

Reshaping Ethics after Wittgenstein

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Abstract

This article suggests a reading of the significance of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* for ethics, in the light of Cora Diamond's resolute reading. The contrasts between sense and nonsense and between ethics and science are commented on and are connected to a further contrast between a specialized response to language and the world and an unspecialized response characteristic of the humanistic disciplines. The *Tractatus* is seen as a work which diagnoses the loss of such a fully human unspecialized sense of things and which wishes to recover this possibility for its reader. On the basis of such reading, the article also suggests how to connect the significance of the later Wittgenstein for ethics with the *Tractatus*. A connection can be established by following Iris Murdoch's notion of conceptual clarification.

1.

Wittgenstein's treatment of ethics, as well as the significance of his work for moral philosophy, have been given prominence in at least two very general ways: one takes its point of departure from the *Tractatus*, the other from his later philosophy. In this chapter I will be mainly concerned with the *Tractatus*. I will briefly treat at the end the relationship between his later philosophy and ethics.

In the *Tractatus* we find a radical contrast between an ethical concern for people and the world and other sorts of concerns, tied for example to knowing how things are, or to acting in order to achieve a number of goals, and so on. This contrast shapes the *Tractatus*. Whatever is illuminated by Wittgenstein's philosophizing in that book under the name of ethics is contrasted with all other sorts of concerns – concerns which we can make sense of as belonging to language. Wittgenstein is interested in elucidating a dimension of experience through a radical contrast with whatever we can speak about, with any concern of which we can make sense. As he writes:

[...] there can be no ethical propositions. Propositions cannot express anything higher. It is clear that ethics cannot be expressed.¹

It is also significant that this dimension of experience is referred to under a number of various indications: ethics, aesthetics, religion, the higher, the meaning of life and death, the experience of finding life problematic, of seeing the world as a whole as happy or unhappy, among others. I will get back to this later.

We may read the elaboration of this dimension offered by the *Tractatus* in at least two ways. They are closely connected; they can be offered as two renditions of the same point, but it might be useful to distinguish them. (1) One way of elucidating this dimension is to work on what goes on in the sections on ethics, where Wittgenstein writes that there are no ethical propositions, and that wishing to say something ethical results in speaking nonsense. The whole book (what has gone on before and what goes on after the sections on ethics) is necessary in order to understand what Wittgenstein does in these sections. In order to get at the contrast between the world and value, between what is the case and the higher, between saying how things are and seeing that by having said how things are we have failed to touch what is most important; in order to get at this family of contrasts depicted in the last sections of the *Tractatus*, we need to understand the goal of the book as such, which is, as Wittgenstein writes in the Preface, to “draw a limit to thinking”, a limit which

can [...] only be drawn in language and what lies on the other side of the limit will be simply nonsense.²

Thus we need to get a sense of how the contrast between what we can say and what we cannot say is a very strange one, as there is no proper limit to be drawn, there aren't really two sides of the limit to be seen. The way Wittgenstein elaborates this point is crucial in order to understand the similar contrast between what we can say and the ethical.

(2) Another way of elaborating the place of ethics in the *Tractatus* is that of attending to another family of remarks, and especially to what Wittgenstein says when he writes to Ludwig von Ficker that the book as a whole has an ethical spirit³, to section 6.54, where he writes that after having gone through the kind of work required by the book we see “the world rightly”, and to what he writes at the end of the Preface

1 TLP 1922: 6.42–6.421.

2 TLP 1922: Preface; p. 4.

3 CLF 1969: 35.

where he introduces a dimension of problems which is treated in the book precisely by being left out:

I am, therefore, of the opinion that the problems have in essentials been finally solved. And if I am not mistaken in this, then the value of this work secondly consists in the fact that it shows how little has been done when these problems have been solved.⁴

We can work on the way in which the kind of progress that the book wishes us to achieve is tied to movements that belong to what Wittgenstein calls the ethical dimension. What the book wishes to do as a whole, philosophically, has ethical significance: this is another mode of entry into the issue of ethics in the *Tractatus*.

I am now going to say something about each of these lines of reading. The first line has been given a very rich treatment by Cora Diamond; and in his work James Conant has emphasized the importance of the second perspective. Their interpretations are now known as “resolute readings” of the *Tractatus* and they have given life to a very rich debate⁵. I am not going to comment on the previous readings which were given of the issue of ethics in the *Tractatus*. These can be roughly put under three headings: ineffability, positivist, and conflict readings. The first kind of reading understands ethics as a realm of values which may be reached only indirectly. It has been the most frequent elaboration of the issue. The second kind of reading understands ethics as an emotive matter. It was held by positivists like Rudolf Carnap in relation to the *Tractatus*. The third kind of reading regards the *Tractatus* as a scene of conflict between the importance that Wittgenstein gives to the realm of ethics and the obstacle posed by his theory of language and meaning which doesn’t allow ethics to be expressed⁶. I will not show how these readings are inadequate and will work instead within the new interpretive perspective.

2.

