

WITTGENSTEIN'S LECTURE ON ETHICS

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B.A., North Carolina State University, 1968

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A MASTER'S THESIS

submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree

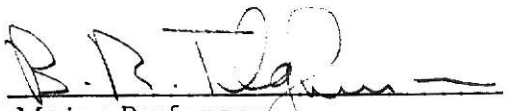
MASTER OF ARTS

Department of Philosophy

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY  
Manhattan, Kansas

1970

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To  
Ben, Rich, Chuck, and Cecil,  
and to  
the Sun, the Moon, the Stars, and Phoebe,

THANKS

## INTRODUCTION

Sometime between September 1929 and December 1930, Wittgenstein prepared a lecture on Ethics and delivered it in Cambridge to the society known as "The Heretics." The version of this lecture discussed in the present essay is the one published in The Philosophical Review, January 1965, which was compiled from shorthand notes made by Friedrich Waismann during and after conversations with Wittgenstein and Moritz Schlick in 1929 and 1930.<sup>1</sup>

In this lecture Wittgenstein makes several moves which are open to criticism. First, he gives a stipulative definition of "Ethics," whereby only judgments of what he calls "absolute value" are to be counted as ethical judgments. Second, he says that such judgments do not and can not state any "fact," but gives the term "fact" a very technical definition of his own. Third, he stipulates that language can only be used to state "facts," as he defines this term, from which it follows that "Ethics," as he defines it, can not be expressed verbally. Ethical discourse, as Wittgenstein puts it, is nonsensical.

In this essay we will examine Wittgenstein's premises for concluding that Ethics is not expressible in language. Our emphasis will be on his theory of language, which, as we will try to demonstrate, paves the way for his conclusion about Ethics. The theory of language in question is that

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<sup>1</sup> "Wittgenstein's Lecture on Ethics," Philosophical Review (January 1965), p. 3. Henceforth "WLE".

developed in the Tractatus-Logico-Philosophicus,<sup>2</sup> and will be criticized in the light of the insights about the workings of the language that the later Wittgenstein presented in his Philosophical Investigations.<sup>3</sup>

The criticism of Wittgenstein's argument, that Ethical discourse is nonsensical, will be concise and to the point. Not all of Wittgenstein's premises will be studied to show how they are wrong, if they are. Nor will any attempt be made in this essay to show that Ethics is an important enterprise grounded in a way of life, and that there is a language-game in which ethical judgments play a role.

Finally, another argument will be formulated to arrive at the same conclusion that Ethical discourse is nonsensical. This argument will be based on some of the views about mysticism that Wittgenstein presents in the Tractatus: that there is a connection between a man's having a feeling of absolute value, or ethical feeling, and a man's having a mystical insight; that the mystical insight can not be put into words; and that, therefore, the ethical, like the mystical, can not be put into words.

The main criticism that will be presented against this argument will be an attempt at showing that the mystical is not beyond the power of words

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<sup>2</sup>Tractatus-Logico-Philosophicus, L. Wittgenstein, translation by D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness. Henceforth Tractatus. Quotations from this book will be acknowledged with a "#" sign and the number of the passage quoted.

<sup>3</sup>Philosophical Investigations, L. Wittgenstein, translation by G.E.M. Anscombe. Henceforth Investigations, or P. I. Quotations from this book will be acknowledged with a "§" sign and the number of the section quoted.

to describe. On the other hand, no attempt will be made to question or probe the authenticity of that experience.

Thus the task of this essay will be to show that Wittgenstein's arguments for the nonsensicality of Ethics are primarily based on his views about the nature of language and his views about the nature of mysticism.

# WITTGENSTEIN'S LECTURE ON ETHICS

## A Definition of Ethics.

Wittgenstein begins his lecture on Ethics by saying that he will adopt the explanation of that term which Professor Moore has given in his book Principia Ethica: "Ethics is the general inquiry into what is good." Then, right away, Wittgenstein says that he wants to use the term Ethics in a slightly wider sense ". . . which includes what I believe to be the most essential part of what is generally called Aesthetics."<sup>4</sup> To make his audience see as clearly as possible what he takes to be the subject matter of Ethics, Wittgenstein presents a number of what he takes to be more or less synonymous expressions, each of which could be substituted for the above definition, hoping that, in looking through the row of synonyms, his audience will be able to see the characteristic features they all have in common and, thus, understand what he means by Ethics.

Now instead of saying "Ethics is the enquiry into what is good" I could have said Ethics is the enquiry into what is valuable, or, into what is really important, or I could have said Ethics is the enquiry into the meaning of life, or into what makes life worth living, or into the right way of living. I believe if you look at all these phrases you will get a rough idea<sup>5</sup> as to what it is that Ethics is concerned with.

The connection that Wittgenstein sees between what is valuable,

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<sup>4</sup>"WLE," p. 4.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 5.

Aesthetics, Ethics, and "the enquiry into the meaning of life" is not made clear in his lecture. Thus, since his very first remarks, we are not sure we understand what he wants to say. Unfortunately, this uncertainty will remain with us throughout his lecture and this essay. We will try to make some of his remarks clear, but many more will have to be left for others to investigate.

### The Trivial and the Ethical.

The expressions or synonyms he has just given, Wittgenstein says, can be used in two very different senses: the trivial or relative sense, and the ethical or absolute sense. To illustrate the trivial or relative sense, Wittgenstein says that if, for instance, one says that this is a good chair, he means that the chair serves or satisfies a certain predetermined purpose; similarly, if one says that this is the right road, he means that it is the right road relative to a certain goal. Used in this way these expressions do not present any problem, Wittgenstein says; however, their use in the ethical or absolute sense is different and, he would add, more problematic. To illustrate this difference, Wittgenstein gives another example:

Suppose that I could play tennis and one of you saw me playing and said "Well, you play pretty badly" and suppose I answered "I know, I'm playing badly but I don't want to play any better," all the other man could say would be "Ah then that's all right." But suppose I had told one of you a preposterous lie and he came up to me and said "You're behaving like a beast" and then I were to say "I know I behave badly, but then I don't want to behave any better," could he then say "Ah, then that's all right"? Certainly not; he

would say "Well, you ought to want to behave better." Here you have an absolute judgment of value, whereas the first instance was one of a relative judgment.<sup>6</sup>

The main difference between judgments of relative value and judgments of absolute value, Wittgenstein says, is this: "Every judgment of relative value is a mere statement of facts and can therefore be put in such a form that it loses all the appearance of a judgment of value."<sup>7</sup> Judgments of absolute value, on the other hand, are not statements of fact. Indeed, ". . . no statement of fact can ever be, or imply a judgment of absolute value."<sup>8</sup> To emphasize the importance of this difference, Wittgenstein says that if all the facts of the world were to be recorded in a big book, then this book would contain the whole description of the world including all relative judgments of value and all true scientific propositions. However, "this book would contain nothing that we would call an ethical judgment or anything that would logically imply such a judgment."<sup>9</sup>

#### Words Can Only Express Facts.

Why does Wittgenstein say that judgments of absolute value or ethical judgments could not possibly be found in any description of the world? His answer is that ethical judgments purport to describe absolute

