



Wittgenstein's analysis of Moral Values

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Abstract

When Wittgenstein speaks of ethical value, he employs the notion of value in a sense opposite to that of relative or instrumental value. Scientific research for example is primarily of instrumental value. Even though ultimately it affords us a better understanding of our world, its approach is essentially instrumental, for it consists entirely in searching for knowledge relative to those practices and aims that we consider useful and worthy. Conversely, there exists another realm of value that it would be absurd to call 'instrumental'. Such is the value that we recognize precisely because of its intrinsic qualities, i.e., a value that is not justified merely by what stands to be gained. Wittgenstein provides several examples such as: "feeling wonder at the existence of the world," "seeing a man's life as having a great value", and "feeling absolutely safe".

Key words: ethics, life, world, religion, metaphysics

Introduction:

The metaphysics of the *Tractatus* was realist (as opposed to nominalist), pluralist (as opposed to monist), and atomist. The simple objects that constitute the substance of all possible worlds include properties and relations of categorially distinct types. It is far from clear what kinds of things Wittgenstein had in mind, but they are arguably such items as minimally discriminable shades of colour, tones, and so on as well as spatio-temporal points in the visual field. Objects are simple (this is mirrored by the logical simplicity—that is, unanalysability—of their names). They have internal and external properties. Their internal properties constitute their (essential) form—their combinatorial possibilities with other objects (this is mirrored by the logico-syntactical combinatorial possibilities of their names). Different objects belonging to the same ontological category (for example, different shades of colour) have a common form

(namely, colour). The external properties of objects are accidental—their contingent concatenations with other objects to form actual states of affairs. A state of affairs is a possible combination of objects (for example, that such-and-such a spatio-temporal point is a certain shade of such-and-such a colour). The obtaining or non-obtaining of a state of affairs is a fact (hence there are positive and negative facts). Elementary states of affairs are 'atomic' or 'independent'—that is, each such state of affairs may obtain or not obtain while all other elementary states of affairs that obtain remain the same.

Metaphysics of value:

To speak of the 'metaphysics of value' is to entertain the possibility that value may be as much a part of the world as any other metaphysical category. Wittgenstein already upheld this view as early as the *Tractatus* period when he states that "ethics is transcendental" and "a condition of the world, like logic." For him, "ethics and aesthetics are one" which reveals his eudemonic conception of ethical value. "The beautiful is what makes us happy for the harmonious life is the happy life. Wittgenstein further emphasizes the metaphysical aspect of ethical value in his "Lecture on Ethics" where he speaks of certain ordinary personal experiences endowed with what he calls "absolute intrinsic value". According to him, such experiences concern "what is really important," "the meaning of life," or "why life is worth living" or "the right way of living." I will here explore the extent to which it might be appropriate, according to Wittgenstein, to describe (not explain) ethical value metaphysically. Ultimately, I will attempt to show that from his point of view, "forms of life" are transcendental determinants of meaning and, as such, the principal objects of ethical value.

Wittgenstein admits however, that these examples of value are not factual descriptions. The grammar of the word 'value' relates to that of the word 'good' which implies a certain utility toward a given end: "a good runner," "a good road," "this errand is not worth the trip" etc. However, when one utters such adjectives with purely ethical significance, they no longer represent a value toward a specific end. Adjectives expressing ethical value prescribe a way of being that transcends any factual description of the world. To say for example that "this man is good" does not express a perception that the person in question has proved himself useful toward specific practical goals in the way that "a good carpenter" would. Furthermore, one cannot factually "wonder at the existence of the world" since it would be impossible to imagine its absence. Hence, Wittgenstein states that all ethical statements run up against the bounds of factual and descriptive language, by employing words in purely metaphorical or allegorical ways.

