

WITTGENSTEIN AND ETHICAL NORMS: THE QUESTION OF INEFFABILITY VISITED AND REVISITED

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Abstract

In the Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus we find Wittgenstein's first and most substantial published investigation of ethics. I will argue that if the ethical sections of the Tractatus are seen in connection with a particular concept of showing, they then reveal a coherent and radical alternative to traditional conceptions of ethics; an alternative which sheds light on Wittgenstein's claim that ethics cannot be expressed and the necessity of ethics. But I furthermore want to argue that the reasons leading Wittgenstein to a demand for silence in ethics falls away if one looks at the later investigations of necessity which he makes in On Certainty.

Keywords: Ethics, Ineffability, Necessity, Normativity, Norms, Silence, Tractatus, On Certainty, Wittgenstein

Introdução

In the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* we find Wittgenstein's first published investigation of ethics. Furthermore, together with the "Lecture on Ethics", this is the last time he makes any longer investigation into this subject, as the *Nachlass* reveals only a few, scattered remarks on specific ethical matters after 1929. I will argue that if the ethical sections of the *Tractatus* are seen in connection with a specific idea of the concept of showing they, then reveal a coherent and radical alternative to traditional conceptions of ethics; an alternative that sheds light on Wittgenstein's claim that ethics cannot be expressed and the *necessity* of ethics. It is a standard dilemma in moral philosophy, that we, on the one hand, want to make absolute claims like 'Murder is *always* wrong', while we, on the other hand, admit that there might be cases when it is possible to give *ethical* reasons as to why a particular murder is not wrong, the murder of Adolph Hitler at a particular time in history being the standard example. And my interpretation of the *Tractatus* will suggest one possible reason why this is so. But I furthermore want to argue that if one looks at the investigations of necessity which Wittgenstein makes his very last writings these will show how the reasons leading him to a demand for silence in ethics in the early thinking falls away in the later.

1 - Ethics in the Tractatus or 'Why Murder must be Wrong'

As everyone is probably well aware, over the last decades the interpretation of the *Tractatus* has again become a living area of research. This revival has primarily grown out of a need to find a better understanding of the ending of the *Tractatus* where Wittgenstein claims that the reader who

understands him does this by recognizing that his sentences are nonsensical (6.54). The traditional explanation of how meaningless sentences can yield a substantial philosophical outcome has been that Wittgenstein uses the concept of *showing* to express how nonsense can point to truths about the world which cannot be stated directly. But out of the recent discussion of this claim, a ‘new’ interpretation of the *Tractatus* has risen which argues that when Wittgenstein writes that his sentences are meaningless it is because he means just that! According to this reading, now often called *the resolute reading*, none of the sentences of the *Tractatus* contain any real or lasting meaning or have any inherent role of their own, instead they serve as a form of provisional helpers in the reader’s therapeutic process of overcoming metaphysical illusions.

What is interesting from my point of view is that this new interpretation poses a specific problem for anyone who wishes to work within Wittgensteinian ethics, as most of Wittgenstein’s remarks on ethics are found in the *Tractatus* and therefore must be regarded as just as senseless as the rest of the book. A related problem appears within the book, for here we find another, *explicit* claim about the inexpressibility of ethics. In section 6.421 Wittgenstein writes that there are *no* ethical sentences, and he continues: “It is clear that ethics cannot be put into words.” (6.421)¹ This means that any reader wanting to work with Wittgenstein’s utterances on ethics seems to face a double demand for silence: The first arises from the fact that *if* you want to free yourself from metaphysical illusions, you must realize that the sections on ethics in the *Tractatus* are just *sheer nonsense* like the rest of the book. And if you for a moment allow yourself to regress and attempt to *read* the sections related to ethics in the *Tractatus*, a second demand for silence emerges as Wittgenstein within the work draws out a concept of ethics that doesn’t admit of the ethical being uttered.