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 5. This is Wittgenstein's way of restating the well known difference between a hypothetical imperative and a categorical imperative.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., pp. 5-6.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

facts that have supernatural meaning and sense, but these "supernatural facts" cannot be described in the language, for the language can be used only to describe natural facts. Wittgenstein stipulates that this is so in the following passages:

Our words used as we use them in science, are vessels capable only of containing and conveying meaning and sense, natural meaning and sense.<sup>10</sup>

There are no propositions which, in any absolute sense, are sublime, important, or trivial.<sup>11</sup>

Therefore, Wittgenstein concludes, no ethical fact could be contained in a book in which all the facts of the world were to be recorded. It is impossible to write a book containing "ethical facts," or to write a "science of Ethics," because, as he maintains:

. . . nothing we could ever think or say should be the thing. . . . Ethics, if it is anything, is supernatural and our words will only express facts; as a teacup will only hold a teacup of water and (sic) if it were to pour a gallon over it.<sup>12</sup>

The argument that Wittgenstein has just presented to establish that Ethics cannot be expressed in the language is not laid out for all of us to see. The premises on which he bases his conclusion are not clearly presented, but are only briefly referred to. Furthermore, Wittgenstein seems to have two different arguments in mind, but fails to present them separately.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

The first argument is primarily based on his view of the nature of language. The second argument is based on his view of the nature of mysticism. Considering that the latter argument shares some of the premises of the first one, we shall omit its presentation and discussion until the last section of this essay.

### Wittgenstein's First Argument.

Wittgenstein's first argument, primarily based on his view of the nature of language, can be presented in this schematic form:

- (1) "Ethics" denotes judgments of absolute value;
- (2) No judgment of absolute value, or ethical judgment, can be or imply any statement of fact;
- (3) Language can only be used to state facts, where the term "fact" is given a very technical definition; therefore,
- (4) No "ethical fact" or "science of Ethics" can be expressed verbally--Wittgenstein's "Ethics" is beyond the power of words to describe.

It can readily be noticed that the premises on which Wittgenstein bases his argument are open to criticism: premise (1) is a very limited definition of Ethics; while premises (2) and (3) put a questionable limit on what can be said in the language. That Wittgenstein's definition of Ethics is a very peculiar and limited one can best be shown simply by following his reasoning in a more specific example he gives to explain what he has in mind when he says that ethical judgments are about absolute value. His second and third premises, however, in which he gives a questionable view of language, are more difficult to lay out and to refute. Our major effort

at criticizing Wittgenstein's first argument will be presented against his view of language. His view of what Ethics is concerned with could just as forcefully be criticized. However, Wittgenstein himself warns us since the very beginning of his lecture that he will use the term "Ethics" in a very special sense. Thus we can limit our efforts to noticing that his definition of Ethics is indeed a very special one.

### Ethics and Absolute Value

Wittgenstein says that when he wants to make clear to himself what he has in mind or what he is trying to express when he feels tempted to use expressions such as "absolute good," "absolute value," etc., he recalls cases in which he would certainly use these expressions. Thus when he wants to fix his mind on what he means by absolute or ethical value, it always happens that the idea of one particular experience presents itself to him which therefore is, in a sense, his experience par excellence and this is the reason why, in presenting his lecture, he uses this experience as his first and foremost example. Continuing, Wittgenstein says:

I will describe this experience in order, if possible, to make you recall the same or similar experiences, so that we may have a common ground for our investigation. I believe the best way of describing it is to say that when I have it I wonder at the existence of the world. And I am then inclined to use such phrases as "how extraordinary that anything should exist" or "how extraordinary that the world should exist." I will mention another experience straight away which I also know and which others of you might be acquainted with: it is, what one might call, the experience of feeling absolutely safe.

I mean the state of mind in which one is inclined to say "I am safe, nothing can injure me whatever happens."<sup>13</sup>

It must be noticed that in this passage Wittgenstein has made an important shift from talking of "Ethics" in the sense of ethical judgments to Ethics<sub>1</sub> in the sense of a special kind of experience which one feels tempted to describe as being of "absolute value," or as wondering at the existence of the world, and feeling absolutely safe. Wittgenstein does not justify this shift from "Ethics" to Ethics<sub>1</sub>. Perhaps he meant to say that "Ethics," in the sense of ethical discourse, uses the absolute sense of value judgments to describe experiences of absolute value, or Ethics<sub>1</sub>. If this is so, then "Ethics" or ethical discourse is limited--by definition--to the description of a special kind of experience, thereby ruling out all discourse involving questions of right and wrong, moral duty and obligation, etc., which are part of the concept of Ethics as it is normally understood.

#### The Rules of Syntax.

Wittgenstein never says in his lecture that he has some special views of his own about what makes sense to say in language. However, many of the remarks he makes in this lecture are rather obscure until they are seen in the context of the theory of language he expounded in his previous work, the Tractatus. Let us follow Wittgenstein as he continues his lecture, and let us see how he slowly becomes involved in some of the consequences of holding the Tractatus view of language.

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

Having given a description of two experiences that, as he says, are the best examples for explaining what he means by "absolute value," Wittgenstein adds, "Now let me consider these experiences. . . . And there the first thing I have to say is, that the verbal expression which we give to these experiences is nonsense! If I say 'I wonder at the existence of the world' I am misusing language."<sup>14</sup>

The claim that the expression "I wonder at the existence of the world" is nonsensical due to its misusing the language, it must be noticed, is the same kind of claim that Wittgenstein makes when he says that it is impossible to write a book containing "ethical facts," or when he says that "Ethics, if it is anything, is supernatural and our words will only express facts; . . . ." This is the claim that for a proposition to make sense it must follow both the grammatical and the logical syntaxes of the language. That is, a proposition makes sense if it is expressed in accordance with the syntactical rules of grammar and if it is formed in accordance to the syntactical rules of logic--if its logical form represents correctly the possible "fact" it purports to describe.<sup>15</sup> In the case of the proposition "I wonder at the existence of the world" Wittgenstein argues that it violates both syntaxes and is, therefore, nonsensical on those two accounts.

The Locution "I wonder at. . .".

First, Wittgenstein argues for the nonsensicality of the expression

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<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>15</sup>See next section.

"I wonder at the existence of the world" by saying that it violates the proper use of the locution "I wonder at. . .", thus violating the grammatical syntax of the language. Wittgenstein begins by affirming that it makes perfectly good sense to say that I wonder at something being the case if I can imagine it not to be the case. For example, it makes sense to say that I wonder at the size of a dog which is bigger than any I have ever seen before, because I could conceive of a dog of a normal size at which I would not wonder. Similarly, it makes sense that one may wonder at the existence of a house when, having imagined it had been demolished, one sees it again. Now, unlike these two examples, it does not make sense to say "I wonder at the existence of the world" because it is not possible to imagine the world not existing: what would it be like to imagine nothing? If, on the other hand, this expression were used to mean that I wonder at the world around me being as it is rather than in some other way, then there would not be any problem. Even the statement "I wonder at the sky being blue" would make sense if it were to be interpreted as stating that I wonder at the sky being blue rather than, say, clouded. However, if I say "I wonder at the sky being whatever it is," then I am misusing the language, for I am not allowing for any possible alternative situations for the locution "I wonder at. . ." to describe. Wittgenstein claims, in other words, that the expression "I wonder at the existence of the world" violates the grammatical rule according to which the locution "I wonder at. . ." is meaningfully used only when the dots

following "at" can be replaced by some possible situations that could be alternatives of the one being described. If nothing can possibly be offered as an alternative to the situation being described, then the locution is being misused, and nothing meaningful is being said.