Diamond has written very clearly about what to make of Wittgenstein’s contrast between sense and nonsense, as this is put into contact with the contrast between the world and ethics. Conant has shown how understanding Wittgenstein’s goal in the book, understanding him in order

4 TLP 1922: Preface; p. 4.

5 See Conant and Diamond 2010.

6 See on this Donatelli 1998, ch. 2.

to liberate ourselves from the impression that we are torn between the alternative doctrines expounded in the book, is connected to a kind of liberation which shows the character of ethics. According to the first perspective, Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus* is working out a way of expressing a sense of things, a way of responding to the world and to people, which requires the radical contrast between such ways of responding to the world and the way the world is captured when we speak about it. As Diamond writes:

If we are able to recognize that none of the gazillion speakable answers to questions will reach to our concern with the problems of life, that none of the speakable answers can be an answer to the questions we take ourselves to be putting, we should see ourselves as: rejecting all answers, rejecting anything that would be an answer to any question. If we could have, as it were, *all* answers, we should still not have the answer to the questions we took ourselves to be putting. Here our understanding of ourselves can reach a further point: that the purported questions are not questions at all.⁷

This is a way of marking the character of the problems of life: that is, by establishing a radical contrast with anything that *is* a problem. So there is a way of interrogating ourselves about the sense of the world, its beauty and goodness, the character of which can be elucidated by showing that any example of what is a problem for us, any example of what we can make sense as a problem about the world leaves *our* problems untouched (“We feel that even if *all possible* scientific questions be answered, the problems of life have still not been touched at all. Of course there is no question left, and just this is the answer”; TLP 1922: 6.52). Wittgenstein uses this method in order to elucidate a certain kind of concern for the world, as he does later in the *Lecture on Ethics* where similarly the sense of the world as an absolutely marvelous and trustworthy place is marked by our refusing to accept the expressions that we want to use as capable of expressing what we want to say. As Wittgenstein writes:

all I have said is [...] that we cannot express what we want to express and that all we *say* about the absolute miraculous remains nonsense.⁸

Any way of saying what we experience fails to express it and such radical failure is the character of the experience here.

The second perspective has to do with the personal transformation involved in the process of working one’s way through the book. The *Trac-*

7 Diamond 2011: 243.

8 LE 1993: 44.

tatus has an ethical spirit in that it teaches us how to transform our involvement with words. For example, to go back to Diamond's passage, in realizing that there are no questions we transform our desire to say certain things, we get clear about our own desires, our own affective involvement with words: To borrow from Wittgenstein's "Philosophy":

As I often said, philosophy does not lead me to any renunciation, since I do not abstain from saying something, but rather abandon a certain combination of words as senseless. In another sense, however, philosophy requires a resignation, but one of feeling and not of intellect. And maybe that is what makes it so difficult for many. It can be difficult not to use an expression, just as it is difficult to hold back tears, or an outburst of anger.⁹

Philosophy, in Wittgenstein's view, is an example of such an activity of clarification and self clarification, and we may understand its connection to ethics if we see that Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus* (and later) did not want to teach doctrines but to teach how to transform ourselves. As Rush Rhees reports Wittgenstein saying a few years later:

I don't try to make you *believe* something you *don't* believe, but to make you *do* something you won't do.¹⁰

The two perspectives I distinguished are connected. As I have just suggested, the very quotation from Diamond shows this: the expression of an ethical concern for the world comes as the realization of the persistence of a desire which faces such a radical failure to be expressed. So the two moments are connected in this way: being able to express a sense of the world as marvelous, as in the *Lecture on Ethics*, comes with not taking ourselves to be *saying* something, e.g., to be giving some kind of information about something, and this is an example of having clarified our desires towards language, having conducted the activity of clarification which the *Tractatus* aims to encourage the reader to pursue.

I want to elaborate a bit more on this connection. The *Tractatus* represents a scene in which we are lost, we have lost contact with ourselves and the world. Language is a place where we move like strangers: we vocalize words with the impression of meaning something (as in the example 'Socrates is identical' in 5.4733), of talking about problems that matter to us, whereas we are not doing anything of this sort. As he writes:

9 PH 1993: 161.

10 Rhees 1970: 43.

It is not to be wondered at that the deepest problems are really *no* problems.¹¹

They are not problems but we take them to be. Our contact with language is confused (the confusions of which the whole of philosophy is full, as he writes in 3.324) but we are not aware of this state of confusion. The *Tractatus* aims to bringing us back to our language, to our capacity to express ourselves and to be in contact with the world again. Philosophy is conceived as such an activity, as he writes in 4.112 (“The result of philosophy is not a number of ‘philosophical propositions’, but to make propositions clear”): it is a way of leading us back to the world and language. It is this sort of activity which results in our being able to go on speaking and responding to the world, in the liberation from the condition of being imprisoned in our own way of expressing ourselves, from a condition of being blocked.

This journey which Wittgenstein describes in the *Tractatus* (but it is really many sorts of different journeys done each time and not once and for all) has an ethical significance. This is Wittgenstein’s point in the letter to von Ficker. This is how Conant comments on this:

even though Wittgenstein, in one sense, ‘has no ethics’ (if ‘ethics’ names a branch of philosophy with its own proprietary subject matter), in another sense, his thinking and writing – on every page of his work – takes place under the pressure of an ethical demand. Any writing answerable to Wittgenstein’s conception of the nature of the difficulty of philosophy – of what it means to acknowledge a philosophical difficulty to be the kind of difficulty it is – necessarily has *ein Ethischer Sinn*.¹²

Ethics is connected here to this kind of demand for self clarification, a demand for *integrity* we might say. But we may see how this philosophic and ethical pressure is also tied to what Wittgenstein does at the end of the *Tractatus*, and later in the *Lecture on Ethics*, when he writes about ethics as a certain kind of involvement with the world, about the world as a certain kind of place for us: the world of the happy and the unhappy. Of course I don’t mean to say that we can understand the last sections separately from what has gone on before. We need to agree with Conant when he writes that

[...] what is ethical in it can come into view only by coming into view as an internal aspect of the whole of the work [...].¹³

