

## **‘Solving or Resolving? Approaching Ethics through Wittgenstein’**

Allow me to put this paper in some kind of context as most of you will know me as someone whose area of research is in the philosophy of sport. However, as an undergraduate studying philosophy, my interest in Wittgenstein was greatly influenced by a former tutor Rupert Read, who, in his published work advocates a therapeutic reading of Wittgenstein. Rupert was the author of *The New Wittgenstein*, which was published in 2000, which contained essays providing radical readings of Wittgenstein’s work. This perhaps isn’t surprising as Rupert is also known in his capacity as a very prominent member of the Green Party. Nevertheless, as a student, I found Rupert’s teaching and tutorials engaging and insightful and this is where my interest in Wittgenstein began. This interest formed the basis of my PhD thesis, around 10 years ago, which on a superficial level was about the ethical question about the use of genetic technology in sport but which really was a Wittgensteinian analysis of ethical questions. Since starting work at the University of Gloucestershire and finding myself in the very narrow field of the philosophy of sport, this is something I haven’t really had an opportunity to visit for several years now (and unfortunately haven’t managed to get Wittgenstein into my current teaching) so it’s a welcome opportunity to be able return to it and present some of my thoughts here.

It may seem strange to talk about Wittgensteinian ethics since Wittgenstein seemed to say little about ethics in his work. Although there is a transcript of a lecture he gave on ethics he hardly mentions it in his written work. Rather he is most renowned for his paradoxical conclusion stating that nothing could be said about it. In his only published work during his lifetime, *The Tractatus*, he says:

*It is clear that ethics cannot be expressed.*

*Ethics is transcendental.<sup>1</sup>*

He goes on to say:

*There are, indeed, things that cannot be put into words.*

*They make themselves manifest. They are what is mystical.*

And he famously ends the *Tractatus* with:

*What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence.*

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<sup>1</sup> Wittgenstein, L. 1969. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. (Trans. D.F. Pears & B.F. McGuinness). London: Routledge and Kegan Paul. §6.421.

So on that note, I will end my talk here.

Okay, I won't because I'm a philosopher and we can't help but try to talk about things when we should probably remain silent.

Wittgenstein maintains that ethics is an area that cannot be approached in the same way that we attempt to approach other problems, particularly scientific or empirical problems. Indeed, despite Wittgenstein's own declaration that his early and later work are very different – so we often talk about the early and late Wittgenstein, the sentiments he held regarding ethics can be seen as a continuous strata running throughout his work.

What I am going to attempt to do this evening is to provide some explanation to why Wittgenstein seemed to neglect the area of ethics in his work and how despite the separation of Wittgenstein's work into that coming from the author of the *Tractatus* and the other from his posthumously published *Philosophical Investigations*, his thoughts on ethics remained essentially the same. Although if I agree with and follow Wittgenstein, I cannot say what cannot be said, I will try to show or indicate at least why it cannot be said.

It was prior to the First World War that Wittgenstein, a student of Bertrand Russell began work on his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. This work was supposed to clearly delineate the limits of logic and subsequently of language. In his Preface, Wittgenstein writes:

*The aim of the book is to draw a limit to thought, or rather – not to thought, but to the expression of thoughts.*

This goal in many respects is congruent with Wittgenstein himself at that time, a disenchanted aeronautics student with a strong interest in mathematics, which is what brought him to arrive unannounced at Bertrand Russell's office door.

However, as was the case for many others at that time, the experiences of the First World War changed perceptions, values and outlooks. Arguably because of his experiences in the trenches – Wittgenstein rejected attempts to be given a safer office job and insisted he was placed at the front line - the *Tractatus* was varnished with a spiritual or mystical gloss that it never originally intended to have. This is telling in Wittgenstein's remarks in a letter to Ludwig von Ficker, the editor of the Catholic paper, *Der Brenner*:

*..the book's point is an ethical one. I once meant to include in the preface a sentence which is not in fact there now, but which I will write for you here, because it will*

*perhaps be a key to the work for you. What I meant to write, then was this: My work consists of two parts: the one presented here plus all that I have not written. And it is precisely this second part that is the important one. My book draws limits to the sphere of the ethical from the inside as it were, and I am convinced that this is the ONLY way of drawing these limits.<sup>2</sup>*

What Wittgenstein expresses in this short paragraph is the key to both understanding the *Tractatus* and an ineffable but elucidatory statement about the nature of ethics. Wittgenstein is categorical in his assertion that it is what he has *not written* that is important. For philosophers, this is incredibly challenging to deal with. We expect ethical discussions to be underpinned with moral principles or meta-ethical accounts of truth conditions which then justify our ethical judgements. With Wittgenstein we are left gesturing at something fundamental but unable to say anything about it. Philosophers, and certainly professional ethicists, do not cope well with silence.