#### A Grammatical Mistake.

The above argument can be criticized on the grounds that Wittgenstein is giving an erroneous account of the proper use of the locution "I wonder at. . .". It is simply not the case that such a locution is meaningfully used only when some possible alternatives can be offered to the situation being described. Wittgenstein, it must be remembered, was not a native speaker of the English language, thus a grammatical mistake on his part should not be thought of as being impossible or too surprising.

The grammatical mistake that Wittgenstein seems to make is that of confusing some of the characteristics of the locution "I wonder about. . ." with those of "I wonder at. . .". If I say that I wonder about something being the case, it means that I am not certain about some aspects of it. If I say that I wonder about the size of a certain dog, for example, I might mean to say that I wonder whether the dog is one or two feet long, etc. While if I say that I wonder about something being the case, and I do not mean to say that I am not certain about some aspects of it, then, to use the language properly, I should say that I wonder at something being the case. In the example of the dog, this means that if I am not wondering about its size, in the sense that I am not certain whether it is one or

two feet long, but am rather wondering at its size, in the sense that I am surprised by it, then, to use the language properly, I should say that I wonder at the size of this dog rather than I wonder about the size of this dog. Thus, in the case of the locution "I wonder about. . .", it seems possible to come up with a general rule of syntax whereby it is claimed that I can meaningfully say that I wonder about something being the case only if I can imagine it not being the case, or as being different than the way it is being described. On the other hand, when I say that I wonder at the size of a certain dog, I am simply saying that I am surprised by its size, regardless of whether it may be one or two feet long, etc., and do not need to imagine any other possible alternatives.

Wittgenstein's claim, that it makes sense to say that I wonder at the size of a dog which is bigger than any I have ever seen before because I could conceive of a dog of a normal size at which I would not wonder, can be shown to be erroneous simply by noticing that it makes perfectly good sense for someone who has never seen a dog before to be amazed by the size of a dog when he finally sees one and say that he wonders at the size of that dog. This is to say that the locution "I wonder at. . ." functions in the language in such a way that it does not require imaginable alternatives filling the dots following "at" in order for the locution to make sense.

Wittgenstein, so it seems, makes the mistake of thinking that the above mentioned syntactical rule that was said could apply to the locution

"I wonder about. . ." applies also to the locution "I wonder at. . .". Thus he sees the expression "I wonder at the size of this dog" on the model of "I wonder about the size of this dog," and says that the expression "I wonder at the size of this dog" is meaningful because I could conceive of a dog of another size. Because of this he sees the expression "I wonder at the existence of the world" on the model of "I wonder about the size of this dog," and says that the expression "I wonder at the existence of the world" is not meaningful because I cannot conceive the existence of nothing. Wittgenstein seems to think that the locution "I wonder at. . ." is only a special case of the locution "I wonder about. . ." and that both operate in the language in the model of "I wonder about. . .". He therefore arrives at the mistaken conclusion that one can say he wonders at something being the case only if he can imagine it not being the case.

#### Seeing the World as a Miracle.

Having established that Wittgenstein's analysis of the locution "I wonder at. . ." is most likely based on a mistaken interpretation of a rule of grammatical syntax, one wonders about the relevance of that analysis for his thesis that Ethics is beyond the power of words to express. A logical solution to this puzzle seems to be that Wittgenstein is offering a supporting argument for his thesis. That is, if he argues as he does that Ethics is beyond language to describe, and if he argues as he does that the expression "I wonder at the existence of the world" is an attempt at describing a feeling of absolute value--which by virtue of his definition is

the subject matter of Ethics--then, to avoid a blatant contradiction in his thesis, he must prove that the expression "I wonder at the existence of the world" fails to be descriptive or to make any sense. He attempted to prove this by arguing that the locution "I wonder at. . ." is being mis-used due to its violating a rule of grammatical syntax, which we established not to be the case. Now he attempts the same by arguing that the expression "I wonder at the existence of the world" violates the rules of logical syntax.

Continuing his analysis of the expression "I wonder at the existence of the world," Wittgenstein says that perhaps this expression is a description of ". . . the experience of seeing the world as a miracle."<sup>16</sup> But a miracle, he adds, could not be described by language, for language, like the scientific way of looking at a miracle, robs the miracle of its miraculous quality or makes its description non-miraculous. Wittgenstein's own example might be useful here:

Take the case that one of you suddenly grew a lion's head and began to roar. Certainly that would be as extraordinary [and miraculous] a thing as I can imagine. Now whenever we should have recovered from our surprise, what I would suggest would be to fetch a doctor and have the case scientifically investigated and if it were not for hurting him I would have him vivisected. And where would the miracle have got to? For it is clear that when we look at it in this way everything miraculous has disappeared. . . .

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<sup>16</sup>"WLE", p. 11.

The truth is that the scientific way of looking at<sup>17</sup>  
a fact is not the way to look at it as a miracle.  
 [emphasis added]

This passage suggests that the "scientific way of looking at a fact" is simply to look for a natural explanation. However, it is possible that Wittgenstein had also in mind the theory of language that he had expounded in the Tractatus. In the light of that theory of language, it is possible to suggest that by "the scientific way of looking at a fact" Wittgenstein means the analysis of a fact into its atomic components. If this is done for a "miraculous" fact, no component would be found to stand for the "miraculous element" in the "miraculous" fact. Thus whenever we analyze a "miraculous" fact we find that its miraculous quality escapes any possible description and that all we are left with is a non-miraculous fact. In other words, just as a miracle ceases to be seen as such when we investigate it like any other fact, so our experience of seeing the world as a miracle, or wondering at the existence of the world, ceases to be seen as a miraculous experience or a source of wonder when we use language to describe it. This is so because language, when it follows what Wittgenstein calls "the scientific method of looking at a fact," can only say that which is analyzable into its atomic components.<sup>18</sup> Therefore, the miraculous cannot be captured or

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., pp. 10-11.

<sup>18</sup> Wittgenstein's reasons for assuming this is so will be easier to understand in the light of the remarks about language he makes in the Tractatus. See next section.

expressed by language. ". . . we cannot express what we want to express and . . . all we say about the absolute miraculous remains nonsense."<sup>19</sup>

From this follows Wittgenstein's conclusion that the expression "I wonder at the existence of the world" is nonsensical in that it fails to say what the experience of seeing the world as a miracle is like.

We Cannot Say What We Cannot Say.