11 TLP 1922: 4.003.

12 Conant 2002a: 90.

13 Conant 2005: 72.

My way of reading the connection between the two perspectives is the following: the world as lost and regained, the world that we are under the impression of having lost, that we feel as a foreign place, as a scene of confusion, and the world that we have regained, the world seen under the pressure of this desire and which undergoes this sort of dialectic, is the sort of world which Wittgenstein describes as coming into view in our ethical experience, the world of the happy and the unhappy. The sense of beauty, of happiness, of being in the grace of God, and we should add the examples Wittgenstein offers in the *Lecture on Ethics*, this sense of the world and life is how the world and life look to us in the process described in the *Tractatus* as the philosophical journey from confusion to clarity. The *Tractatus* leads us on a journey in which we go through a crisis signaled by a sense of estrangement from our language, but then it aims to bring us back to the world, the world which, in the light of this process, comes to look special and unique, as the only world there is, as beautiful in the absolute sense. This is how I see the connection between these two ways of approaching the issue of the *Tractatus* and ethics.

3.

I want to suggest now another way of making the connection between the two perspectives. I find it very significant that, in elaborating this notion of absolute value in the *Tractatus* and in the *Lecture on Ethics*, Wittgenstein makes use of examples of a variety of spheres of experience, such as the ethical, the aesthetic and the religious. This fact sheds its own peculiar light on a consideration that belongs to the understanding of ethics that I have suggested so far, that is, there is no specific department to which Wittgenstein ties the sphere of value. Diamond has commented on this ubiquitous notion of ethics and has connected it to the place of logic in the *Tractatus*. She has done this in various places. One such place is her comment on *Tractatus* 6.421: “Ethics is transcendental”. Wittgenstein also writes in 6.13 that “logic is transcendental”. Diamond comments as follows:

What ‘transcendental’ means in the *Tractatus* is that the ‘sign’ for whatever is called transcendental is the general form of a proposition, not some particular proposition or set of propositions that says something in particular. [...]

There – in the general form of a proposition – you can see that logic and ethics are not spheres in which we express ourselves by means of signs.¹⁴

And elsewhere she writes:

The comparison Wittgenstein makes between logic and ethics, in speaking of both as ‘transcendental’ [...] has at its heart a contrast: between propositions with a specific subject matter, and logic/ethics, ‘symbolized’, as it were, by the variable for *every* particular thing we might say, a variable none of whose values is a proposition with logical or ethical subject matter. There is not, on this view, a ‘moral vocabulary’, a vocabulary through which we mean moral things. If one wanted to give sense to ‘moral vocabulary’ one might mean: vocabulary we use in saying things that might have applications in moral life, but that excludes no words.¹⁵

The point here, which Diamond develops in many places also as an independent point about moral philosophy, is that ethics is a sphere which we do not sort out by subject matter but by use.

I want to develop the point about the lack of a subject matter in a somewhat different direction, though one which is related to Diamond’s point. In referring to ethics and to the other spheres of experience such as aesthetics, religion and so on, Wittgenstein is interested in drawing our attention to an undepartmentalized sense of things and life, a sense of things and life which does not arise from a certain technical problem, or from an ethical, political or religious problem, in the sense in which these, in some doctrines or vocabulary, are given as departments of experience. It might be helpful – this is my suggestion – to think of such a sense of things as a human sense, tied to the interest for things cultivated by the humanities. I sketch a few reasons for wanting to do this. First we need to consider the appeal that the *Tractatus* makes to the reader¹⁶. Wittgenstein does not appeal to someone who believes in certain doctrines concerning logic, ethics, religion. The book presupposes a certain knowledge about philosophic theories and it also addresses a certain philosophic form that the “problems of life” take, but what he wants to do with the reader cannot be pursued from the perspective of the theories that are dis-

14 Diamond 2000: 168.

15 Diamond 1996: 252–253.

16 Conant has made it familiar to us that the understanding of the philosophy contained in the *Tractatus* requires that we make sense of the fact that the book makes reference to the author who addresses the reader on how to read the book. As Wittgenstein writes: “My propositions are elucidatory in this way: he who understands me finally recognizes them as senseless, when he has climbed out through them, on them, over them” (TLP 1922: 6.54). See Conant 2002b.

cussed in the book. The book appeals to someone who shares a human sense of language and of the depth of things. It is from the perspective of such a human sense of language and experience that what is discussed in the book as philosophy is recognized as a certain form of desire which has brought us to a dead end which needs to be overcome (as he writes in 6.54: “Er muss diese Sätze überwinden”).

We might see this also by commenting on the experience of reading. Wittgenstein works on the experience of reading. He appeals to the humanistic capacity of reading: a capacity of going through philosophic arguments with a certain human experience, an experience which the reader may bring in connection with the book, given an undepartmentalized sense of reading, of what goes on in reading, in the fact that words are the words written by someone, by some human being speaking to us, and that in such a way they can work for us in ways which are different from those of communicating information in specialized ways. This is crucial in order to understand 6.54: “he who understands me finally recognizes them as senseless”. Understanding the author is understanding the words as the words written by someone who is speaking to us. This requires a quality of the writing and a quality of reading which belongs to what we find in imaginative literature and in the literature where there is a personality speaking in the text. If we take seriously section 6.54 and elaborate a resolute approach we also get to the importance of the experience of reading as a kind of experience afforded by a “humanistic” (in the sense which contrasts this with “departmentalized”) sense of the importance of what is communicated, of what words can do, of the kind of transformation they can effect. This may be taken as a further development of the idea that the book is ethical in the way in which it effects a personal transformation: I am saying now that this is connected to a capacity to respond to what is said, to what is written, which belongs with a humanistic understanding of imaginative literature.