For Wittgenstein, ethics is the point at which we arrive in our urge to go beyond the limits of language.<sup>3</sup> There are things that we can say, and things that can't be said even though we feel we ought to be able to express it in some way. And this perhaps is why Wittgenstein put ethics and aesthetics into the same category. We can all recollect times when we have been struck by the beauty of nature. An incident that I included in my PhD these was an example from several years ago when I was working in Bath and commuting from Bristol. I used to drive up a hill near the racecourse which overlooked Bristol and the Severn, and one morning as I was driving in, there was the most incredible rainbow. I have never seen anything like it before or since. The colours were as vibrant as you could imagine and I really was astounded by how beautiful it was. It was quite fortunate that I remained on the road. Now I can recount this experience in words as I am doing to you today but it doesn't come near to the actual experience I had at the time. Equally, I was speaking to my sister's boyfriend last weekend. He has just finished rowing across the Atlantic for charity and I was asking him about it. He said that being out on the ocean alone for two months meant you saw nature in completely different ways. One of the experiences he was recounting was a sunset where there was a square hole in the clouds where the sunlight was coming through. The reflection on the water made it look as if it was literally a stairway to heaven. When I was talking to him, I could see his that this was a profound experience for him. But the words he used were a poor substitute. In these instances we find we have reached the limits of our language and can only gesture vainly or not

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<sup>2</sup> 'Letters to Ludwig von Ficker', (ed. Allan Janik). 1979. In *Wittgenstein: Sources and Perspectives*, (ed. C.G. Luckhardt). Harvester. pp.82-98. Undated, but almost certainly November 1919. (Cited in Monk, R. 1990. *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius*. New York: Penguin. p. 178).

<sup>3</sup> Waismann, F. 1967. *Wittgenstein und der Wiener Kreis*. (Ed. by B.F. McGuinness). Oxford: Basil Blackwell. p68 (cited in Holt, R. 1997. *Wittgenstein, Politics, and Human Rights*. London: Routledge. p93).

speak about them at all. Wittgenstein believed that this was the case for ethical matters too: that the most we can say is to say that we are unable to say anything as our language will not only be inadequate but also misleading and meaningless.<sup>4</sup> In many respects this seems plausible as the really important issues in our lives, issues of life and death, are beyond words.

Wittgenstein asserts that it is often a change of will rather than a change in intellect that is needed in overcoming philosophical and ethical problems. This seems to beg the question; how is this change in will to be achieved if it has nothing to do with persuasion through language (since he has said that on ethics we must remain silent)? It can appear that Wittgenstein's comments indicate that a change in will (or attitude) is an accidental and arbitrary occurrence and has nothing to do with rational deliberation. James Edwards suggests that Wittgenstein's intention is to use his remarks on ethics to provide a type of practical knowledge. It is an attempt to show us how to *do* something through changing our *attitude* towards the world rather than changing our *beliefs*. This type of practical knowledge will provide sense to how we live in the world. Wittgenstein demonstrates this in the *Philosophical Investigations* where he says:

*I wanted to put that picture before him, and his acceptance of that picture consists in his now being inclined to regard a given case differently: that is to compare it with this rather than that set of pictures. I have changed his way of looking at things.*<sup>5</sup>

Ultimately, it can be argued that Wittgenstein showed that philosophy is only successful if it provides the catalyst to will the world to be a happy one. Whilst an objective and rational discussion about ethical rules and principles are not helpful, there are things that can be represented through language which serve as powerful ethical reminders and it is this that can instigate a change in the will. Edwards points to Wittgenstein's letter to Engelmann as an illustration of this in which he writes in a quasi-riddle about a poem by Uhland:

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<sup>4</sup> Criticisms of Wittgenstein's sentiment is that if nothing can be said about ethics then even that nothing can be said cannot be said. See P.M.S. Hacker's 'Was He Trying to Whistle It?' in *The New Wittgenstein*. (Ed. Rupert Read & Alice Cray) 2000. London: Routledge. If this were to be the case it would result in a seemingly irreconcilable and paradoxical situation whereby the only way that one could come to such a conclusion is by reaching it purely by one's own philosophising in which case there would be no need for anyone including Wittgenstein himself to say that nothing can be said, but rather by actually not even mentioning it at all (perhaps as commentators on Heidegger's work have suggested). But as Wittgenstein himself indicated, sometimes we need to feel as if we are on solid ground even if we are making things difficult for ourselves: "We have got onto the slippery ice where there is no friction and so in a certain sense the conditions are ideal, but also, just because of that, we are unable to walk. We want to walk: so we need *friction*. Back to the rough ground!" PI §107.

<sup>5</sup> Wittgenstein, L. 1968. *Philosophical Investigations*. (Trans. G.E.M. Anscombe) Oxford: Basil Blackwell. §144.

*The poem by Uhland is really magnificent. And this is how it is: if only you do not try to utter what is unutterable then nothing gets lost. But the unutterable will be – unutterably – contained in what has been uttered.*<sup>6</sup>

As Edwards remarks, there is obviously no direct way to say the unsayable but there are things that can 'contain' those things that cannot be said. Poetry, literature and film are ways in which such things can be communicated: "it can communicate some ineffable truth about life while talking about the growth of a sprig into a hawthorn bush."<sup>7</sup> It is exactly for this reason that Wittgenstein would have recommended reading fictional literature over the great philosophic works because fictional literature (and I would suggest possibly autobiographical works) do not try to utter the unutterable yet still importantly hold on to important ethical reminders that serve to alter our attitude. It is often the novelist who shows us possibilities that we would otherwise not see. This contrasts with the dominance of the scientific method in contemporary moral philosophy which comprises of optimism, order and progress.<sup>8</sup>

One of the criticisms of the traditional method of Western moral philosophy is that it uses trivial examples in an attempt to seek guidance on ethical problems. This is based on the idea that trivial examples will not incite emotion in the same way that more serious examples would, thus enabling a cool and logical view of the situation. Yet this drive for a sanitised moral theory misses the point, as it implies that we can make decisions without having information that is essential in being able to make these decisions. In a course I teach on normative ethical theory, often to my frustration, my students seem to see straight through this problem. If I present them with an ethical dilemma, often their first response is to ask a series of other questions in order to provide the dilemma with sufficient depth. The difference between approaching moral philosophy through fictional and non-prescriptive literature and traditional analytic or normative philosophic methods is that the former focuses upon the way people live and what is important in life but does so in a way that is non-explicit; showing or describing an aspect of the world provides a force that other methods fail to achieve.

We need to feel a certain emotional involvement in moral issues because otherwise we are likely to reach very different conclusions. If I am told of a hypothetical case where limited resources mean that only one person in two is able to receive life-saving medical treatment: one a convicted criminal

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<sup>6</sup> *Letters From Ludwig Wittgenstein. With a memoir by Paul Engelmann.* 1967. Oxford: Basil Blackwell. p7 (Cited in Monk, R. 1990. *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius.* New York: Penguin, p. 151).

<sup>7</sup> Edwards, J. C. 1982. *Ethics Without Philosophy: Wittgenstein and the Moral Life.* University Press of Florida. p51.