I think the best way to handle both of these problems is to focus on what I find to be the two least convincing aspects of the new, resolute interpretation. First, even though I find it well-argued that Wittgenstein only allows for an *austere* concept of nonsense, I simply do not think that he is completely consistent when claiming that *all* of the *Tractatus* is nonsensical. Primarily, because this does not fit with the way in which he continued to work in many of the areas treated in the *Tractatus*, but also because many of his remarks seem to be straightforwardly meaningful by any standards. Secondly, when the new reading claims that Wittgenstein dismisses any concept of *showing* I think this is based on a wrong interpretation of the concept. According to resolute readers, showing is thought to concern cases where meaningless utterances are used to refer to something *outside* language and the world, that is, attempts to use nonsense to get a grip of ineffable truths; an idea which the resolute reading has convincingly shown to be a central part of what Wittgenstein wants to liberate us from by means of the *Tractatus*.² But, contrary to this, I want to argue that Wittgenstein never ties the concept of showing to ineffable truths as he only uses it in connection with tautologies, contradictions or straightforwardly meaningful sentences, something which makes it possible to combine an acceptance of the fact that the *Tractatus* only offers an austere concept of nonsense with an new interpretation of showing. And, in a recent article co-written by Cora Diamond and James Conant, they seem to allow for just such a

concept, saying that they just want to throw away” ... any account of showing as a revealing of ineffable content.” (Conant and Diamond 2004, 65)

If one looks at the way the concept of showing is actually used in the *Tractatus*, it becomes clear that showing in different ways concerns the way in which the conditions of some particular form of dealing with the world stand out in our use of it, for example the way in which the conditions of meaning stand out in the use of meaningful sentences. Furthermore, Wittgenstein introduces the concept of showing in an intimate connection to saying: “A proposition *shows* how things stand, if it is true. And it *says that* they so stand.” (4.022) In connection to logic, it is emphasized that logic is not *about* anything; instead, if you state the whole of logic, you will at the same time have stated *all* possible facts, everything which can be thought. (See 6.124) In this way, Wittgenstein thinks that logic *shows* the possible. Even though logic and language are the cases where Wittgenstein primarily uses the concept of showing, it is also used in other connections to bring out the inexpressibility of the conditions for a particular practice. For example, in the *Tractatus*, the existence of causality is seen as a condition for the particular practice we call the natural sciences, so that when we do scientific work, causality shows itself, but within the natural sciences we are not able to *state* this existence. In this connection, Wittgenstein writes: “If there were a law of causality, it might be put in the following way: ‘There are laws of nature’. But of course this cannot be said: it shows itself.” (6.36)

In general, what show itself is thus the conditions for different ways of dealing with reality, which means that Wittgenstein thought that our particular descriptions or statements about reality reveal the rules which govern them. What is shown is not something *in* the world, but something that shapes our dealings *with* the world, and as such it applies to the world with necessity. This necessity does not imply that one has to regard for example logic or causality as platonic or autonomous structures, as these conditions can be viewed as intimately tied to the practical dimension of mastering a practice, for example language. If you view logic in this way, the necessity of logic comes from it being a *practical ability*, which we have to possess in order to speak about the world.³ In the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein thus sees the distinction between a practice and what conditions that practice as absolute, which means that these conditions cannot be expressed within the practice itself. It is not because of some limited theory of meaning that Wittgenstein thinks there are no logical and ethical sentences, but because he sets up an absolute dichotomy between the rules that establish a practice on the one hand and the use of this practice on the other; and even though he abandons this idea in his later thinking, the question of the conditions for our dealings with world continues to intrigue him, and it is one of the main themes of both the rule-following considerations and *On Certainty*.

Following my first objection to the resolute reading of the *Tractatus*, I now return to the last sections of the work where ethics – as a part of the category of ‘das Mystische’ – is characterised by it *showing* itself (6.522). In view of the above characterisation of showing, this indicates that ethics, in some way or other, should also be seen as a condition for descriptions or meaning, and the analogy between logic and ethics is emphasised by the fact that both are referred to as *transcendental*, and that

both are tied to the fact that the world *is* (6.432). In 6.41 Wittgenstein connects ethics to the meaning of the world, and it thus becomes possible to argue that ethics it is the particular condition of reality that we can view it as a meaningful whole. This is the same idea of ethics which one finds in the beginning of Wittgenstein's "A Lecture on Ethics", where he says that ethics is: "the enquiry into the meaning of life, or into what makes life worth living, or into the right way of living." (Wittgenstein 1965, 4) What Wittgenstein calls *die Ethik* is therefore not itself a fact but rather what particular attitude we have to facts as meaningful or valuable which constitutes the rules or the structure that condition our everyday morality or our judgements about value.