According to Wittgenstein, the experience of ethical value then arises not from scientific observation, but from the aesthetic gaze, which is essentially constituted by a deep harmony between the individual and the world. For “that is what “being happy” means”. This at least partly explains why he was more interested in aesthetic questions than in scientific ones: In 1949 he writes: “I may find scientific questions interesting, but they never really grip me. Only conceptual and aesthetic questions do that. At bottom I am indifferent to the solution of scientific problems; but not the othersort”. Whereas the scientific approach resides in perceiving the world causally, i.e., in recording, measuring, and predicting phenomena, To see sub specie aeternitatis is hence not to perceive the object from within any chain of causal relation, i.e. in orientation toward certain desired or anticipated consequences. This is not to say that such a perspective is fixed outside the temporal as an eternal image. It is a perception “with” time and not “outside” of it. For the aesthetic gaze does not apprehend logical space through the temporal experience of applying its rules, but from the external point of view of its dynamic totality itself constituted by transformations extended in time. “If we take eternity to mean not infinite temporal duration but non-temporality, then eternal life belongs to those who live in the present”.

Wittgenstein’s view on Ethics:

The philosophical I is not the human being, nor the human body or the human soul with its psychological properties, but the metaphysical subject, the boundary (not a part) of the world. The human body, however, my body in particular, is a part of the world among others, among animals, plants, stones etc., etc. Wittgenstein is obviously not claiming that we should value stones as much as humans—only that each object shares and modifies logical space. Imagine a world without such objects as water, stones, ovens, or ‘still-lives’, and you imagine a completely different world. The perception sub specie aeternitatis is hence a perspective at once aesthetic and metaphysical. In order to better understand its symbolic function, we must acknowledge the distinction between intrinsic intentionality and derived intentionality.

Searle generally defines intentionality as the “capacity of the mind (or brain) to relate the organism to the world”. According to him, the essence of its philosophical import is the question of how the mind-brain projects intentionality on objects that are not intrinsically intentional. A smile, for example, is intrinsically intentional for its meaning is not imposed, but is instead constituted by its very image. That is to say, we make no reference to any conventional system of rules in order to interpret it. Conversely, the words on this page represent derived intentionality since their meaning seems conventionally established. Searle’s approach of reductionistic naturalism is motivated by the goal of discovering how the pre-linguistic mind

can go beyond the domain of intrinsic intentionality to assign derived intentionality that necessarily functions within a system of rule-based conventions. Without resorting to speculation on the existence of some biologically hardwired system of conventional ascriptions (Mentalese) one is hard-pressed to explain how it would be possible to invent a grammatical rule prior to the establishment of any system of syntactic convention from which the rule could obtain a role. But the chimera that this picture of intentionality contains is the presumption that all derived intentionality is a mental representation of a syntactical ascription. Wittgenstein hence draws our attention to the way in which children learn their first words.

How does an ostensive definition work? Is it put to work again every time the word is used, or is it like a vaccination which changes us once and for all? The representationalist error is the conception of language as ultimately determined by the apprehension of specific definitions and not by general behavior. A child, for example, does not have to entertain a system of rules to begin using language more or less correctly. Humans have a transformational capacity to replace our instinctual behavior with linguistic behavior. This should come as no surprise since all animal species inculcate myriad behaviors to their progenies, and most seem to succeed without the intermediary of syntactical convention. Human behavior transforms itself gradually into a linguistic behavior through which it becomes possible to live so to speak conceptually. Without language, a member of a non-linguistic species can only apply what it has learned through the manipulation of the external world. It cannot conceptually internalize its behavior. If a cat can, for example, imagine chasing a mouse even before carrying it out, this imaginary experience is devoid of any intrinsic import. Only the authentic chase is of any interest. Conversely, linguistic behavior includes the capacity to act within the imagined realm with as much or even more importance as acting within the physical realm. For as Wittgenstein says, “words are also deeds”.

Language is initially nothing more than a tool that serves to multiply our behavioral possibilities. At this stage, learning language is not so much a representation of imposed conventions as it is an actualization of behavior eventually becoming internally practicable. The human species possesses the capacity to replace certain primordial reactions with verbal ones. These new reactions do not describe the old ones, but simply replace them often enough that it later becomes possible and useful to exercise a behavior mentally, without having to engage with the external physical world. Over time, the child replaces its physical world with a linguistic one. As Wittgenstein puts it, “light dawns gradually over the whole”. Eventually, the behavioral repertoire becomes sufficiently embedded in experience that it becomes a complete reflection of the external world. Hence Wittgenstein says, “man is the microcosm”. Ultimately, that is what linguistic

“mastery” looks like. From there, purely derived intentional ascriptions (ostensive or other) become possible through the intermediary of the maternal language.