<sup>8</sup> For further discussion see 'Our Over-Reliance Upon the Scientific Method,' Chapter 1, p19-57.

and the other a nine year old child, and I was asked to decide which one should get the treatment, I would probably reply that the nine year old child should get the treatment and support my reasoning with reference to particular ethical theory, whether it is Utilitarianism, Social Contract Theory or other normative theories. Such a conclusion seems more than reasonable and is the bread and butter of ethicists' work. However, if this case was no longer a hypothetical one but one in which I was personally involved, and that convicted criminal was my sister who for whatever reason had been (perhaps falsely) convicted of a crime, my conclusion may well be different. Disembodied, non-emotive reason doesn't necessarily play a part in ethical decision making regardless as to whether professional ethicists think it should. It seems that the distinction between the philosopher and moral agent is as wide as the distinction between the philosopher and the scientist. In the same way that philosophers cannot dictate to science except perhaps in the field of meta-physics, philosophers are in no position to pressurise on moral matters. There will always be an enormous gulf between an individual's moral beliefs "and the tidy ethical systems which philosophers offer us as the result of their reflection upon it."<sup>9</sup>

When Carl Elliot in *A Philosophical Disease* discusses the value of using narrative in bioethics, he argues that narrative can be better moral communicator than philosophical or biomedical essays simply because there are certain aspects of morality that essays cannot convey in the way that narrative literature can. Narratives are much more colourful and detailed than the impersonal account of *A did X to B*. They do this by engaging the emotions and making things much more accessible and real to us. As Elliot identifies, our moral intuitions only start to kick in when we know the context and personalities involved in ethical problems:

*...we want to know them because these details are important morally. If there is anything that practical ethics has taught us, it is that genuine moral experience is rich in detail, and it is often on these rich details that our minds are made up or changed.*<sup>10</sup>

The problem with attempting to elucidate Wittgenstein is in wanting to say something or advance a thesis, without being able to say it: since once it is said, it gainsays Wittgenstein's central point. This perhaps explains Wittgenstein's paradoxical statement at the end of his *Tractatus* when he says:

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<sup>9</sup> Stocks, J.L. 1972. *Morality and Purpose*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul. p124 (cited in Phillips, D.Z. 1992. *Interventions In Ethics*. Hong Kong: Macmillan Press Ltd. p175).

<sup>10</sup> Elliot, C. 1999. *Bioethics, Culture and Identity: A Philosophical Disease*. London: Routledge. pxxiv-xxv.

*My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually recognizes them as nonsensical, when he has used them – as steps – to climb up beyond them. (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it.)<sup>11</sup>*

## **Resisting Theory**

Wittgenstein's denigration of professional ethicists stems from his belief that anyone offering a theory or an explanation for ethical judgement says nothing of any value.<sup>12</sup> In the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein remarked that:

*...we [philosophers, ethicists] may not advance any kind of theory. There must not be anything hypothetical in our considerations. We must do away with all explanation...<sup>13</sup>*

What Wittgenstein was warning against here is the attempt to use scientific methods to solve philosophical and ethical problems. This again is a common thread that runs from the *Tractatus* to his later work. Although philosophers and ethicists are tempted to analyse and deconstruct ethical decision making in order to discover their rational foundations, for Wittgenstein, the fact that it is an explanation at all should merit its dismissal. Ethics in his view cannot be taught. This is an additional reason why fictional literature was merited by Wittgenstein: because it resists by its nature the tendency that philosophical work has to provide judgement and theory. The best literature and film provides a depth of description about human life and shows how messy it really is. This is not to say that the writer or director isn't aiming to make a particular point in the narrative but this aim is very different to the one that the professional ethicist or philosopher advocates when they are providing guidance on the morally correct course of action in particular scenarios.

Resisting theory in providing an ethical insight may appear to be an impossible or ridiculous task. For the main criticism is that one merely uses a theory of anti-theory – but it still a theory all the same. The response to this criticism is to argue that Wittgenstein is not providing an alternative 'theory' in place of the one which is being dissolved but rather to show how the picture that is being provided is a mistaken one. Here it is important to distinguish between formulating philosophical *theory* and undertaking philosophising as an *activity*. It is only the former of which Wittgenstein was critical. For

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<sup>11</sup> *Tractatus* 6.54.

<sup>12</sup> McGuinness, B.F. (Ed) 1967. *Wittgenstein und der Wiener Kreis, Friedrich Waismann*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell. p116-17 (cited in Edwards, J. C. 1982. *Ethics Without Philosophy: Wittgenstein and the Moral Life*. University Press of Florida. p98).