In a much later conversation Wittgenstein himself commented on his view of ethics in the *Tractatus* and said (I quote): " 'The Ethical,' which cannot be expressed, is that whereby I am able to think of good and evil at all, even in the impure and nonsensical expressions I have to use." (Rhees 1965, 25) Wittgenstein indicates that the ethical is that which establishes *the very idea* of good and evil, and this idea seems to accord with the idea that ethics establishes any view of the world as meaningful or valuable. But the question is why he thinks that what springs from the meaning of the world is not just some sort of philosophy of life, but an *ethics*. The only comment in the *Tractatus* which is concerned with anything that rings of a more traditional picture of ethics is 6.422, which treats the connection between the ethical and action.

When an ethical law of the form, 'Thou shalt ...,' is laid down, one's first thought is, 'And what if I do not do it?' It is clear, however, that ethics has nothing to do with punishment and reward in the usual sense of the words. So our question about the consequences of an action must be unimportant. – At least those consequences should not be events. For there must be something right about the question we posed. There must indeed be some kind of ethical reward and ethical punishment, but they must reside in the action itself. (6.422)

Let's try to unfold what Wittgenstein says here. It is clear that since he claims that ethics has nothing to do with reward and punishment in the usual sense of the words, he is *not* trying to advance a traditional law-conception of ethics where a set of principles is established and upheld by an external authority.⁴ Instead he seems to turn the idea of reward and punishment upside down by saying that these must reside in the action itself, and I think that he thereby means that if there are no external ethical authorities, then the ethical is completely dependent on what you actually *do*. In areas where there are rules with some kind of independent authority, when somebody breaks a rule, the rule itself is not challenged or annihilated. But if Wittgenstein thinks that ethics has *no* laws and *no* external authorities, then every single act both establishes an ethical rule *and* follows it at one and the same time. Thus Ethics becomes the task of sustaining rules on no grounds whatsoever, so that it represents an unstable and temporary order in chaos. If there are no ethical laws or rules independent of the agent, then these rules are always at stake, in every single thing one does. In other words, the ethical is always in the process of *being* established, and the action bears the reward and punishment in itself because the action itself is the only representation of the ethical understanding present in one's life, or rather, it is the only place where this understanding *shows*. Any *ethical* consequences of an action are not the changes it may

bring about in reality, but the way it may change our ethical view of the world; and if the action differs radically from our prevalent moral outlook, the action may change this completely – it may even turn our conception of right and wrong completely upside down.

Around the time of “A Lecture on Ethics” Wittgenstein writes the following in his diary: “An ethical sentence says ‘You must do that!’ or ‘That is good!’ but not ‘People say that this is good’.” This makes clear that he does not think that the ethical is a reflection of some existing consensus, as he declares it to be independent of what most people would do or think is right in a particular situation instead it is a *command* to do the right thing. But for the early Wittgenstein this command is *personal*, it originates in the agent and is shown in the actions and attitudes of this agent, for example the way she prizes some things and condemns others; it is a general feature of his early views of ethics that nothing outside the individual has any influence in establishing a moral outlook. In the diary entry, Wittgenstein continues:

But an ethical sentence is a personal action. Not a statement of fact. Like an exclamation of admiration. Just consider how the justification of the ‘ethical sentence’ only tries to trace the sentence back to another, which makes an impression on you. If you in the end have no aversion for this and no admiration for that, then there is nothing to deserve the name of justification. (Wittgenstein, 2000, Tagebuch aus dem Koder 183, p.76, 31.05.06, my translation.)