Bernard Williams in the last part of his life encounters these issues and he writes that philosophy

will not speak to our concerns unless its sounds right, unless the manner of the work itself expresses what the writer feels is living or alternatively derivative and phony, and that is likely to be an imaginative achievement. A failure to achieve what is required – required by the traditional aims of philosophy itself – may well show itself in failings which attract the kinds of criti-

cisms applicable to imaginative literature, not only those familiar from the standard range of philosophical criticisms.¹⁷

I have suggested that the understanding of the *Tractatus* requires such sort of imaginative achievement which belongs to the humanistic notion of language.

This is also tied to Diamond's point about ethics lacking a content: as she writes,

'ethics' is not a term for a subject matter alongside other subjects.¹⁸

We may connect this point to what I have called a humanistic notion of a human sense of life and of experience, a sense of life which is not nourished by a given department of interest for things – political, religious, scientific – but from a undepartmentalized human sense of life. As I said, Wittgenstein's examples in the *Tractatus* and later in the *Lecture* point in this direction. They are examples which wish to disintegrate the impression that the ethical dimension is a given sphere alongside others. Wittgenstein's contrast in the *Tractatus* therefore is one between ethics in the way in which the *Tractatus* elucidates this dimension and *any* departmentalized view of things.

4.

In this light we should also rethink the contrast with science. Wittgenstein holds that the space of science is the space of what we can say (TLP 1922: 4.11: "The totality of true propositions is the total natural science (or the totality of the natural sciences)"; TLP 1922: 6.53: "The right method of philosophy would be this. To say nothing except what can be said, *i. e.* the propositions of natural science, *i. e.* something that has nothing to do with philosophy [...]"). But science can also be taken as a given stock of talks along with others. Science in the *Tractatus* is both the picture for what can be said and also of a given stock of such talks. Let me explain.

In 6.53 science is the picture for whatever "can be said", in the same way as in 4.111, where he writes: "Philosophy is not one of the natural sciences"; and in 6.52: "We feel that even if *all possible* scientific questions be answered, the problems of life have still not been touched at all". Also

17 Williams 2006: 212.

18 Diamond 1996: 252.

in 4.113–4.114 he writes: “Philosophy limits the disputable sphere of natural science”; “It should limit the thinkable and thereby the unthinkable”. In such places he establishes a contrast between science and philosophy, between the problems of science and the problems of life, which is the contrast between what can be said, what can be spoken about, and another sort of activity with words. The questions which science discusses, and from which it arrives at the body of scientific truths, stand here for whatever can be said, for the sphere of language and the world. So the picture of science is one way by which Wittgenstein facilitates his doing something that he is also doing (for example in the sections on solipsism) when he uses the picture of the world as a whole in order to suggest that there is something outside the whole of what can be said, of what is the case. The picture of the world as limited, which is a picture that he wishes us to be able to discard at the end as one of the rungs of the ladder, is intended to suggest that there is something left out. This is also the spirit in which he writes in 6.41 that “The sense of the world must lie outside the world”. Science is taken along with such pictures as the world as a whole, “all happening and being-so” (TLP 1922: 6.41), the picture of language as “the totality of propositions” (TLP 1922: 4.001), which are used in order to suggest that there is something outside the totalities mentioned, which has no place of its own to stand, and to encourage in such a way the kind of dialectic of self disintegration indicated in 6.54.

But Wittgenstein is also doing another kind of elucidatory work in the *Tractatus*. The distinction I am introducing has also been remarked on recently by Diamond.¹⁹ Wittgenstein writes in 6.53:

The right method of philosophy would be this: To say nothing except what can be said, *i. e.* the propositions of natural science, *i. e.* something that has nothing to do with philosophy: and then always, when someone else wished to say something metaphysical, to demonstrate to him that he had given no meaning to certain signs in his propositions. This method would be unsatisfying to the other – he would not have the feeling that we were teaching him philosophy – but it would be the only strictly correct method.

Proposition 6.53 presents two distinct methods: the “correct” method refers to the mere saying what can be said. The second method – “and then always, when someone else wished to say something metaphysical, to demonstrate to him that he had given no meaning to certain signs in his propositions” – refers to the use of techniques of clarification with

19 See Diamond 2011.

which we erode what appears to us as a linguistic intention directed to a certain string of signs, in the manner shown for example in proposition 5.4733 (“‘Socrates is identical’ says nothing, because we have given *no* meaning to the word ‘identical’ as *adjective*”). These two methods should be distinguished from a third method, the one employed by the *Tractatus* when it wishes to follow our philosophical desire and encourages it to proceed with the formulations of various doctrines up to the moment in which we are willing to throw them away, like the ladder which has played its role. With this third method the *Tractatus* approaches a metaphysical desire by working on it from the inside, by imagining what it means to feel the desire, for example, to say something about the totality of propositions, the world as a whole, the self as a metaphysical counterpart of the world, and so on, up to the moment in which such a desire and the various doctrines to which it has led disintegrate.

