The claim in the *Tractatus* that there can be no ethical propositions comes as the culmination of a line of thought that begins just two remarks earlier, at *Tractatus* 6.4, with the claim that "all propositions are of equal value." Wittgenstein elaborates on that claim as follows (*Tractatus* 6.41–42):

> The sense of the world must lie outside the world. In the world everything is as it is and happens as it does happen. *In* it there is no value—and if there were, it would be of no value.
>
> If there is a value which is of value, it must lie outside all happening and being-so. For all happening and being-so is accidental.
>
> What makes it non-accidental cannot lie *in* the world, for otherwise this would again be accidental.
>
> It must lie outside the world.
>
> Hence also there can be no ethical propositions.

I do not want to dwell on the idea suggested here that a genuine proposition about value would itself be of value—though that is surely true. And I also do not want to dwell on the oddly self-undermining movement of these remarks, where the idea of a value that lies outside the world is contrasted with the idea of a value lying inside the world, which would, it then turns out, be no kind of value at all—though this trajectory of thought is no doubt also relevant to what follows.[8]

Instead, what I want to take from this quotation is just the simple thought that value is not accidental. It is that thought, and that thought pretty much on its own, that seems to serve as the basis for Wittgenstein's claim that there can be no ethical propositions.

III

The thought that value is non-accidental is almost as old as philosophy itself. It features in some form or other in Plato's *Euthyphro,* where it plays a crucial role in the rejection of Euthyphro's attempt to define the good (or the pious, or the just) in terms of what is loved by all of the gods.[9]

What it means to say that value is not accidental could be put like this: that what is of value, or what has value could not be otherwise—that if something, anything, really is of value then its value is essential to what it is so that there is no having that thing without the value, with some other value, or with no value at all. It is to say that in this respect, things could not be otherwise, that it is not possible for things to be otherwise.

Euthyphro's problem, or part of his problem anyway, is that if we construe his definition as a definition at all, it makes value accidental to the things that have it—it would not be an essential part of what they are. What makes them of value, according to Euthyphro's definition, is just that they are loved by all of the gods—it is just that all of the gods happen to love them, whatever they are. But we can imagine the gods not loving those things, or loving some of them but not others, or never having loved any of them, so that according to Euthyphro's definition what is of value could be otherwise: it could be different—it could change from moment to moment, or it could have been different all along.

In saying that it is not possible for things to be otherwise here, the kind of possibility at stake is logical possibility. From a logical point of view, what is of value could not be otherwise. From a logical point of view, what is of value being other than it is is not a coherent possibility. It is not logically possible for what is of value to be different.

But then what is it that is supposed to be impossible here? Something that is not logically possible is not illogically possible instead—there are not two kinds of possibility, logically possible possibilities and logically impossible possibilities. Something that is not logically possible is not possible at all: it is not even a something.[10]

But in that case, what is it that I am trying to say here is not a coherent possibility when I say that it is not possible for things to be otherwise? It looks as though whatever I could give you in answer to that question, whatever I could express, if I were to express something at all, it would be something possible, something that from a logical point of view could be the case, so that anything I could express would not be what I wanted to say here.

What I am trying to say is that to say that things could not be otherwise is to say that there is no such thing as them being otherwise—that the form of words that I am using to try to capture a possibility here is itself just empty. Despite appearances, I have not managed to give it a sense that would satisfy me.

The problem is not that this thing that we do grasp in thought could never be the case, but that we have not yet identified a determinate state of affairs for our thought to grasp at all. The problem is that of all of the ways our words could make sense here, none of them will give us what we wanted from them.

To say that value is not accidental then is to say that we cannot even imagine it being other than it is: that there is no imagining it to be different, no grabbing hold in thought of what it would be like for things to be different in this respect.

IV

I think that this is borne out when we turn to particular examples, and try to imagine what it would be like, in specific cases, for things to be otherwise with respect to value.

Take cruelty for example. It seems entirely possible to imagine the gods—all of them—loving cruelty. (Sophocles, among others, seems to have made a living from doing pretty much exactly that.) But suppose I want to imagine not the gods loving cruelty, but something it might be appropriate to describe as cruelty itself being good. Can I do that? What would it be like to do that?