The argument that Wittgenstein presents to prove that the expression "I wonder at the existence of the world" is nonsensical seems to run very smoothly to its obvious conclusion. However, it has a major flaw: it contains the same questionable premise of the argument in support of which it is being presented. As we have seen, Wittgenstein's conclusion, that Ethics is beyond language to describe, was based on the premise that one could do only one thing in language and this was to describe natural "facts," and on the premise that "Ethics" consisted of absolute or super-natural "facts". In his new argument about the nonsensicality of the expression "I wonder at the existence of the world," Wittgenstein makes the same moves. He says that this expression purports to describe a supernatural "fact", but it must fail to do so, for language can only describe natural facts. The expression fails to be descriptive of the experience which it is supposed to express in language, because no expression in the language can state a supernatural "fact". The experience must be nonsensical because it pretends to state an ethical fact. It could, perhaps,

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<sup>19</sup>"WLE", p. 11.

state a non-ethical fact, but that was, supposedly, already ruled out by Wittgenstein's analysis of "I wonder at. . .".

It seems obvious that Wittgenstein has not presented a convincing argument for the nonsensicality of the expression "I wonder at the existence of the world." Yet, he is not willing to recognize that that expression stands in blatant contradiction with his thesis that Ethics, or judgments of absolute value, is beyond words. Whenever he finds some possible evidence for the absurdity of his premises, he declares these evidences to be "nonsensical." An example of this attitude is found in the following passage. Foreseeing a possible criticism of his view on what counts as a fact, Wittgenstein says that someone might argue this way:

. . . if certain experiences constantly tempt us to attribute a quality to them which we call absolute or ethical value and importance, this simply shows that by these words we don't mean nonsense, that after all what we mean by saying that the experience has absolute value is just a fact like other facts and that all it comes to is that we have not yet succeeded in finding the correct logical analysis of what we mean by our ethical and religious expressions.<sup>20</sup>

Naturally, Wittgenstein objects to such a proposition, although the detailed reasoning underlying his objection is simply not elaborated in this lecture. He says that if such an argument is presented to him, then he suddenly realizes:

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<sup>20</sup>Ibid., p. 11.

. . . not only that no description that I can think of would do to describe what I mean by absolute value, but that I would reject every significant description that anybody could possibly suggest, ad initio, on the grounds of its significance.<sup>21</sup>

Then he adds that in attempting to put into words the experience which he thought of when he wanted to "fix his mind on" what he meant by an absolute value he was actually attempting the impossible:

that is to say: I see now that these nonsensical expressions were not nonsensical because I had not yet found the correct expressions, but that their nonsensicality was their very essence. For all I wanted to do with them was just to go beyond the world and that is to say beyond significant language. My whole tendency and I believe the tendency of all men who ever tried to write or talk Ethics or Religion was to run against the boundaries of language. This running against the walls of our cage is perfectly, absolutely hopeless. Ethics so far as it springs from the desire to say something about the ultimate meaning of life, the absolute good, the absolute valuable, can be no science. What it says does not add to our knowledge in any sense. But it is a document of a tendency in the human mind which I personally cannot help respecting<sup>22</sup> deeply and I would not for my life ridicule it.

Once more Wittgenstein says that judgments of absolute value are not statements--they do not state facts--and that, consequently, what they say, if they do say anything, does not add to our knowledge in any sense, for, in his view, only factual statements add to knowledge. It seems useless, at this point, to keep arguing that the expressions

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<sup>21</sup> Idem.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., pp. 11-12.

Wittgenstein considers to be nonsensical are in fact perfectly intelligible and contradict his thesis about the impossibility of stating ethical facts. What is needed now is to investigate more closely his theory of language and to show that it arbitrarily sets limits on what can meaningfully be said.

## SENSE AND THE TRACTATUS

### Words, Names, and Facts.

There is a rich historical background for the views about language that Wittgenstein presents in the Tractatus. Language, according to St. Augustine, for example, consists of words which acquire a meaning by standing for various things. Words are names and have a meaning in virtue of their naming something. On this view, to know a language is to know what all its words denote. If a word does not denote anything, then it is not a word at all; it is only a sound, a meaningless sound. Later philosophers found that an exception had to be made for words like "not", "and", "if", "or", which were finally said to function in language as logical constants. However, this exception was not seen as undermining the theory that words are names.

Continuing from this philosophical view of language, Wittgenstein arrived at the view expressed in the Tractatus that the structure or logical form of language mirrors the structure of reality, and that, consequently, to know how to use language is to know how to picture or describe facts--not simply to name things. This implies that if the logical form of a statement is distorted, that is, if it does not mirror the logical form of some possible fact, then the result will be a nonsensical series of words.

"The world," Wittgenstein says, "is the totality of facts, not of things." (#1.1) As an illustration of this, assume that there are only two

things, a watch and a table such that the watch is on the table. The proper description of this world would not be that there are two things, a watch and a table, but that there are two things having the relation of one being on top of the other. That is, the proper description of this world includes not only the objects but also the relation in which they stand with respect to each other--and this state of affairs is what Wittgenstein means, at this point, by a "fact". If, on the other hand, we were to say that the world is simply the totality of things, then we would be giving an incomplete description of the world, for we would have left out how things are arranged. Thus, in this example of the watch and the table, Wittgenstein would say that there is a fact: the fact that the watch is on the table. However, such an everyday state of affairs is not a "fact" in the more technical definition of that term that Wittgenstein gives later on in his analysis.

This more technical sense of what a "fact" is is stipulated by Wittgenstein in another set of propositions in which he says: "What is the case--a fact--is the existence of states of affairs." (#2.) Where a "state of affairs" is a "fact" that in itself does not consist of facts; it consists of a configuration of simple and irreducible objects, or what Wittgenstein calls substances. These simple entities, Wittgenstein specifies, must not be identified with ordinary objects like tables, and stones, for these are complex objects made up of objects which are perhaps complex themselves, but ultimately reducible to simple objects. Unfortunately, Wittgenstein never makes clear what these ultimate, simple objects, or substances are.

Language Mirrors the World.

The next group of propositions in the Tractatus that interest us refer to language. Language, Wittgenstein says, is a picture or model of the facts. "We picture facts to ourselves." (#2.1) "A picture is a model of reality." (#2.12) That is, in using language we do not simply name objects but represent the objects named as standing in a certain arrangement which is referred to as a fact. From this it follows that there are in language elementary propositions that correspond to states of affairs or elementary facts. "The simplest kind of proposition, an elementary proposition, asserts the existence of a state of affairs." (#4.21) In other words, Wittgenstein says that language consists of sentences, and that sentences picturing a state of affairs are elementary sentences. But how can a proposition picture a state of affairs? Wittgenstein's answer is that ". . . what makes the linguistic picture a picture of what it depicts is the similarity of structure,"<sup>23</sup> or logical form: ". . . the logical form of the statement and the logical form of the fact are identical."<sup>24</sup> In his own words, "What any picture, of whatever form, must have in common with reality, in order to be able to depict it--correctly or incorrectly--in any way at all, is logical form, i.e. the form of reality." (#2.18)

A statement or elementary proposition, Wittgenstein says, pictures

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<sup>23</sup>Wittgenstein and Modern Philosophy, J. Hartnack, p. 22.