Even though Wittgenstein thus ties the ethical to the individual person, he does not think that it is something that we *choose*. Or rather, it is something that can only be chosen by actually acting in a way that expresses this particular ethical outlook. Another special feature about the ethical action is that, as it at the same time establishes and follows a rule, it stands completely alone, because it has to serve as its own justification. As there are no external rules or principles to refer to in connection to the ethical dimension of an action, there are no possibility of justifying one’s deeds by saying that one is simply following directions or has ‘found’ the right principle to follow. As far as the ethical goes the individual *alone* is responsible for its actions, something which I will return to later.

It is thus my actions and attitudes that form the particular ethical outlook shown in my life, and the only general feature connected to ethics is the way in which our lives show the *possibility* of ethics. What I actually say or do is the only thing related to ethics that can be expressed, as the existence of ethics only shows itself. I think that one way to explain this idea is to look at what Bernard Williams calls the general or thin moral concepts – like right, wrong, virtuous etc.⁵ Such concepts can be seen as simply showing the limits of moral behaviour, the ethical, because when it comes to the question of why one ought to do the *right* actions, it is not possible to give any further reasons. Interpreted according to a Tractarian picture of ethics, this is because the concept of ‘right’ is empty of all actual content, and simply shows a part of the structure of ethics; it is a defining, not a describing term. Parallel to this, I think that whole sentences can be used as a kind of tautologies by showing necessary ethical connections, as for example the sentences ‘You ought to do the right thing’, ‘Humans should be respected’ and even a sentence like ‘Murder is wrong’. Sentences like this have no meaning when seen in isolation from a

context, they describe nothing, but they show the limit of our ethical understanding of right and wrong and are thus rules that *necessarily* apply within morality. Seen in this way these sentences do not *say* anything, they only show a part of a condition for life, the ethical structure, in much the same way as logical tautologies and contradictions show a part of another condition, namely the structure of our practice of meaning. In this way they shows the conditions for thinking in terms of good and evil, but in this role they do not reveal anything about what situation we would actually consider to be right or wrong.

I would like to compare this to an idea presented in a longer quote from the *Tractatus*:

Newtonian mechanics, for example, imposes a unified form on the description of the world.

Let us imagine a white surface with irregular black spots on it. We then say that whatever kind of picture these make, I can always approximate as closely as I wish to the description of it by covering the surface with a sufficiently fine square mesh, and then saying of every square whether it is black or white. In this way I shall have imposed a unified form on the description of the surface. The form is optional since I could have achieved the same result by using a net with a triangular or hexagonal mesh. ... The different nets correspond to different systems for describing the world ...

And now we see the relative position of logic and mechanics. (The net might also consist of more than one kind of mesh: e.g. we could use both triangles and hexagons.) The possibility of describing a picture like the one mentioned above with a net of a given form tells us nothing about the picture. (For it is true of all such pictures.) But what *does* characterize the picture is that it can be described *completely* by a particular net with a *particular* size of mesh. (6.341-6.342)

Just as the type of mesh chosen to describe the spots on the surface does not say anything about how these spots are actually arranged, pointing out the sentences that work as ethical tautologies by showing the necessities structuring our ethical discourse does not determine any actual ethical judgements or settle any actual moral disputes. In the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein wants to show that it is an essential condition of our world that we question its meaning and perceive of it in terms of good and evil. This means that there is no escaping the ethical, it is given together with the way we experience the world. But it is of vital importance for Wittgenstein that this transcendental possibility of ethics in itself does not say anything about what we actually do find good or evil, or what we ought to find good and evil. But it says something about the world as whole, namely that this is a world in which these sentences may work as conditions for judgements, and that the sentences thus are that which must be taken for granted in forming any value judgements is the reason why these sentences are necessary.