What I want to suggest is that the notion of science as the reign of the thinkable is a picture functional to the third method, to this kind of dialectic. But the notion of science has a role in the first method as well. According to this method, speaking meaningfully as such has a philosophical function. It has one by showing that what we have said is not what we wanted to say. So examples of scientific discourses can be offered as a response to a certain kind of question, and by doing this we show that this is not what we wanted; offering them as a response shows how they miss altogether the point of our concerns. I want to add now that any talk of this kind, not just scientific discourse, but any talk which is guided by its subject matter, is not what we want. Such talk could be sorted out for example as ethical, religious, political, and so on. In the conversations with Waismann, Wittgenstein says that in thinking of value he would refuse anything which would be an explanation, or a theory of it.²⁰ This remark is helpful in order to understand what goes on in the *Tractatus* as well. In wanting to elucidate the kind of response to life that he feels is so significant, on the one hand he works on the contrast between such a response to life and anything that can be spoken about: the picture of the totality of propositions is of help in order to show that an ethical sense of life is not included here. But on the other he suggests another sort of work, the work of showing that any specific kind of talk which we can make sense of (a talk that has a content of its own) shows that our concern is left unexpressed.

20 FWN 1965: 12–16.

In this sense I mentioned the conversations with Waismann where the point is that any talk presented as a theory, that is, any talk shaped by a departmentalized sense of things, would not do. Wittgenstein's worries in the *Tractatus*, as in the *Lecture on Ethics*, are mainly addressed to what he calls (in the *Lecture*), "the scientific way of looking" ("The truth is that the scientific way of looking at a fact is not the way to look at it as a miracle").²¹ But his worries are more generally addressed to any way of looking and responding to things that is shaped by a departmentalized interest, by a given theory, a given doctrine.

So I think that the kind of criticism which the *Tractatus* treats unfolds into a variety of different criticisms. A central contrast and a central preoccupation in the *Tractatus* is that with science: the sense that the scientific view of things exhausts the entire interest for things is a great source of preoccupation in the *Tractatus* as it is in his later work. The *Tractatus* develops this issue through its paradoxical character. Just the fact that science occupies the entire world (science as the picture of the whole of what can be said) shows the character of what is left out (in a style that Czesław Miłosz has attributed to Dostoyevsky, Shestov and others and which signals a specific form of the response in modernity to the scientific and Newtonian revolution in our worldview).²² But this is not the only way we can develop the contrast made in the *Tractatus* between speaking about something and expressing an ethical view. Another way of establishing this contrast is that between an undepartmentalized responsiveness to things and a way of responding guided by a certain view, e.g., by a certain ethical or political view, or by a certain ideology. In this sense, science is one example of a number of talks that are shaped by a preconceived view, by what he calls, in the conversations with Waismann, a *theory*. A theory cannot capture the ethical, he says, and he adds that at the end of his *Lecture on Ethics* he had spoken in the first person: there is something very essential in this, he says. So his interest is for a personal responsiveness which is missed if we assume the attitude of theoreticians.

I said that the humanities offer an example of this kind of personal and undepartmentalized responsiveness to experience. We can argue that art, for example, in order to be enjoyed and appreciated requires an unguarded and undepartmentalized perspective, which brings a fully human response to what is portrayed and represented. I want to mention,

21 LE 1993: 43.

22 See Miłosz 1984.

in connection with this, one humanistic defense of film criticism offered by Robin Wood (in the context of a discussion of realism and ideology). He writes:

The richness of the work of Dickens and Hitchcock goes with their ideological helplessness: the stance outside their respective societies which alone would make possible a conscious ideological restructuring would automatically make *impossible* the richness, dependent as it is upon their role as entertainers within society, and upon a certain degree of trust of intuitive-emotional impulse. In art, one might argue, ideological awareness is bought at a terrible price. Admirable in some respect as one may find Godard's recent 'politicized films' – admirable in their rigour and astringency – one cannot but be aware of their relative thinness of texture, a thinness resulting from the necessity of total vigilance, every impulse, every idea, being ideologically scrutinized and 'vetted' before it can pass the censorship. The anti-Realist rigour of *Vent d'Est* is – and must be – above all a refusal to trust oneself, a refusal to make that surrender that Dickens and Hitchcock have made so freely.²³

Robin Wood speaks here about a kind of writing and film making (but what he says also concerns the experience of the reader and the film viewer) which expresses a capacity to respond to things, to participate in the events in other people's lives, which is not guarded and restricted by a given doctrine of what is important, what has value, what needs to be communicated, but which surrenders to the richness of experience and brings in one's whole self. Ideology in this context is a way of distorting the awareness of the world on the basis of what we assume has significance, it is a way of limiting what we can learn from experience, how we can respond to it. Our response is limited by a doctrine; the world comes to us, as it were, not as a whole but departmentalized. What counts as experience is spelled out in advance in a theory, and so we are not really trusting ourselves. As Wood writes, we refuse to trust our personal capacity of response.

I think the *Tractatus* is also concerned with elaborating this kind of criticism against ideological views of things, a view of, and a response to, things where we are guided by a given doctrine, a given body of knowledge, and we do not trust ourselves, our full capacity of transformation and response. The author of the *Tractatus* relies on such a capacity, he does not rely on someone who has a certain stock of beliefs, on someone with a certain specialized view of things, from the point of view of science or of a given doctrine about society and ethics. He relies instead

23 Wood 1976: 109–110.

on someone who has access to the full experience of language and therefore who can be brought through the various steps of the *Tractatus*. Conant has argued very convincingly about the fact that the *Tractatus* does not presuppose a theory of language, that its author relies on our linguistic capacities as human beings. He writes:

The *Tractatus* does not aim to show us that certain sequences of words possess an intrinsically flawed sense by persuading us of the truth of some theoretical account of where to locate 'the limits of sense'. [...] The *Tractatus* seeks to bring its reader to the point where he can recognize sentences within the body of the work as nonsensical, not by means of a theory that legislates certain sentences out of the realm of sense, but rather by bringing more clearly into view for the reader the life with language he already leads – by harnessing the capacities for distinguishing sense from nonsense [...] implicit in the everyday practical mastery of language that the reader already possesses.²⁴

Such capacities belong to our fully human responsiveness to language and people and it is such responsiveness that the *Tractatus* addresses in wanting his book to have ethical significance. So Wittgenstein thinks that a view which conceives the methods of science as the only way of approaching the world leaves out a human capacity to respond to the world. As he writes in 6.372:

So people stop short at natural laws as at something unassailable, as did the ancients at God and Fate. And they both are right and wrong. But the ancients were clearer, in so far as they recognized one clear terminus, whereas the modern system makes it appear as though *everything* were explained.