<sup>24</sup>Idem.

a possible fact,<sup>25</sup> and it is said to be true or false according to whether the state of affairs it depicts exists or not. "In order to tell whether a picture is true or false we must compare it with reality." (#2.223) That is, we must see whether the state of affairs depicted in the statement corresponds to reality. However, we cannot decide if a statement is true unless we understand its sense, or know what it means, and it cannot possibly have any meaning if its logical form does not mirror a possible reality. Thus language is characterized by its logical form; and insofar as propositions depict reality, the logical form of language is governed by that of reality. Nothing can be said except by means of this form. "Indeed, language is capable only of talking about--describing, expressing, characterizing--what is real, or what is factually and logically possible. What lies outside the realm of the logically possible cannot be. . . ."<sup>26</sup> thought nor described; for a thought is a logical picture of a fact and, therefore, describable.<sup>27</sup>

#### The Limits of Language.

Wittgenstein claims that the limits of language and of the world coincide. By this he means that "the logical limits of language are the limits both of what can be said and what can be thought, and therefore of

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<sup>25</sup> Cf. Tractatus, 2.201.

<sup>26</sup> J. Hartnack, op. cit., p. 36.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Tractatus 3., 3.001, 3.01, 3.02, 3.03.

all that can be said to exist."<sup>28</sup> In his words:

The limits of my language mean the limits of my world. (#5.6)

Logic pervades the world: the limits of the world are also its limits. So we cannot say in logic, 'The world has this in it, and this, but not that.' For that would appear to presuppose that we were excluding certain possibilities, and this cannot be the case, since it would require that logic should go beyond the limits of the world; for only in that way could it view those limits from the other side as well.

We cannot think what we cannot think; so what we cannot think we cannot say either.. (#5.61)

Thus anything that can be said is about facts. One can describe a situation or another (or a fact or another), but one can say nothing about the universe as a whole, for the universe is the totality of facts. A fact is a concatenation of simple objects while "the universe" is the sum total of those objects and, thus, all the facts, not a new fact in itself. Therefore, it would be paradoxical to maintain that the totality of facts is itself a fact.<sup>29</sup>

To say that no proposition can be about the universe as a whole is the same as saying that no thought can be about the universe as a whole, "and to wish to think such a thought is to wish to think what cannot be thought and to know what cannot be known"<sup>30</sup> Thus, Wittgenstein adds,

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<sup>28</sup> J. Hartnack, op. cit., p. 38.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Russell's Theory of Types.

<sup>30</sup> J. Hartnack, op. cit., p. 39.

the many efforts that some metaphysicians make in attempting to give a description of the universe as a whole are doomed to a failure. It is nonsensical to discuss, think about, or describe the universe as a whole, because language cannot logically be employed for that use. Thus, no metaphysical system can be meaningfully expressed. The metaphysical insight is not possible.

### The Tractatus and Ethics.

We saw earlier that Wittgenstein arrived at the conclusion that Ethics is supernatural. That remark, at that time, had to seem rather cryptic. We see now, from what he says in the Tractatus, that absolute value is outside the world, and that judgments of absolute value, by virtue of being judgments about that which is outside the world, are judgments about the world as a whole. Therefore, they are, in this sense, supernatural. Wittgenstein says in the Tractatus that:

All propositions are of equal value. (#6.4)

The sense of the world/or absolute value/ must lie outside the world. In the world everything is as it is, and everything happens as it does happen: in it no value exists--and if it did exist, it would have no value. If there is any value that does have value, it must lie outside the whole sphere of what happens and is the case. For all that happens and is the case is accidental. What makes it non-accidental cannot lie within the world, since if it did it would itself be accidental. It must lie outside the world. (#6.41)

And so it is impossible for there to be propositions of ethics. Propositions can express nothing that is higher. (6.42)

It is clear that ethics cannot be put into words.  
 Ethics is transcendental.  
 (Ethics and aesthetics are one and the same.)  
 (#6.421)

Ethics cannot be put into words, Wittgenstein says, because absolute value, in contrast to relative value, cannot be a fact in the world. Absolute value must lie outside the world, for all that happens or is in the world is accidental and relative, not absolute. Thus, insofar as judgments of absolute value are judgments about that which is outside the world, then they must be about the world as a whole. But we have just seen that, according to Wittgenstein's view of language, no proposition can be about the universe as a whole. Therefore, Ethics, as Wittgenstein defines it, cannot be talked about. But this conclusion is obviously guaranteed by Wittgenstein's imposing a limit on what can be said in the language. To show that his setting such limits was an arbitrary move will be our next task.

## SENSE AND THE INVESTIGATIONS

### Wittgenstein Vs. Wittgenstein.

Unlike the Tractatus, where the earlier Wittgenstein had said that a meaningful proposition was made up of the names of objects picturing a possible fact, the Philosophical Investigations presents a view of language in which, according to the later Wittgenstein, many language-games are possible, some of which serve to describe, to assert, to report, and so on. In the Tractatus a word is meaningful if, and only if, it is a name or logical constant. In the Investigations, on the other hand, a word is not necessarily a name; a word can be used as a name, but it can be used in numerous other ways as well, and names can name or function in many different ways. Thus, in the Investigations a word is meaningful if it has a use, or plays a role in a language-situation or language-form--what Wittgenstein calls a language-game.

Even though, in the Investigations, Wittgenstein does not directly repudiate the views about language that he had expounded in his earlier work, the Tractatus, nonetheless, he does prove as being mistaken the theory of language held by St. Augustine--a theory which is very similar to the one Wittgenstein had presented in the Tractatus.

### The Naming-Game.

According to Wittgenstein, St. Augustine thought that he had discovered the essential characteristic of all languages, namely that all words

have a meaning and that the meaning of each is what it stands for. According to this theory, a language (or language-game) is learned by understanding which objects are signified by the different words that a given language (or language-game) contains. But this, Wittgenstein adds, is true of only one special language-game, and is not true of all language-games. To suppose that it is true of all language-games is to make a mistake made by ". . . someone trying to explain the word 'game' by saying that it means moving objects in a certain order about a board; and this of course would be true only of board games, and not of the many other kinds of games there are."<sup>31</sup>

If a language, as St. Augustine would have it, consists of a naming-game, that is, if a language is mastered by learning the names of different things there are to be named, then "the mastery will be complete when one has learned all the names by ostensive definition--by pointing to a thing and at the same time speaking its name."<sup>32</sup> This, however, is denied by Wittgenstein who argues that when a person has learned what the various words of a language name, he has not yet learned how to use them.

### Words Have Many Uses.

To illustrate the above, Wittgenstein says in the Investigations that it is possible to imagine a primitive language-form where there would

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 65. Also Cf. P.I. § 3.

<sup>32</sup> Idem.

be some reason for maintaining that the meaning of a word is the thing to which it refers. "It is conceivable that the conversation between a skilled workman and his mate might consist of names only, that is, the names of the tools needed by the workman and handed to him by his mate every time he mentions one of them."<sup>33</sup> The question Wittgenstein wants to ask here is: Has the mate learned this language-game as soon as he knows the names of the tools? Certainly not. He has been trained to respond to the call "hammer" by picking up this object. "But what does he suppose the workman means when he says, 'Hammer'? Does it mean that he is repeating the name to himself? Or is he uncertain, and asking the mate to reassure him that this is really a hammer? Or does it have some further and completely different meaning?"<sup>34</sup> There can be many possible contexts accompanying the uttering of the word "hammer". Thus, there can be many possible meanings for the word "hammer", only a few of which have been suggested above.