This necessary status of certain sentences like ‘You ought to the right thing’ also shows in the fact that anyone who does not understand this sentence is unable to fully participate in ethical discourse, unable to have an ethical outlook on the world. And the necessary character of these sentences also explains why we want to hold on to them no matter what, even when we are confronted with what we ourselves agree are examples where the best possible action might be to go against them. If we try to imagine someone who had certain knowledge that Adolph Hitler were just seconds away from giving the order to start the ‘Endlösung’ and who also had the possibility of actually killing him, it is still almost impossible to say that this would be the *morally right* thing to do. We do not just regard the situation

as one which demands us to make a tremendously difficult decision, it presents itself as genuinely *tragic* because we think that agreeing that *any* murder could be the ethically right thing to do is the same as questioning the ethical itself, because it is questioning, not a particular moral proposition, but a moral *norm*, part of the structure which makes ethical reflections possible. This means that the existence of norms in ethical reflection shows in the way we treat some sentences as sacrosanct or even sacred. A possible objection to this comparison between logical and ethical tautologies is that the sentences included in the last group imply practical demands; for example, we just saw how the sentence ‘Murder is wrong’ prohibits a wide range of actions. But this objection is misguided in several ways. First of all, the connection to practical demands is not a difference between the two groups of sentences as logical tautologies and contradictions themselves also have such implications, just not in connection to our actions, but in connection to the way we talk and think, by allowing some and excluding other forms of sentences from our language. Secondly, the ethical tautologies get their status as necessary, practical demands only because *we* give this status, by giving them a certain role and treating them as sacrosanct; the practical demands do not arise out of any intrinsic feature of the sentences, but out of the role they play in our lives.

We are afraid that acting against a sentence like ‘Murder is wrong’ would compromise its status as a rule and therefore change the very system of ethics and our entire moral outlook. If I kill someone, then the reasons I might give for my action will not change the fact that I, by that very action, have made a fundamental alteration in the ethical structure which shows itself in my actions. Most people live in a world in which the idea to commit murder is, in a certain sense, *impossible*, and by doing so anyway I change the very layout of my reality, so that it now also contains the possibility of murder. In this way, my world becomes a different world. But the early Wittgenstein stresses that the nature of this change – although it is of the greatest importance – cannot be said; because it is a change in the way I deal with the world. Sentences such as ‘Murder is wrong’ show a limit for action and they are only necessary as long as they are taken as such, so by acting against it I change my very concept of ethics. I think this is what Wittgenstein is trying to express in the following quote: “If good and bad acts of will do alter the world, it can only be the limit of the world they alter, not the facts, not what can be expressed by language. In short, the world must become an altogether different world.” (6.43)

When we treat some sentences as definitions or ethical tautologies, we thus determine the conditions for any dealings with value. To see this clearly is at the same time to see that ethics is always constituted by *us*, and that it cannot be given any external justification. As far as our ethical outlook goes, we cannot refer to something more fundamental to justify it, there is simply nothing more to say on the matter. I think that this is the key to a better understanding of why Wittgenstein claims that the ethical cannot be said, namely because it constitutes the very possibility of thinking in terms of good and evil, of seeing our actions as good or bad, something which among other places shows in the question of the meaning of the world. Ethics is a condition of value which cannot be separated from the *use* we make of it. Even though it shows in every actual evaluation or ascription of meaning to the world, it is itself it

without any particular content, and therefore it cannot be stated. In 1931, Wittgenstein writes: “The ineffable . . . provides . . . the background on which what I can say, becomes meaningful.” (Wittgenstein 1984, 472, 1931; my translation) Both logic and ethics are frames or structures that condition meaningful ways of viewing the world, namely language and value respectively. The ineffability of ethics is a consequence of the fact that the existence of the frame itself does not justify any particular moral outlook, as justifications can only be given within an already established practice, ethical or otherwise, and understanding this is at the same time understanding the fact that we must take full responsibility for any actual practice we establish.

For Wittgenstein the ineffability of ethics is thus tied to a radical demand on the individual, as the silence of his ethics is a silence which shows us that we alone have the absolute responsibility for the structure of our ethical practices, as well as for what we actually do. The Danish philosopher K.E. Løgstrup also notes the connection between silence and the radical responsibility connected with the ethical. Working within a phenomenological framework, he thinks that the very existence of life, of other people, gives rise to a one-sided ethical demand which is – and I quote from an article by Hans Fink – “silent in the rather dramatic sense that any formulation of it as an explicit demand is unavoidably a misrepresentation of it. ‘What is demanded is that the demand should not be necessary.’ ” (Fink 2004, 6)⁶ For Løgstrup it is *because* the demand meeting the agent is *absolute* that it cannot be stated, any formulation of the demand would make it determined and thereby be an unwarranted release for the individual from part of her actual responsibility towards the other. That is, any formulation of it would misrepresent it and gives us the illusion that we can choose not to take on the responsibility of giving content to the demand ourselves. Løgstrup thus writes:

The demand, precisely because it is unspoken, is radical. This is true even though the thing to be done in any particular situation may be very insignificant. Why is this? Because the person confronted by the unspoken demand must him or herself determine how he or she is to take care of the other person’s life. (Løgstrup 1997, 44)

So in both Wittgenstein and Løgstrup the ethical must remain unarticulated and implicit, because it is the responsibility of every single one of us to give it the appropriate content.

The question arising from Wittgenstein’s claim that there are no ethical sentences was whether we are then forced to employ meaningless propositions in our dealings with value. I think that, according to a Tractarian conception of ethics, the answer to this question is twofold. First, when it comes to the attempt to *say* or *speak out* the ethical, the attempt to state the very existence of the ethical dimension of our lives, I believe that the answer is in the affirmative. We can demonstrate or show this existence, but we cannot say it. This also sheds light on the comment from “A Lecture on Ethics”, where Wittgenstein says that the attempt “to write or talk ethics . . . was to run against the boundaries of our language” (Wittgenstein 1965, 12). But, secondly if we look at how values or moral actions unfold on the background of the ethical, these are in no way nonsensical. The existence of the ethical shows in our meaningful actions, in the meaningful conversations we have about doing this or that, in our meaningful reactions to

other people's actions or to the world as such et cetera.⁷ It is therefore important to distinguish between the general and metaphysical question of the existence of ethics and the question of how morality and value unfold in the meaningful lives we, hopefully, all live – and philosophy is the activity that brings us an understanding of this difference. One could see the early Wittgenstein's conception of the task of philosophy in terms of a metaphor of 'tidying up', as it represents the attempt to make the distinction between the necessary and the contingent clear by showing us the difference between what we can say and what only shows itself in what we say. In 4.115 Wittgenstein thus says that philosophy: "will signify what cannot be said, by presenting clearly what can be said."

2. Ethical norms according to *On Certainty*

I earlier argued that in *the Tractatus* ethics is claimed to be ineffable not because Wittgenstein has a particular theory of meaning that does not allow for expressions of value, but because he thinks that there is an absolute and exclusive distinction between the conditions that establish a particular discourse and what we can say within that discourse; thereby giving the concept of showing such a central role in the *Tractatus*. I now want to show that the questions surrounding the conditions for dealings with the world continue to intrigue him even though he in his later thinking abandons the idea that it is impossible to express the conditions for a particular discourse. I want to argue for this by means of some reflections on central passages in *On Certainty*, and I will also try to sketch out what consequences the development in Wittgenstein's later thinking would have had for his views on ethics – had he returned to this topic.

On Certainty is primarily an investigation of our epistemic language-games, that is, of the grounds on which we claim to *know* something, and the conditions that have to be in place for such a claim to be meaningful. Throughout the book, Wittgenstein returns to G. E. Moore's reply to scepticism about the existence of the outer world, which consisted in Moore holding out his hand to his audience and stating 'I know that this is a hand'. Wittgenstein starts out on a somewhat critical note by showing that it is very unclear what role the word 'know' plays in this sentence. Knowledge usually requires the possibility of giving *reasons* for its correctness, but in the case of 'I know that this is a hand' it seems impossible to think of any sentence *more* certain than the stated one. Wittgenstein then goes on to show how there are many sentences that are never questioned or assessed in terms of truth or falsehood despite the fact that they have the form of an assertive sentence. Instead of expressing truths about the world, these sentences seem to serve a completely different role, as they simply are what we take for *granted* within a particular area of discourse.

Can't an assertive sentence, which was capable of functioning as a hypothesis, also be used as a foundation for research and action? I.e. can't it simply be isolated from doubt, though not according to any explicit rule? It simply gets assumed as a truism, never called into question, perhaps not even ever formulated.