And also he thinks, even though this is not clearly spelled out in the *Tractatus*, that any way of responding to the world under the vigilance of a doctrine (to use Robin Wood's expression), under the vigilance of a *Lehre*, leaves out as well our human capacity to respond fully to circumstances – and this is what makes life problematic to us and which opens the dimension of concerns that the *Tractatus* wishes to address.

24 Conant 2002b: 423–424.

5.

I have sketched various ways in which we can work on the connection between the *Tractatus* and ethics. I want to refer now to a different sort of approach which takes its point of departure from the later Wittgenstein.

I will introduce the issue first by illustrating a way of elaborating the contrast between what we can learn from the *Lecture on Ethics* and what we can learn from the later Wittgenstein offered by Roy Holland. In “Is Goodness a Mystery?”, Holland writes that the absolute sense of value introduced in the *Lecture* and in the conversations with Waismann can be usefully contrasted with ways of elucidating value which bring in the role of explanation. Explanation can take different directions. Holland mentions Aristotle and Hume as two different examples. In the first case explanation takes the form of tying value to the explanation of the goals of living; in the second case it takes the form of approval as an activity backed up by criteria which are also explained against the background of a certain society. Holland calls these kinds of arguments “life-form arguments”. According to them, “value is whatever the way of life makes it”.²⁵ In life-form arguments value is explained “against a background of arrangements composed of a nexus of natural and institutional needs”.²⁶ Whereas the kind of value which Wittgenstein in the *Lecture* calls absolute cannot be so explained. Holland writes:

I should myself agree that it is often possible to mention separately certain elements or considerations the presence of which in combination has led to the placing of an absolute value upon some action for good or ill. For instance I might say, in the case of a deed that has struck me as wonderful, that it was not only the courage but even more the magnanimity of it; or in the case of another action I might say that there was an element of duplicity and also of meanness alongside the brutality. In speaking thus I should be substituting more specific terms of evaluation for the unspecific term with which perhaps I had begun. What I should be doing here would be distinguishing and characterizing certain forms or typical faces of good and evil. But I should not be making plain what makes them forms of good and evil, nor should I be offering any explanation of the nature of that of which these forms are forms – I should not be explaining this however much detail I were able to go into.²⁷

25 Holland 1980: 102.

26 Holland 1980: 102–103.

27 Holland 1980: 95.

I can give more descriptions of what I am seeing, of how I am reacting, but I am not giving any explanation of why such descriptions strike me as they do; I do not explain value in terms of something else, whereas this is what life-form arguments aim to do. Different as they are,

all versions boil down in the end to the position that placing absolute value upon something – [...] being struck by the absolute value of something – is the same as favouring it or otherwise supporting it (registering a choice, influencing someone in respect of it, and so on), against a background of arrangements composed of a nexus of natural and institutional needs.²⁸

One such version mentioned by Holland is that advanced by Elizabeth Anscombe. With Anscombe, Holland writes, Hume's scientism and atomism are gone. Anscombe rethinks deeply what a fact is and as a consequence she can argue that value can be placed in reality, among facts, if we don't take facts to be, as Holland writes, "all equally flat".²⁹ Holland writes that, on Anscombe's view,

the Humean inner centre of personal approval has now been externalized and expanded into a syndrome of shared proceedings in which actions have their institutionally chartered consequences and elicit institutionally appropriate reactions; so that the chains are formed and patterns of carrying on to which sense and a certain necessity attach. The sense and necessity are conceptual but the agents do not always conform – they do not always do as they should. [...] He may fail for accidental reasons or otherwise, but anyway it is no accident that what he should do is what it is. And not altogether dissimilarly, what you should do and what it is reprehensible of you to do after you have received your groceries, is non-accidentally what *it* is, given an appropriate background of life ways.³⁰

Holland concludes that the way Wittgenstein speaks about value in the *Lecture* (and in the *Tractatus* we can also argue) is entirely opposed to this. To take up Holland's example, if we are going to speak, say, of the value of truthfulness, life-form arguments would conclude

that it is impossible to conceive of a human life in which truthfulness would not be generally regarded as a virtue.³¹

But in this way we attach truthfulness to the world, to the "modicum of truth"³² needed in order for society to flourish and we don't capture the

28 Holland 1980: 102–103.

29 Holland 1980: 105.

30 Holland 1980: 106.

31 Holland 1980: 106–107.

32 Holland 1980: 107.

sense in which truthfulness is a value that cannot be measured against the needs of society; we transform truthfulness into a relative value and lose its absolute character.