Each time a new linguistic behavior is acquired in the pre-linguistic infant, it is a replacement and not a description. Language replaces behavior and does not describe it. The same is true of most linguistic practices acquired secondarily. When a person becomes proficient in a foreign language, its sentences are no longer treated as derived intentionality. Usage embeds itself gradually into linguistic behavior rather organically. As Wittgenstein points out, when we recognize a word or even a letter of the alphabet from a language we have mastered, we perceive a kind of “face” imbued with a certain physiognomy. We do not perceive a description of a given fact, and do not therefore experience the representation of a mere conventionality. Instead, we have the experience of an intentionality that is entirely intrinsic. Consequently, the representationalist conception of ordinary language as essentially constituted by derived intentionality is completely illusory. As a result, the problem of knowing how derived intentionality arises in the acquisition of maternal language disappears.

The physiognomy of the symbol is what could be called its logical space, and explains why it is appropriate to speak of logical space in aesthetics. The logical space of every sign and symbol is constituted by a physiognomy that is necessarily intrinsic. The aesthetic gaze *sub specie aeternitatis* hence concerns the intrinsic intentionality of the object contemplated. This analysis of the distinction between intrinsic and derived intentionality shows us that derived intentionality does not depend upon any mysterious mechanism of mental codification. It is simply a term denoting the descriptive aspect of language. Language obviously provides the capacity to assign more or less arbitrary meanings, i.e., derived intentionalities. However, such activities are only useful in purely artificial conventions such as scientific vocabulary and Morse code. And even these examples rest upon a background of ordinary linguistic intrinsic intentionalities embedded within our linguistic experience of the world. We know that the aesthetic gaze concerns intrinsic intentionality—on this Searle seems to concur since its contents are not imposed by the intermediary of any conventional ascription. The aesthetic image constitutes its own meaning. To perceive fear, disgust, joy, happiness, or serenity is simply to perceive its very image. With respect to either a painting, a melody, or a facial expression, no translation is needed. The impressions are directly received more or less immediately and spontaneously. The will does not intervene to invent the criteria according to which one judges beauty or goodness. It is true that one may often try to change one’s mind on a given subject, but such attempts always appeal to certain attributes of an indifferent world.

Hence, our sentiments of approval, sympathy, revulsion, etc. are not acts of will. This immediate quality thus confers a great deal of autonomy upon all our aesthetic experiences and explains why Wittgenstein says: "It is impossible to speak about the will insofar as it is the subject of ethical attributes".

Likewise, the experience of ethical value is also characterized by apprehensive immediacy. We perceive it when contemplating an object for its intrinsic and not its instrumental value. It thus generally concerns a living organism or a representation of the living. For life, being highly transformative, is the paradigmatic example of ethical value. Wittgenstein hence draws an important ontological distinction between the living and the nonliving. For example, he states that "the concept of a living being is as indeterminate as that of a language" and invites us to compare inventing a game, inventing a language, and inventing a machine. A living being is something that the aesthetic gaze in a certain sense "listens to" in an entirely distinctive way. His student, Rush Rhees, offers the example of admiring the soaring of an eagle, drawing attention to the fact that we would immediately lose interest if it turned out to be in fact a remote-control glider. We might still watch it from curiosity, but we should not in the same way "listen to it".

This is an important ontological difference revived from the Middle Ages by Kant, and more recently by Eugene Hargrove—that of existence preceding essence. A non-living object such as a coin, as Kant rightly points out, contains no property that is not contained in our concept of it. So the physical existence of the coin is irrelevant to its properties and to predicates expressing those properties. Hence, its essence is statically delimited by its conceptual identity, and the simple fact of existing in the world adds absolutely nothing to its attribute of being a coin. Its essence in this way precedes its existence. However, a living object exceeds the concept we have of it. A living object necessarily transforms itself within its spatio-temporal existence. It is the evolutionary result of continuing historical development. Therefore, its existence in this way precedes its essence. This is why it is possible to speak metaphorically of species, cultures, languages, games, and of ecological and geological objects as living. Since their existence precedes their essence, we can consider for example the Octopus, the French culture, the English language, the game of chess, the Amazon Rainforests, the North Polar Ice Cap and the Matterhorn as living objects of transcendental epistemic value. However, a stone fallen from Mount Rainier, a chess-piece and a Matisse painting cannot be considered even metaphorically as living, since their existences in no way precede their essences. The mere fact of their continued spatio-temporal existence adds nothing to their essential identities as the objects just described. An inanimate part of an object that is either literally or metaphorically alive therefore cannot, as a physical object, be of any ethical value. If for example, a