It may be for example that *all enquiry on our part* is set so as to exempt certain propositions

from doubt, if they were ever formulated. They lie apart from the route travelled by enquiry. (Wittgenstein 1974, §87-88)⁸

Wittgenstein shows how any investigation of the world must rely on some sort of foundation, and that this foundation is very often made out of assumptions about the world which we simply do not call into question, thereby giving them a status of absolute certainty. In *On Certainty* he mentions a wide and diverse range of examples of such assumptions from different discourses, for example the idea that the world existed long before one was born, that water boils at a 100 degrees, that there will be firm ground to step on when one goes out the door, and he even mentions some which have *now* lost their certainty, as for example another of Moore's claims, namely that no one has ever gone to the moon.

The way our epistemic language-games work thus seem to depend on the fact that some assumptions are exempted from doubt, because in order to investigate something we have to be able to rely on related areas which then have to be regarded as certain. Wittgenstein is not thereby pointing to the shortcomings of our knowledge of the world, but pointing out the very structure by means of which we can achieve such knowledge.

That is to say, the *questions* that we raise and our *doubts* depend on the fact that some propositions are exempt from doubt, are as it were like hinges on which those turn.

That is to say, it belongs to the logic of our scientific investigations that certain things are *in deed* not doubted.

But it is not the case that we just *cannot* investigate everything, and for that reason we are forced to rest content with assumption. If I want the door to turn, the hinges must stay put. My *life* consists in my being content to accept many things. (Wittgenstein 1974, §341-344)

Wittgenstein pictures the relationship between the certainties on which we base our investigations and the investigations themselves by means of the relationship between the *hinges* and the moving door. For a door to move, something else has to remain still. As the hinges thus work as conditions of our investigation they cannot be justified by it, like in the case of Moore's sentence they themselves fulfil the role of final reason. As these certainties lie at the foundation of all justification, they are not just exempt from doubt; they are also in a certain sense *groundless*. But only in a certain sense because to ascribe to anything the role of certainty is to treat it in a particular way, to *actually* treat it as certain in the way we live.

My life shows that I know or am certain that there is a chair over there, or a door, and so on.

- I tell a friend e.g. "Take that chair over there", "Shut the door", etc. etc.

- As if giving grounds did not come to an end sometime. But the end is not an ungrounded presupposition: it is an ungrounded way of acting. (Wittgenstein 1974, §7 and §110)

In *On Certainty* Wittgenstein gives various descriptions of what it *means* to treat something as certain, for example that it involves us trusting something completely; not wanting to go into discussion about it; using it as a guide the way we for example use the boiling-point of water to define 100°C; and never – or hardly ever – yielding to pressure to abandon it, as I for example would refuse to abandon

the idea that my name is Anne-Marie, even if this claim for some reason was heavily opposed.

These ways of treating something as a certainty shows that they actually have the *necessity* of a rule or norm that guides the way we think in a particular discourse. What we acknowledge in our acknowledgement of the certainties is the structure of the way we speak about the world, and in describing our certainties our epistemic grammar is thus revealed. (See Wittgenstein 1974, §348.) As the epistemic certainties are a kind of necessities, they can be seen as parallel to the tautologies and contradictions of the *Tractatus*, and *On Certainty* thereby becomes a very welcome supplement to some of the thoughts found in the early work by offering actual descriptions of the way norms unfold in our lives. It is precisely because such descriptions seem completely absent in the early work that they are a part of what I have been trying to offer in this article.