I can imagine people who enjoy being cruel to others, or who take pleasure in cruelty generally, but this isn't even close to imagining something one might describe as cruelty being good. No matter how I imagine someone or some people behaving with respect to cruelty, if I am still viewing cruelty as I currently do I will not have succeeded in imagining something it would be appropriate to describe as cruelty being good. What I want, when I want to imagine that, whatever it is exactly, it is not something that is going to be available from the outside in the way that someone's behavior is.[11]

In order to imagine something it would be appropriate to call cruelty being good, I would have to imagine not merely someone else who takes pleasure in cruelty, but me acting and thinking and feeling in all of the ways that I act and think and feel about things like compassion and kindness and consideration for others, but about cruelty instead. It would be to imagine cruelty taking the place in my life of something like compassion, or kindness, or whatever—it would be to imagine the concept of cruelty occupying the kind of logical space that these other concepts occupy for me, while still being the concept of cruelty.

But whatever I can get into that logical space is just not going to be the concept of cruelty anymore: it will no longer stand in the logical relations to my other concepts, and to my life, that cruelty stands in, and that are essential to what cruelty is. Cruelty is, for instance, something that one deplores, something one avoids, that one discourages in others, maybe also something one sometimes has to be in order to be kind—something that is sometimes unavoidable should one wish to be kind, but something which one will want to avoid if one wants to be kind. All of these things, and much more besides, go into making the concept of cruelty the particular concept it is. If I want to imagine something we might call cruelty being good, I would have to imagine something that has these logical features of cruelty, but that also, instead, has the logical features of a concept like compassion—something which for instance does not typically conflict with kindness, where the desire to act in such ways does not typically conflict with the desire to be kind. If I want something with the logical features of a concept like compassion, I have to change some of the logical features of cruelty—I have to change the way it relates to concepts like kindness or compassion or generosity. And if I want to preserve these features of the logic of the concept, the relations it stands in to things like kindness or compassion or whatever, then I cannot simply focus on the concept of cruelty alone—I have to do something much more radical, like imagining a complete reversal of my ethical concepts; I have to imagine my whole ethical world stood on its head. And even if I could do that I would still be trying to imagine something with one set of logical features, something that connects with my life—my thoughts, my actions,

my feelings—in one set of ways, having a totally different set of logical features, connecting with my life in totally different ways, while nevertheless being the same thing as before.

Well, what is it that is supposed to still be the same here? If we change all the logical characteristics of a concept, if we change all of the ways it connects with our actions, thoughts, and feelings, in what sense are we still dealing with the same concept? My answer is: in no sense are we still dealing with the same concept—change the logical features of the concept, and you change the concept itself.

The idea that we could still be dealing with the same concept here, the idea that there is something we could imagine here at all, depends on taking these features of the concept of cruelty not to be features of the logic of the concept at all, but to be accidental accompaniments to it: it depends on one's taking cruelty to be specifiable in terms of bare, valueless facts—certain kinds of behavior, certain actions or happenings, just are cruel, but the fact that something is cruel involves no presumption about its value at all.[12] Only if someone thought this could they claim that the concept of cruelty could be reoriented elsewhere in the logic of our lives and still be the same concept. What I want to say about this is just this: there could be no clearer sign that a person did not share our concept of cruelty than their willingness to claim this.[13]

V

I have argued that to say that value is not accidental is to say that there is no logical possibility of things being otherwise here, and that to say that is to say that there is nothing we can even imagine here, that the forms of words we want to use to try to capture what we think we want are simply empty.

And I have argued that that claim is borne out when we do actually try to imagine something that it might be appropriate to describe with the words "cruelty is good"—that we would have to imagine something that has certain characteristic logical features and then imagine it having a totally different, incompatible set of logical features instead, while nevertheless still having the same logical features as before (and only those features), and it should be clear that there is no imagining anything at all here.

The fact that value is not accidental, in other words, I want to say is shown by our inability to imagine anything along those lines, by our inability to accord to our words a sense in this context.

That line of argument, however, also has the consequence that those forms of words that we think of as expressing the way value actually is—sentences like "cruelty is not good," or "cruelty is bad," or whatever—those forms of words are equally empty of content.

Whatever those strings of signs might say, it will be something that gets its content through the logical relations it stands in to sentences such as the sentence

"cruelty is good." But what we have just seen is that that sentence offers only the illusion of making sense: it is, for all that we have said, entirely empty of content. It is nonsense.

But if that is correct then what can we be saying when we utter a sentence that superficially has the form of a denial of that empty sentence? If we have given no sense to the string of signs "cruelty is good" then we have given no sense to its denial either: the negation of nonsense is not sense, but just more nonsense.

So what I want to say is that we have moved from the claim that value is not accidental to the claim that our attributions of value—"*x* is good," "*x* is not good"—are nonsense.