Matisse painting does acquire great ethical value, this is strictly the result of its becoming representative of a significant part of human experience within a living culture. When a work of artistic genius is finally recognized as such, it is the popular culture that has in time transformed—not the work itself. One therefore “listens” to living phenomena in an especially singular way. When we admire a sunrise, a soaring eagle, a song, a dialogue, a poem, or a story we are in a sense “listening” to life as it emerges through its perpetual transformative processes of action and interaction. Wittgenstein hence reminds us that all art is founded on this very concept:

The miracles of nature:

One might say: art shows us the miracles of nature. It is based on the concept of the miracles of nature. (The blossom opening out. What is marvelous about it?) We say: “Just look at it opening out!” Life fills us with wonder because it is essentially undetermined. This is why Wittgenstein adds that we can never really know the future: It could only be by accident that a man’s dreams about the future of philosophy, art, science, should come true. What he sees in his dream is an extension of his own world. PERHAPS what he wishes (and perhaps not), but not reality. You can’t build clouds. And that’s why the future you dream of never comes true. Before airplanes existed people dreamed of airplanes and of what the world with them would look like. But just as the reality was not at all like what they dreamed, so we have no reason to think that the future will really develop in the way we dream now. For our dreams are covered in tinsel like paper hats and fancy dress costumes (1980: 41). The proliferation of life and meaning unfolds inch by inch, as new actions and interactions manifest themselves in various new and more or less unpredictable contexts. Behavior in general naturally adapts itself to the contexts in which it arises. The immediate impressions that forge our experience of the world are rather automatic. “You can’t build clouds”. Hence one does not listen to life with the ear of ratiocination. Wittgenstein returns at several occasions to this kind of immediacy in which our impressions of living objects arise. He points out that the observation of another person, and of another species in particular, implies a degree of uncertainty, but this uncertainty is as much instinctive as it is philosophical. There are very particular cases: ones in which the inside seems hidden to me. And the uncertainty that expresses itself this way is not a philosophical uncertainty. The uncertainty whether a fly feels pain is philosophical; but couldn’t it also be instinctive? And how would that come out? Indeed, aren’t we really uncertain in our behaviors towards animals? One doesn’t know: is he being cruel or not? For there is uncertainty of behaviour which doesn’t stem from uncertainty in thought.

One kind of uncertainty is that with which we might face an unfamiliar mechanism. In another we should possibly be recalling an occasion in our life. It might be, e.g., that someone who has just escaped the fear of death would shrink from swatting a fly, though he would otherwise do it without thinking twice about it. Or on the other hand that, having this experience in his mind's eye, he does with hesitancy what otherwise he does unhesitatingly. The uncertainty Wittgenstein highlights here regarding animal consciousness reveals that our perceptions are also projections. How much consciousness we ascribe, for example, to other persons, animals, or extra-terrestrials will depend on how much their behavior reflects our own. This is epistemically ironic because it keeps us from having any clear criteria for judging if a being with a completely strange physical appearance and incoherent behavior is in fact conscious. Indeed for Wittgenstein, we would have no way of attributing consciousness (or significance) to the behavior of any being whose natural history differed sufficiently from ours. Ultimately, as he reminds us at several occasions, our ability to ascribe mental states to other minds varies by their degree of affinity with us: If a lion could talk, we would not understand him. Only remember that the spirit of the snake, of the lion, is your spirit. For it is only from yourself that you are acquainted with spirit at all. (...) The same with the elephant, with the fly, with the wasp. But the question arises whether even here, my body is not on the same level with that of the wasp and of the snake (and surely it is so), so that I have neither inferred from that of the wasp to mine nor from mine to that of the wasp. What is essential for us is, after all, spontaneous agreement, spontaneous sympathy. Instinct comes first, reasoning second. Our ordinary experiences of living objects are not inferred through intellectual calculation. They are pre-theoretical. Each recognizable form of life subsists in relation to a given behavioral context toward which we have an immediate instinctive sensibility. In addition, the distinctive character of each form of life continually develops through its spacio-temporal existence, and is therefore never ultimately defined. Hence, each form of life is an indefectible source of knowledge and meaning. We can now begin to see the full ontological significance the concept of "form of life" holds in Wittgenstein's general conception of ethical value: "What must be accepted, the given, is—so one could say—forms of life." Forms of life are the principle objects of ethical value, for the extinction of a form of life constitutes an irrevocable loss of future knowledge and meaning.