Holland's views are very interesting as a comment on the *Lecture* (and also on the *Tractatus*, though he doesn't speak of it), but they are also interesting for what he says about life-form arguments. We might want to start saying for example that a version of a life-form argument, such as Anscombe's, may be taken as a way of learning from the later Wittgenstein, a way of picking up from Wittgenstein's lesson in order to criticize a significant line in analytic ethics. We may actually wish to argue that an entire family of views can be grouped together under both such features: they are life-form arguments of the very general sort described by Holland and they want to learn and inherit from Wittgenstein. I'd like to mention here the views held by authors such as Anscombe, Iris Murdoch, Stanley Cavell and Cora Diamond. They criticize, in very different ways, a significant line in modern and contemporary moral philosophy which has depicted moral thought as the operation of a few concepts cut off from the life form where they have a place. Such authors have wanted to learn from the later Wittgenstein how to investigate the "life with our concepts", to use Diamond's nice phrase.³³ In order to do this they argue that we need to investigate the framework which makes a certain moral thought what it is, liberating us from the impression that there is something like a notion of obligation, say, or a notion of choice and criteria of rightness set free from the larger structure of a conceptual framework.³⁴

How are these approaches related to the approaches that I connected to the *Tractatus*? Are these two departing ways of picking up from Wittgenstein and of learning from his lesson? Holland's point is that in order to explore the approach suggested by the *Lecture on Ethics* we can profit from the contrast that it establishes with life-form arguments. Yet I have suggested that life-form arguments of the general sort envisaged by Holland are arguments shaped by Wittgenstein's lesson: by the later Wittgenstein's views in the first instance. So if we put together Holland's views about the contrast between the understanding of ethics in the *Lecture* (and in the *Tractatus*, I add) and life-form arguments, and my suggestion that life-form arguments of the sort treated by Holland are a way of

33 See Diamond 1988.

34 I have commented on this tradition of thought in many places, among which in Donatelli 2012.

learning from Wittgenstein, there is a problem about working out from Wittgenstein's philosophy such incompatible views about ethics, which is also a problem about Wittgenstein's philosophy in the first place.³⁵ I will not discuss this here, but I will suggest a way of connecting what I have called with Holland life-form arguments and the sort of interest for ethics shaped by the *Tractatus* and its preoccupations.

In my view, we should appreciate the independent contribution to ethics offered by the two approaches, but we should also be able to see how they allow for the possibility of their being related in various ways. The possibility of establishing a connection is tied to the problem of what we do philosophically by working out a life-form argument, that is by furnishing the larger framework of moral thought. I think we can see how to draw connections between the two approaches in authors such as Murdoch, Cavell and Diamond. The connection is more difficult to make in Anscombe and I would want to argue that there are moments in her views where we can see how such a connection cannot be made at all.

As I said, the connection may be, or may not be, drawn according to the way in which we understand the task of investigating the framework of our concepts. In Anscombe's work we have roughly this picture: we do the conceptual work first and then we do ethics.³⁶ Now this is the kind of argument that Holland identifies as a life-form argument and that he sees as incompatible with Wittgenstein's sense of absolute value. But there is a different way of conceiving a life-form argument according to which doing the conceptual work (furnishing the framework that is lacking, where the moral considerations have a place) is an ethical achievement. This is Murdoch's picture for example. She connects her view of conceptual work, work on language, work which recovers the framework of our concepts, with personal transformation in a way which seems to be hospitable to the family of approaches I connected to the *Tractatus*.

35 The idea of incompatibility here goes well together with a view about the development of Wittgenstein's philosophy, according to which his later views don't leave room for what the *Tractatus* does with the notion of ethics. See e.g. Rhee 1990. See on this Donatelli 1998: 142–147.

36 See Anscombe 1981.

6.

I will describe sketchily how we may read Murdoch's views as an indication of how to draw a connection between the two approaches, but I won't show how Murdoch's views are tied to Wittgenstein's later philosophy.³⁷

In her essay "Metaphysics and Ethics", Murdoch elaborates an approach to ethics that she finds to be neglected in a significant line in modern and contemporary philosophy in her time (for example in authors such as R.M. Hare).³⁸ She goes back to what she calls the linguistic method in philosophy and to Wittgenstein's lesson which she finds was taken in the wrong direction, with a fascination for a few words like 'good' and 'right' and a lack of interest for the whole framework which makes language something alive for us. As she writes later in "The Idea of Perfection":

The living and radical nature of language is something which we forget at our peril.³⁹

The linguistic method in philosophy properly conceived allows us precisely to examine the various "conceptual or metaphysical frameworks within which morality may be placed".⁴⁰ She writes:

Philosophers have usually tended to seek for universal formulae. But the linguistic method, if we take it seriously, is by its nature opposed to this search. Logic, whatever that may be determined to be, has its own universality; but when we leave the domain of the purely logical we come into the cloudy and shifting domain of the concepts which men live by – and these are subject to historical change.⁴¹

So she can argue that:

Moral differences can be differences of concept as well as differences of choice. A moral change shows in our vocabulary. How we see and describe the world is morals too – and the relation of this to our conduct may be complicated.⁴²

37 For a larger treatment, see Donatelli 2010: 89–117.

38 Murdoch 1998a.

39 Murdoch 1998b: 326.

40 Murdoch 1998a: 68.

41 Murdoch 1998a: 74–75.

42 Murdoch 1998a: 72–73.

Moral differences are conceptual differences, in the sense that they refer to differences in the concepts which shape our lives: in which some concepts are significant and others are less so, and certain others have no place at all. This in turn is tied to what is alive in a certain time and place and to what is alive personally for someone. For example, the moral thought about procreation lies within the reflective resources that are available to us as we deepen and work our way into the conceptual dimension of what it is to give life to children, of what it is to be a woman, what is pregnancy and so on, and as we bring such concepts into contact with other concepts, such as for example responsibility and chance. Reflective resources in moral thought are internal to such conceptual dimensions. We can follow Murdoch in this manner and rethink ethical reflection as conceptual work which makes sense against a background of human activity as shown in the concepts which shape our lives. Murdoch's view of what moral thought is may be taken as an example of the general notion of life-form argument introduced by Holland; and it is one which would follow Wittgenstein in wanting to investigate the forms of life which make our thoughts and preoccupations bear all the weight they carry for us (to use an expression from Cavell's).⁴³