The mate who knows only what the word "hammer" stands for, without knowing how to distinguish between a possible context and another, has no way of understanding what the workman means when he says, "hammer". He has not learned the language-game simply by knowing that the word names this particular tool. In this specific game, the context determining the meaning of the term "hammer" consists of the fact

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<sup>33</sup>J. Hartnack, op. cit., p. 64.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., p. 65.

that the workman wants this particular tool to be handed over to him so that he might proceed with his work. To understand the setting, or context in which the word "hammer" is spoken is vital to the understanding of the language-game being performed, indeed, it is part of the language-game. The same criticism can be made of St. Augustine's account of how language works.

St. Augustine thought that one learns a language by being given ostensive definitions of all its words. But this is the same as being trained to respond to the call of different words, just like the mate had been trained to respond to the call "hammer" by picking up a particular object. Consequently, just like the mate, St. Augustine had learned what the various words named, but he had not yet learned how to use them. That is,

. . . he had not yet learned to give or understand orders, to make or understand requests, to ask or understand questions, and so on. Just as learning the names of playing cards or of the pieces in a chess set is not learning to play bridge or to play chess, so to know the names in a language is less than learning how to speak it. A language has been learned only when one can play the various language-games that make up the language concerned; that is to say, when one has learned how to use words for such purposes as asking questions, describing things and events, giving orders, making requests and promises, evaluating, condemning or naming.<sup>35</sup>

In the Augustinian fashion, to give and learn names--the naming language-game--was the logical basis of the other language-games, just

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 66.

as learning the names of playing cards is a basis for learning to play the various card games. This amounts to saying that one can learn to speak only by giving and memorizing names; and teaching or learning names is done by ostensive definition. But is it logically necessary to begin with such definitions? "According to Wittgenstein, the answer must be no, since understanding ostensive definitions already presupposes a certain knowledge of language."<sup>36</sup>

Words in a Context.

Suppose, for instance, I want to give an ostensive definition of the word "red." Pointing to a red object, I say, "This is red," or "This color is red," or just, "Red." This definition will be understood by someone who knows what the word "color" means--someone, a foreigner, perhaps, who has asked to be shown what color "red" is. But if he doesn't already know what the word "color" means, then he will be none the wiser by being told "This color is red." He may equally believe that "It is red" means that the shape of the object is what is referred to as red, or that this kind of object is called "red"; or perhaps that "red" is the name of this particular object; or he may think that it means something about the aesthetic qualities of the object. "But if he does not know the meaning of any of the words 'color', 'common name', 'proper name', or 'aesthetic', and is therefore unfamiliar with any of these concepts, it is logically impossible

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<sup>36</sup>Ibid., p. 67.

for him to understand the word 'red' in any of the ways mentioned."<sup>37</sup>

To understand the word "red," one must understand how it is being used, the context in which it is being spoken, the language-game which is being performed. This is the basis of Wittgenstein's assertion that ostensive definition presupposes a certain knowledge of the language. The naming language-game cannot be a basis for other language-games, but, on the contrary, itself presupposes other language-games. One has to know the "language" in order to be able to name--where by "language" he means a people's form of life.<sup>38</sup> This is to say, a language-game is understood only if one is aware of the many different activities in which people engage themselves, for the language-games of a particular language are expressions of a people's form of life. Therefore, it is only in contexts, or ways of life, that words and sentences have a use and, hence, are intelligible.

#### The Investigations and Ethics.

From the criticism that the latter Wittgenstein makes in the Investigations of the earlier view about language he had expressed in the Tractatus, we can see that whereas in the Tractatus it is nonsensical to say anything about the universe as a whole, for no possible state of affairs can logically be pictured by any such proposition, in the Investigations, on the other hand, for a sentence containing a reference about the universe as

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<sup>37</sup>Ibid., p. 67.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid., p. 68. Also, Cf. P.I. §19, 30.

a whole to make sense all that is needed is a context, a form of life or language-game in which such a sentence plays a role and is, therefore, understood.

Applying the findings of the Investigations to what Wittgenstein says in his lecture on Ethics, we see that his objections to the meaningfulness of the expression "I wonder at the existence of the world" are ill-founded. All that that expression needs to make sense is an adequate context. One such context is provided by Wittgenstein himself when he describes the setting in which such an expression could be made, namely, when one is undergoing the experience of seeing the world as a miracle. Thus, there is a language-game where this expression plays a role: It is embedded in a form of life, a form of experience that occurs in the lives of many human beings.

We can also apply the findings of the Investigations to Ethics, in the sense of ethical discourse involving questions of right and wrong, moral duty and obligation, etc., and say that it is an important enterprise grounded in a way of life, and that there is a language-game in which ethical statements play a role. And even if one were to accept Wittgenstein's peculiar definition of Ethics, i.e. judgments of "absolute value," by which he means expressions like "I wonder at the existence of the world," we can still say that such expressions--regardless of whether they are ethical expressions or not--do play a role in the language and are, therefore, intelligible.

# WITTGENSTEIN'S VIEWS ABOUT MYSTICISM

## The Ethical and the Mystical.

We can now go back to Wittgenstein's lecture on Ethics and discuss his second argument for the nonsensicality of Ethical discourse. This second argument, even more than the first, is not explicitly presented by Wittgenstein. Indeed, only its conclusion is presented: "Ethics, if it is anything, is supernatural. . .".<sup>39</sup> But here and there in his lecture and in the Tractatus, Wittgenstein makes some remarks about the ethical and the mystical such that it is possible to imagine he saw a specific connexion between the two, a connexion that reinforced his belief in the inexpressibility of ethical discourse, without denying the reality of an experience he had a genuine respect for. In some notes that Friedrich Waismann took of a personal conversation he had with Wittgenstein after the lecture on Ethics, Wittgenstein is quoted as asserting:

. . . Thrusting against the limits of language?  
Language is not a cage.

I can only say: I don't belittle this human tendency; I take my hat off to it. And here it is essential that this is not a sociological description but that I speak for myself.

For me the facts are unimportant. But what men mean when they say that "The world is there"<sup>40</sup> lies close to my heart.

We see then that Wittgenstein faced a dilemma: on the one hand he

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<sup>39</sup>"WLE", p. 7.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid., p. 16.

knew from experience that the world could be seen as a miracle, as a marvel, as a cause of surprise; but, on the other hand, he could not allow himself to say the things he felt tempted to say. He was torn between his own experience of having felt that the world was a miracle and his philosophical analysis of the expression "I wonder at the existence of the world."