But there is also an important difference between the early and the later thinking at this point. In the *Tractatus*, ethical norms are only upheld by the isolated agent and have no fix-point outside his or her actions, and this means that the only way for Wittgenstein to picture their necessary status is to claim that they are *transcendental*; ascribing the agent an absolute responsibility not just of his actions, but of the norms that govern them as well. But in *On Certainty* Wittgenstein has definitely given up the Tractarian idea of transcendental conditions of our dealings with the world. Even though the certainties are *necessary* conditions of our investigation, this is not because their transcendental character is revealed in their use, but because *this very use* makes them necessary. And *use* is, as the later Wittgenstein has repeatedly shown us, a concept that is inherently *public*; there is no such thing as an absolute private use. This publicity does not in itself imply that all norms are shared, or social conventions, but it means that for something to be a norm it must be publicly assessable, at least in principle. I want to argue that the inherently public character of norms has some consequences for the question of ethical ineffability: In the *Tractatus* ethical norms can only be shown, but not said, because they establish the possibility of talking about value. But in *On Certainty* this possibility is established by something inherently public, namely the role these norms play in our lives, something that we may investigate, much the same way Wittgenstein investigates epistemic norms in *On Certainty*. In this way Wittgenstein no longer considers ‘the background of what I can say’ to be ineffable; our norms are perfectly expressible *as long as* we see their very special role clearly.

This also reflects in the fact that Wittgenstein in *On Certainty* has a much more differentiated view of the relationship between different areas of discourse. In the *Tractatus* we seem to be presented with a range of pre-established categories – as for example language, science and ethics, to mention some – which each condition different ways of describing the same world while remaining completely independent. This view of the relationship between different ways of describing the world changes completely in the later thinking, as both the *Philosophical Investigations* and *On Certainty* picture how discourses overlap in endless complex patterns. A consequence of this is that role we assign to a sentence may differ from context to context, so that what works as a norm within one context, is a testable empirical proposition in another. The obvious example is again Moore’s sentence, and

Wittgenstein imagines situations where this sentence would be the answer to an empirical question, for example trying to find out whether someone had his hand amputated or not. In this way what functions as norms in some language-games takes the role of empirically testable statements in others, and if we return the sentence I introduced previously, namely ‘Murder is wrong’, this means that even though the sentence is a norm in almost all ethical discourse, we may imagine a context in which we would want to see it as an assertive sentence and maybe even question its truthfulness. This new diversity in Wittgenstein’s conception of language also reflects in the way he pictures the possibility of norms changing, so that there might a fluid borderline between the sentences that constitutes norms and the sentences that follows them.

It might be imagined that some propositions, of the form of empirical propositions, were hardened and functioned as channels for such empirical propositions as were not hardened but fluid; and that this relation altered with time, in that fluid propositions hardened, and hard ones became fluid.

The mythology may change back into a state of flux, the river-bed of thoughts may shift. But I distinguish between the movement of the waters on the river-bed and the shift of the bed itself; though there is not a sharp division of the one from the other.

And the bank of that river consists partly of hard rock, subject to no alteration or only to an imperceptible one, partly of sand, which now in one place now in another gets washed away, or deposited. (Wittgenstein 1974, §96-99)

The question of whether ethical norms are generally like sand or rock, I will leave for now – although I suspect that there are in fact ethical norms of both types, with ‘Murder is wrong’ as one of the more stony ones.

In both his early and later thinking Wittgenstein struggles to shed light on how our world is structured by various norms, ethical and others, but as far as ethics goes, he seems to hold on to the idea that philosophy can say nothing about what these norms ought to command or condemn. The investigation of ethics in the *Tractatus* in no way determines the content of a normative ethics, and I think that any work in ethics starting from the insights of *On Certainty* would not either. To want to be a moral philosopher on Wittgensteinian ground means giving up the hope that philosophy can settle normative matters and instead wonder at the diversity revealed by their description.

NOTES

¹ I have made slight changes in the translation of some of the quotes.

² Diamond thinks a central part of Wittgenstein's project is to make us *give up* "the attempt to represent to ourselves something in reality ... as not sayable but shown by the sentence." (Diamond 1991 p.184). See also Conant 2000 p. 196.

³ This interpretation of logic in the *Tractatus* is very close to the one given in McGinn 2001.

⁴ For the idea of law conceptions of morality, see Anscombe 1958.

⁵ *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* pp.128-129.

⁶ The last line is a quote from Løgstrup: *The Ethical Demand*.

⁷ I thus disagree with Diamond's interpretation, according to which Wittgenstein says that *all* utterances connecting to morality or value are nonsensical. See Diamond 2000.

⁸ I have made slight revisions in the translation of some of the quotes from *On Certainty*.

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