How is this interest in the larger conceptual framework related to the idea which Holland finds radically opposed to it, that of absolute value? There are various arguments running through Murdoch's writings which can be usefully connected to the issue here. I mention one argument that is found in the essays collected in her book *The Sovereignty of Good*. We find a similar kind of argument in Cavell's *The Claim of Reason* and something echoing it is present in some of Bernard Williams's papers collected in *Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline*.⁴⁴

Language, Murdoch holds, in itself public and shared, is also a personal matter. The rich sources of language, which we may forget if we only attend to certain public or scientific uses of it, are given by contexts of use characterized by both history and personality. She writes:

That words are not timeless, that word-utterances are historical occasions, has been noted by some philosophers for some purposes [...] but the full implication of this fact, with its consequences for the would-be timeless image of reason, have not, in our modern philosophy, been fully drawn.⁴⁵

43 Cavell 1979: 173.

44 On these connections see Donatelli 2011.

45 Murdoch 1998b: 324–325.

One consequence she draws from this is that the use of words is a human activity made by particular individuals in specific contexts. Concepts are brought within the self and they undergo a deepening process which weave them into the quality of one's perception and one's responsiveness to things. As she writes:

an individual is making a specialised personal *use* of a concept. Of course he derives this concept initially from the surroundings; but he takes it away into his privacy.

This activity, she argues, puts into question the existence of “the impersonal world of language”.⁴⁶ Thus she can hold that “except at a very simple and conventional level of communication there is no such ordinary world”,⁴⁷ because our hold on external reality and on a public and shared world, which is also the world of language, the shared forms of our living together, is always the result of personal energy and effort.

The idea of ‘objective reality’, for instance, undergoes important modifications when it is to be understood, not in relation to ‘the world described by science’, but in relation to the progressing life of a person.⁴⁸

In Murdoch's view, the work of establishing the conceptual connections which articulate a life form – for example the kind of connections Anscombe was interested in drawing as part of the conceptual work which she thought was needed in order to then get into the proper work of ethics –, such work is to be seen as the result of effort and personal transformation. In her view, moral reflection conceived as conceptual reflection, that is, as the laying out of the frameworks where our moral concerns have a life, requires the notion of the “progressing individual”. In such a perspective the notion of choice changes dramatically:

I can only choose within the world that I can *see*, in the moral sense of ‘see’ which implies that clear vision is a result of moral imagination and moral effort. [...] The moral life, on this view, is something that goes on continually, not something that is switched off in between the occurrence of explicit moral choices.⁴⁹

In this light, conceptual reflection is properly moral work, it cannot be conceived as work done independently from the kind of personal effort which corresponds to a change in our world:

46 Murdoch 1998b: 319.

47 Murdoch 1998b: 326.

48 Murdoch 1998b: 320.

49 Murdoch 1998b: 329.

Moral concepts do not move about *within* a hard world set up by science and logic. They set up, for different purposes, a different world.⁵⁰

I have briefly sketched Murdoch's arguments in order to suggest that, if we follow this line of thinking in ethics, we won't try to do what Holland sees that life-form arguments (e.g. Anscombe's) wish to do. Holland argues that life-form arguments attach ethics to the world in the following way: they attach it to something that stands by itself, divorced from our fully human and personal contribution. He sees this approach as standing in contrast with what Wittgenstein does with absolute value in the *Lecture*. But if we follow Murdoch we may envisage a different way of laying out a life-form argument. There is a background which gives life to our concepts, but in Murdoch's view the elucidation of such a background does not consist in the individuation of something which grounds our conceptual capacities in a way in which such ground, as it were, does the work by itself. The work of establishing the life of words is a personal achievement, it is a way in which we regain the world for ourselves. The search for conceptual connections which shape our life forms is not the search for features that we can lay down independently from ethical thinking itself. And such ethical thinking is tied to personal effort and personal transformation. There isn't something like the justification of our moral responses through the appeal to conceptual facts that are available in other terms than those exemplified by our personal and moral responses themselves.

Exploring the nature of this effort and of this personal transformation requires a notion of experience and responsiveness to life which is exemplified by the humanities. Murdoch writes:

There is only one culture, of which science, so interesting and so dangerous, is now an important part. But the most essential and fundamental aspect of culture is the study of literature, since this is an education in how to picture and understand human situations. We are men and we are moral agents before we are scientists, and the place of science in human life must be discussed in *words*.⁵¹

I take this to be the kind of interest for the human concern for life, the undepartmentalized concern for human beings and the world which the *Tractatus*, at the same time, appeals to and wishes to recover for us. Murdoch shows how the investigation of the forms taken by human life is the

50 Murdoch 1998b: 321.

51 Murdoch 1998b: 326.

investigation of such a human interest. Therefore, we see here a connection between the two approaches that I introduced as independent ways of learning from Wittgenstein. There is one understanding of the work of investigation of the frameworks of our concepts, their life forms – something that Wittgenstein teaches us to do in various ways in his later work –, which requires a sensibility to language and the world that – according to one reading of the book – is also the main concern of the *Tractatus*.

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