Wittgenstein wanted to acknowledge the reality of his own experience, yet, on the grounds of his philosophical analysis, he wanted to deny the sensibility of the verbal expressions that he felt tempted to use to describe that experience. He could not accept that the experience of "seeing" the world as a miracle could be described as being a rational insight. For, in that case, it would be a thought that could be pictured in the language, a thought that could be used for metaphysical speculations about what the world as a whole is or is not, thus stepping over the limits of what can be said and contradicting his theory of language. Therefore, Wittgenstein opted for the only way out he thought was available to him: to "see" the world as a miracle is to feel that the world is a miracle. It is to have the kind of feeling that is felt by someone who has a mystical insight, for only the mystic can "see" the world as a miracle, not by "seeing" it with an intellectual or rational insight, but by feeling it that way. In

Wittgenstein's words:

To view the world sub specie aeterni is to view it as a whole--a limited whole.  
Feeling the world as a limited whole--it is this that is mystical. (#6.45)

To "see" the world as a miracle, just like to "see" the world as a whole, is to feel it as a miracle. And this, according to Wittgenstein, is to have a mystical insight. Thus, according to Wittgenstein, when one says, "I wonder at the existence of the world," he is describing not the fact that the world is a miracle, but the fact that he feels as if the world were a miracle. This feeling is connected to the mystical and, like the mystical, it can be revealed, or felt, but not put into words:

There are, indeed, things that cannot be put into words. They make themselves manifest. They are what is mystical. (#6.522)

Having seen how Wittgenstein connects a man's experience of feeling the world as a miracle to the mystical, it is now possible to suggest that this mystical quality is also the connection that Wittgenstein sees between this feeling and what a man ought to do--to the extent that a man's ethical ought's are religiously given (and to the extent that mysticism is the ground of religion.) Also, it is now possible to understand why Wittgenstein thought that the expression "I wonder at the existence of the world" fails to be an adequate description of feeling the world as a miracle: if the experience is connected to the mystical, then, like anything mystical, it cannot be adequately described in the language.

#### Wittgenstein's Second Argument.

Wittgenstein's second argument, primarily based on his view of the nature of mysticism, can be presented in this schematic form:

- (1) "Ethics" denotes judgments of absolute value;
- (2) When one makes a judgment of absolute value, he is describing his "having a feeling" rather than his "having a thought" about the world;
- (3) There is a connection between having a feeling of absolute value and having a mystical insight;
- (4) The mystical insight can be revealed, or felt, but not put into words; therefore,
- (5) The ethical, like the mystical, can be revealed, or felt, but not put into words. Wittgenstein's "Ethics" is beyond language to describe.

We have already seen that Wittgenstein's first argument for the nonsensicality of ethical discourse had to be rejected on the basis of his analysis of the workings of language. He had arbitrarily set too narrow a limit on what could be meaningfully said in the language. Is his present argument, that the ethical and the mystical are connected and share the uncommunicability of the latter, a more convincing one? No, indeed, it is not.

The first premise of the argument, Wittgenstein's definition of Ethics, has already been discussed in our earlier analysis of his first argument and was found to give a very peculiar and limited view of the subject matter of Ethics. The second premise, that in making a judgment of absolute value one is describing his "having a feeling" rather than his "having a thought" about the world, is open to criticism on two accounts: first, the distinction between feeling and thought was obviously made by Wittgenstein to avoid contradicting the Tractatus theory of language, thus

it is a distinction "tailored" to satisfy a questionable need; second, it is questionable, if at all intelligible, whether such a distinction between "having a feeling" and "having a thought" is more than a grammatical difference, rather than a difference that, as Wittgenstein seems to suggest, is based on some factual experience. The third premise, that there is a connection between having a feeling of absolute value and having a mystical insight, is something that one must either accept on faith or reject for lack of it. Wittgenstein simply says that there is such a connection. Our most sympathetic interpretation of this premise is that, to the extent that a man's ethical ought's are religiously given, and to the extent that mysticism is the source of religion, then it is possible to conclude that there is a connection between a man's ethical feelings and his mystical ones. The fourth premise, that the mystical insight can be revealed, or felt, but not put into words, is the one premise which we will study the most carefully, for it entails the conclusion of Wittgenstein's argument. If we can convincingly show that the notion of mystical uncommunicability is standing on quicksand, then Wittgenstein's last argument for the nonsensicality of ethical discourse will, once more, be found to be unsatisfactory.

#### The Silent Dimension.

The claim that the mystical insight can be revealed, or felt, but not put into words is a claim that mystics often make. . . and then write volumes describing their experiences. There is a vast amount of literature written by famous mystics in which they describe at length the several

stages of the mystical experience. But this description, the mystic says, is only tentative and unsatisfactory, for there are no words that could express the experience itself. Similarly, in his lecture on Ethics, Wittgenstein says that language fails to convey the experience of absolute value or, for example, the experience of feeling the world as a miracle. But what is it that is not being expressed in the language? What is the limitation that the language imposes upon us? Is it that "it cannot convey the experience" of feeling the world as a miracle? But, obviously, it is not the function of language to convey a feeling; at most it can do other things like describing the feeling, by comparing it to other feelings; or it can be used to tell someone how to go about reaching a state of mind which will facilitate the occurrence of the experience of feeling the world as a miracle. What is it that is missing?

When one has the experience of feeling the world as a miracle and says, "I wonder at the existence of the world," or says, "I feel awestruck," or "I am speechless," he is not saying that he has not yet found the right words to give an adequate description of his feelings. His expressions are not a cry of helplessness at the failure of language to communicate what he feels. By saying that he is speechless, or awestruck, or in wonder, he is giving a description of the way he feels. To say, "I am speechless," is not to say that language "fails" me--it is to describe. Thus, even though, the expressions one uses seem to indicate that he lacks words, he is, actually, giving a possible description of the way he feels.

But the mystic insists that such descriptions are only tentative and unsatisfactory. Something is being left out, but, what? The element which, according to the mystic, is being left out in any description of a mystical experience is what the experience points to.

A mystic might want to argue that it is not enough simply to report the feeling one is having when he feels or sees the world as if it were a miracle. To say "I am speechless," or "I wonder at the existence of the world," is not the end of the matter. He might want to argue that some feelings can be interpreted as signals: feeling a pain in the stomach at a certain time might indicate that supper time is near; feeling sleepy might indicate that I had too many drinks, etc.; similarly, feeling awestruck or astonished at the existence of anything might indicate. . . what? The point is that, according to a mystic, it is possible to interpret the experience of seeing the world as a miracle as pointing to something that concerns the nature of reality. This is, indeed, what Wittgenstein seems to have in mind when he says:

Man has the urge to thrust against the limits of language. Think for instance about one's astonishment that anything exists. This astonishment cannot be expressed in the form of a question and there is no answer to it. . . .<sup>41</sup> But the tendency, the thrust, points to something.

Saying the Unsayable.

Some mystics have chosen to turn metaphysicians and to start

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<sup>41</sup>Ibid., pp. 12-13.

speculating about the nature and the implications of their experiences. They are free to do so. There are no logical reasons why they should not speculate, and perhaps build a new philosophical system that might help us see or notice relationships we had not noticed before. On the other hand, some other mystics insist, à la James, that "Our vocabulary is inadequate," that language lacks the words they need to describe the experience properly. To these mystics we would ask why do they not introduce a new vocabulary? What would have to be the case for them to be able to do so? Or we would ask a simpler question: For what are we lacking words?<sup>42</sup> Significantly, the mystic never answers these questions. Then one feels more and more inclined to suspect that there is nothing at all that the experience of seeing the world as a miracle is supposed to point to, and one begins to look for other ways to solve the puzzle.