What I have argued here about cruelty goes just as well for our other value concepts—concepts like compassion, or kindness or courage, or generosity. Insofar as these concepts are value concepts at all, their value is internal to what they are. But all that our words can give us is something that is not internal, something external, something accidental or arbitrary, and that is not what we want.

What we want is to be able to turn around and catch hold of what makes these things of value and turn that into an object about which we can theorize. But all our ways of talking give us something that, if it is anything at all, it is not a feature of the logic of these concepts at all, is not essential or internal to them, and yet nothing that is not internal is what we want.

Our confusion consists in wanting to treat something that is part of the logic of our concepts as if it is not a feature of their logic at all. Our confusion consists in thinking that what is essential to a concept is not essential to it. It is, I think, like a confusion between wanting to say something about the content of a thought and wanting to say something about its form.

What I want to say is that this kind of confusion is characteristic of ethics—what I am calling ethics here just is the attempt to round upon the logic of these concepts in this way. What makes something an ethical proposition is just that it arises out of this kind of confusion. Ethics, conceived as something like the general science of the good, is nonsense. There can be no ethical propositions.

VI

I want to say a little about what we are left with on the account I have been trying to sketch here. But first I want to return to a point I made earlier and say that my argument here is not this, or anyway is not supposed to be this—it is not "because of the way meaning is, because of the kind of thing meaning is, these sentences—sentences like 'cruelty is good' or 'cruelty is not good'—are nonsense." My argument is not supposed to be based on any particular theory of meaning or of sense that one would be free to accept or reject at all.

Rather, my claim is that these sentences are—so far at any rate—nonsense by the lights of our own shared capacity for making sense of an utterance. My claim

is that there is no sense being made here yet, irrespective of any particular theory of sense or of meaning at all.

So when I say that ethical sentences are nonsense, I am not saying that they do not meet certain criteria for sensefulness, criteria that you might then reject. I am saying that these sentences are entirely empty—empty as it were by any criteria you might like to apply, since there is nothing here yet for criteria to get a grip on.

VII

On the account that I have tried to sketch here, ethics disappears inside logic, not as the whole of logic, but as a part of it. What we are left with are those concepts that we want to abstract from in creating our concepts of goodness and badness, and we are left with them all built into our lives in the ways they are, but without the temptation to think we can get hold of whatever it is that unites them and turn it into an independent subject matter for theory.

I want to say that that picture fits well with what can otherwise seem like a tension between Wittgenstein's hostility toward ethics, toward ethical theory, and his own apparent willingness to engage in discussion of certain, distinctive ethical problems, or with his own fiercely demanding ethical standards.

But I also want to say that this story captures something crucial to whatever we think ethics is: namely, its phenomenology, the sense of what it is like to be in the grip of an ethical problem or necessity. The thought that ethics is in this way a part of logic I think captures the feeling of being bound by necessities that are somehow inexplicable, or inexplicable to someone who does not also feel bound by them, someone who does not share our concepts, or our sense of the logical terrain in which we find ourselves.

Moral dilemmas can I think bring this out particularly clearly, since one striking feature of moral dilemmas, it seems to me, is that the sense in which there is a dilemma at all is something that can be completely lost on someone who does not share the relevant concepts, and the concerns in conjunction with which those concepts arise.

An example here might be Agamemnon and his choice between sacrificing the expedition to Troy and sacrificing his daughter, Iphigenia. That choice is, as Aeschylus describes the situation, sufficient to drive Agamemnon into madness, from which he emerges eventually to sacrifice Iphigenia.[14] But to our eyes, to us who do not share his concepts, or his conception of the necessities that bind him, his conception of the logic of the terrain in which he finds himself, his dilemma is bound to seem, as it seems to Clytemnestra, not to be a dilemma at all, but rather a sign of moral weakness, of an ethical failing. His problem, as much as anything, is that he has the wrong concepts.

VIII

Throughout my argument I have relied at various points on taking things, certain combinations of words, to be substantial, to be meaningful or intelligible, that I have then wanted to go on to say are not really meaningful or intelligible at all. So from the point of view of my own argument, some of what I have said above must itself be written off as nonsense, and one might wonder how this is possible at all, or whether it is really consistent.

