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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.