What are we doing when we say "I see the world as a miracle"? Are we pointing to some mysterious feelings that might possibly be a clue to the nature of reality? Or are we doing something else? The locution "seeing as. . ." is revelatory of what is being done in saying "I see the world as a miracle." This locution helps select a perspective, or viewpoint, from which to regard the matter under consideration; it is like offering a model through which a relationship is to be discovered. In this use, the locution "seeing as. . ." functions in the language as a filter,

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<sup>42</sup>Cf. P.I. §610.

so to speak, that permits one to focus his attention on a specific aspect or another of the object of his concern. In saying, "I see the world as a miracle," for example, no fact is being reported, in the sense of no new object or situation is being seen, but an explanation is being given as to the kind of activity one is involved in at the moment, namely, in regarding the world not as a common, well known object, but as a surprisingly, and intriguingly new one. An illustration of this situation might be helpful here: Imagine a man who, after having felt very depressed and, perhaps, having even thought of committing suicide, reestablishes an interest in life. It would make perfectly good sense for this man now to say that he sees the world as if it were a new experience to him, as if the world were a miracle. For he has become aware, strangely or newly aware, of the fact that the world exists, and he marvels and wonders about it--awestruck, speechless. But being speechless is an integral part of the experience. He is not lacking words. He does not need them. And this is all there is to say.

From the above analysis we can conclude that the mystical experience is not beyond the power of words to describe. Mystics have described it in many possible ways.<sup>43</sup> The element of wonder, or speechlessness of a mystical experience should not be interpreted as indicating that words are lacking, for to say "I am speechless" is to describe. Not

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<sup>43</sup> Cf. St. John of the Cross, St. Theresa of Avila, etc.

only can a mystic describe his experience, he can even interpret it or speculate about it if he pleases to do so. The mystical is not unexpressible and, consequently, Wittgenstein's "feelings of absolute value", or "Ethics" is not beyond the power of words to express.

## CONCLUSION

Wittgenstein presented his lecture on Ethics as early as 1930, but was finally published only in 1965. Surprisingly, no work has been done on it. Perhaps it is too obvious to the scholars how the later Wittgenstein would have corrected many of his initial remarks. For this author, however, it was quite a challenge to trace the way that the later Wittgenstein himself might have followed to make those corrections.

Wittgenstein's views about the nonsensicality of ethical discourse have been presented in the form of two arguments, the first is based on Wittgenstein's views about the nature of language, and, the second, on his views about the nature of mysticism. His views on these two subjects had to be drawn from the Tractatus rather than from his lecture on Ethics, for in that lecture he did not state all of the premises he had in mind when he arrived at the conclusion that Ethics was uncommunicable.

In his first argument, Wittgenstein gave a definition of Ethics, whereby only judgments of what he calls "absolute value" were to be counted as ethical judgments--the expression "I wonder at the existence of the world" being one such judgment; then he gave his view on what could be said in the language: that to say anything was to state a fact or to describe a state of affairs, and this was done by naming the component elements of a state of affairs; then he added that "absolute value" was not an element of any state of affairs, thus it could not be named nor

be put into words; from which it followed that "Ethics," as defined by him, could not be expressed in the language.

The criticism presented against this first argument attempted to demonstrate that Wittgenstein had given a very limited definition of Ethics, then a wrong view of language, and then correctly concluded that if language was the way he said it was, and if Ethics was what he said it was, then Ethics was impossible. To Wittgenstein's credit, however, it was recognized that Wittgenstein's own criticism of his earlier views was used to substantiate our arguments. In the Investigations, for example, we followed his reasoning for asserting that a statement is meaningful only if it is made in a context, if it plays a role in a language-game, thus establishing that the expression "I wonder at the existence of the world," used in the context given by Wittgenstein, is meaningful even though it does not state a fact, thereby showing that even his "Ethics" can be meaningfully expressed in the language, and that the Tractatus view of language is mistaken.

In Wittgenstein's second argument for the uncommunicability of ethical discourse, the one based on the Tractatus views about the nature of mysticism, we saw him saying that there was a connection between a man's having a feeling of absolute value (or ethical feeling) and a man's having a mystical insight; that the mystical insight could not be put into words; and that, therefore, the ethical, like the mystical, could not be put into words.

The main criticism that was presented against this second argument was an attempt at showing that when a mystic says "I am speechless" he is not saying that words are lacking, but he is rather describing his experience. The mystic can describe what he feels. Indeed, he can even interpret his experience and speculate about "the nature of reality." Thus, we concluded that the mystical was not beyond the power of words to describe, and that Wittgenstein's feelings of "absolute value" could also be described or communicated in the language. Therefore, even if one had accepted Wittgenstein's limited definition of Ethics, it was still possible to express it in the language.

## BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

In the writing of this essay no attempt was made to cover the literature available on the many subjects covered. Our attention was limited to the following works:

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WITTGENSTEIN'S LECTURE ON ETHICS

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AN ABSTRACT OF A MASTER'S THESIS

submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree

MASTER OF ARTS

Department of Philosophy

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY  
Manhattan, Kansas

1970

Sometime between September 1929 and December 1930, Wittgenstein prepared a lecture on Ethics and delivered it in Cambridge to the society known as "The Heretics." Friedrich Waismann took shorthand notes of this lecture and of conversations he had with Wittgenstein and Moritz Schlick in 1929 and 1930. These notes were finally published in the Philosophical Review, in January 1965.

In this lecture Wittgenstein expressed the view that ethical discourse is nonsensical. This view has been presented in this essay in the form of two arguments which, even though Wittgenstein did not explicitly state in his lecture, can nevertheless be attributed to him, for they have been documented with quotations from the Tractatus. The first of these arguments was based on Wittgenstein's views about the nature of language, and the second was based on his views about the nature of mysticism.

Wittgenstein's first argument was shown to be based on premises that were open to criticism. The first premise, in which he defined Ethics as consisting solely of judgments of what he calls "absolute value," that is, consisting of expressions such as "I wonder at the existence of the world," was shown to be a very limited definition of Ethics. The second premise was based on Wittgenstein's view of language according to which to say anything was to state a fact or to describe a state of affairs. This premise was criticized in light of the findings about language that the later Wittgenstein made in the Investigations. Finally, the conclusion, where Wittgenstein said that "absolute value" was not an element of any state of

affairs, thus it could not be named nor be put into words, i.e. that "Ethics" could not be put into words, was found to be a logical consequence of the restrictive definitions that he had given both of what was to count as an ethical judgment and of what could be said in the language.

Wittgenstein's second argument for the uncommunicability of ethical discourse, the one based on his views about the nature of mysticism, was also shown to be based on questionable premises. He said that there was a connection between a man's having a feeling of absolute value (or ethical feeling) and a man's having a mystical insight, thus producing a strange relationship between a man's saying "You ought to behave better" and the occurrence of a mystical experience. Then he added that the mystical insight could not be put into words, and that, therefore, the ethical, like the mystical, could not be put into words. This conclusion was challenged by showing that the expressions mystics use to declare their being in a state of wonder or speechlessness are not proof of the impotency of language, but descriptions of the mystic's experience. Thus we concluded that the mystical was not beyond the power of words to describe, and that Wittgenstein's feelings of the "absolute value"--regardless of whether they were correctly called ethical judgments or not--could also be described or communicated in the language.