Cora Diamond has described such self-conscious, disillusioned uses of nonsense as involving the imaginative activity of entering into the taking of nonsense for sense, and it is a use of the imagination and of nonsense that is taken for granted throughout Wittgenstein's work as essential to his therapeutic, elucidatory method.[15]

I am not inclined to think that this kind of use of nonsense is especially problematic, although it is very interesting. Entering into the taking of nonsense for sense may for instance involve an understanding of what someone or other wants to do with their words, of the kinds of logical role they want their words to play, some of which can be imagined along one set of lines, and some of which can be imagined along another set of lines. The problem is not with imagining something having any of those logical roles, but with imagining something having all of them—the problem is with imagining them combined in one thing, in one symbol.

Thinking through someone's nonsense may involve drawing consequences that their words would have if they had now one set of logical features, now another. Well, you can have one, or you can have the other, and there is no problem with that. The problem is just that there is no having both, that there is no such thing as the having of both, nothing that would be that.

Diamond, however, in her own account of Wittgenstein's thinking about ethics, also imagines a further self-conscious or disillusioned use of nonsense—one that is not elucidatory, but ethical.[16] According to Diamond's account, certain forms of words, certain utterances, may retain their attractiveness for us, even after we recognize their emptiness. What marks such nonsensical utterances out as ethical for Diamond is nothing to do with their content (they have none), but the intention with which they are uttered.

On Diamond's view, ethical nonsense-sentences are distinguishable from Wittgenstein's therapeutic, elucidatory uses of nonsense "by the intention with which they are uttered or written," and they are distinguishable from the confused, non-elucidatory utterance of philosophical nonsense that Wittgenstein aims to wean us from "by their relation to the self-understanding towards which the *Tractatus* aims to lead us."[17] Whereas the attractiveness of philosophical nonsense will "disappear," on Diamond's view, in light of that self-understanding, "the attractiveness of ethical sentences will not."[18]

I am reluctant to criticize this aspect of Diamond's account of Wittgenstein's thought, not because I agree with it, but because I do not think I understand it. I do not understand what it is on such a story that makes an ethical intention ethical, or

why certain forms of words should retain their attractiveness for us even after we see through to their emptiness. I feel too uncertain about what explanations there could be here to be confident that I have really understood what Diamond's view amounts to, or why someone would adopt it.

What I will say, however, is that the whole trajectory of my view, of my argument, runs counter to Diamond's view here: the whole trajectory of my argument runs counter to the idea that we may still want to reach for nonsense as a means of expressing ourselves in ethics despite recognizing the futility, the hopelessness, of doing so.

As with Diamond, my understanding of Wittgenstein is that he takes ethics to be entirely empty. But my understanding of the reasons behind that claim directs us not to the continued, disillusioned use of nonsense in the service of our ethical intentions, but back to the sayable, back to what can be said, back to our lives and to the features of those lives that ethics is built upon.

Ethics, I have tried to argue, involves a confused attempt to round upon those features of our lives, to reify features of the logic of our ethical concepts, to turn them into objects about which we can theorize. Seeing through that confusion leaves us with those ethical concepts as they feature in our lives, and it leaves us with a clearer grasp of how they feature there. That is, in a sense, all that it leaves us with. But, contrary to Diamond's account, I also want to insist that that is enough.

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NOTES

1. Wittgenstein 1992: hereafter, *Tractatus.* Further references to this work will be given by section number and included in the text.
2. Mackie 1977, 38–42.
3. Anscombe 1958, 6.
4. Nietzsche 1967, II, §11.
5. See Agam-Segal 2012, 126–27, for some nice examples.

6. Notable exceptions include James Conant 2005, Cora Diamond 2000, and Alice Crary 2007.
7. Many of the reasons for thinking this can be found in the work of Conant and Diamond on the *Tractatus.* See, for instance, Conant 1991 and 2002, Diamond 1991, and Conant and Diamond 2004. I have argued along similar lines in, e.g., Dain 2008, and Conant and Dain 2011.
8. See Mulhall 2007, 226–27 for a discussion of this trajectory of thought within Wittgenstein's remark.
9. See Plato 2002, 10.
10. In these remarks I am drawing especially on Conant 1991.
11. Here, I am drawing on Diamond 2000, 156–7.
12. Mackie, quite absurdly in my view, adopts precisely this stance in his 1977, 41.
13. I am grateful to Oskari Kuusela for pointing out the existence of similarities between some of my claims in this section and some of Philippa Foot's views in Foot 2002.
14. Aeschylus 2003, 52, ll.206–72.
15. See Diamond 2000, 157ff.
16. Diamond 2000, 160–61.
17. Diamond 2000, 161.
18. Diamond 2000, 161.

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