Conversely, the loss of one famous impressionist painting for example does not impact the very logical space through which the painting obtains its meaning and value. If however, the entire impressionist movement had been wiped out in its early years by the plague, that certainly would have modified the

whole of logical space through which certain aesthetic interpretations are made possible and others impossible. Hence, the destruction of any form of life, literally or metaphorically speaking, inexorably compromises the totality of logical space. The same can therefore be said of languages and cultures when for example certain socio-economic factors systematically shut-out small businesses or reduce the average 14 year old's vocabulary by more than half over 50 years—as has now been the case in this country by some accounts⁷ Such a culture of “inarticulacy” would be a form of life not much worth preserving. Its intrinsic value as a source of knowledge and meaning (however minimal in this case) does not give it a kind of sovereign ethical status in the face of any and all competing claims. Had the leaders of the Nazi movement died a year before coming to power, we should of course have been grateful for their absence. Hence, the massive rate of extinction we are collectively inflicting on biological, linguistic, and cultural diversity is, in effect, what we might well go so far as to call a form of metaphysical decimation, or even genocide.

Forms of life thus both determine and constitute what we consider most valuable. Each of our ordinary and extraordinary experiences of ethical value functions according to a particular natural history through which we have gained a common sensibility to any phenomenon that is also a result of that same historical fabric. We are hence the products of a temporal continuum populated by innumerable forms of life in which we have a natural disposition to find aesthetic, ethical, and epistemic import. It is therefore not at all surprising that we have a general tendency to value the preservation of biological species for their own sake.

Wittgenstein's account of the interdependence of aesthetics, meaning, and value hence provides a strong theoretical basis for environmental ethics. It demonstrates that the ecological and biological wealth of this planet is not only a reservoir of scientific information, but also a perpetual source of inspiration from which language, art, culture, and human experience in general become enriched. Imagine all the various forms of life that must have sparked myriad new ways of perceiving and describing the world. How would human experience and communication have evolved without an environment rich enough to amaze, astound, shock, and bedazzle us time and time again? Take but for example the transformation of the caterpillar into butterfly, the soaring eagle, the swim of the penguin, the two thousand year old sequoia, the salmon run, the blossom opening out. Imagine that half of the species known today had never existed, and how much human experience, culture, and language would have in turn become impoverished. Now imagine that some fifty percent of the world's flora and fauna disappear over the next century, as Stuart Pimm and many other conservation biologists now predict.

Conclusion:

Wittgenstein sees the aesthetic approach as characterized rather by a perception of the object as symbolic representation. Unlike scientific observation, the aesthetic gaze does not focus on any particular aspect, attribute or function of the perceived object. It is essentially concerned with the imponderable accords uniting the object with the world seen *sub specie aeternitatis*, that is, from the standpoint of eternity: The work of art is the object seen *sub specie aeternitatis*; and the good life is the world seen *sub specie aeternitatis*. This is the connection between art and ethics. The usual way of looking at things sees objects as it were from the midst of them, the view *sub specie aeternitatis* from outside. In such a way that they have the whole world as background. The most profound and staggering irony is that several generations from now, our progeny would remain forever ignorant of the value of all they never had the chance to know. It's important to notice that not everybody who is a metaphysician call themselves that any more. Some version of the explanation about "red" can be found in a text book on neuroscience or cognitive psychology, both of which claim to be science and not metaphysics. Wittgenstein is often regarded as being both positivist and behaviorist; positivist in rejecting all metaphysics, and behaviorist in denying inner human life.

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