<sup>13</sup> Wittgenstein, L. 1968. *Philosophical Investigations*. (Trans. G.E.M. Anscombe) Oxford: Basil Blackwell. §109.

instance, Wittgenstein didn't offer any *theory* about language; he simply assembled reminders and provided particular pictures. What we do with these reminders is up to us. What Wittgenstein didn't do, that a number of academics inaccurately describe him as doing, is formulate theories such as 'meaning as use' or 'language-games'. These were not *theories* but merely observations. Wittgenstein maintained that all positions, such as; realism, scepticism, idealism, and linguistic idealism, are distorted perspectives. Neither did Wittgenstein support the notion of a 'common-sense' philosophy, as has often been proposed, and he was critical of Moore's attempt to formulate a list of common-sense propositions.<sup>14</sup> Wittgenstein did not reject theory because he thought that there was nothing puzzling or problematic with the world, but rather he saw the world as something fundamentally more complex and mysterious than can be encapsulated in a philosophical theory. Ultimately, Wittgenstein does not reject philosophical theory because it provides too simplistic a picture, but because we can be easily beguiled by particular analogies and forget that a picture is simply that. The analogy that Wittgenstein uses is to say that we believe that we are tracing around the form of the thing we are studying when in actual fact, we have simply been tracing around the frame through which we view it.<sup>15</sup>

Once we reject the need for theory, our interest in ethics from a philosophical viewpoint will diminish, for we will no longer approach ethics in the same way as we approach science – believing that we will be become enlightened by new knowledge – but we will instead see ethical theories similar to partisan slogans. The problem and confusion over Wittgenstein's consistency in his rejection of theory and explanation can be seen with the considerable discussion over the translation of a key term in Wittgenstein's writings. The German term 'Darstellung' was originally translated as 'representation' by Anscombe, whereas several commentators argue that it is more appropriately translated as 'presentation'.<sup>16</sup> The reasons for this claim can be read in the light of Wittgenstein's writings as a whole in which he was adamantly against the idea of 'representing' anything; he rather wished to 'present' things as they were. The passage in which this term arises is in the *Philosophical Investigations* where Wittgenstein says, 'the concept of a perspicuous [re]presentation [*Übersichtliche Darstellung*] is of fundamental significance for us. It earmarks the form of account we give, the way we look at things.'<sup>17</sup> This alternative translation changes the emphasis from providing an explanation or theory as to the way we see things to a reminder of what

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<sup>14</sup> Pleasants, N. 1999. *Wittgenstein and the Idea of a Critical Social Theory: A Critique of Giddens, Habermas and Bhaskar*. London and New York: Routledge. p13.

<sup>15</sup> Wittgenstein, L. 1968. *Philosophical Investigations*. (Trans. G.E.M. Anscombe) Oxford: Basil Blackwell. §114.

<sup>16</sup> Pleasants, N. 1999. *Wittgenstein and the Idea of a Critical Social Theory: A Critique of Giddens, Habermas and Bhaskar*. London and New York: Routledge. p15

<sup>17</sup> *Philosophical Investigations* §122 Amended translation

we already know but have forgotten after falling into the temptation of creating philosophical theories. As Wittgenstein says, 'If your head is haunted by explanations here, you are neglecting to remind yourself of the most important facts.'<sup>18</sup>

One of the criticisms of Wittgenstein's rejection of theory in favour of presentation is that *all* observation is theory-laden. If this were the case then it would be impossible for us to follow Wittgenstein's rejection of philosophical theory because we would never be able to escape taking a theoretical view of anything. To this criticism, Wittgenstein replied by saying that you are simply playing with words if you wish to find some common property between things that share similar features<sup>19</sup>. For example, it is wrong to claim that the theory or hypothesis one holds when carrying out a scientific experiment is the same thing as holding a theory or hypothesis when searching for one's mislaid glasses. Before carrying out a scientific experiment, one has certain expectations as to what will happen based upon knowledge from other experiments and understanding as to how the world works. In contrast, when you have mislaid your glasses, you are simply trying to remember when you last used them or saw them. You may say, "now I definitely had them when I read my post this morning - I expect I left them on the dining table." One cannot compare the theory one has that boiling sea water will leave a residue of salt, with the expectation that one will find one's glasses on the dining table. We might agree that we do rely on inductive theory in our day-to-day lives because it allows us to be a little more efficient in our future planning but these are not philosophical theories, rather the opposite: we take it for granted that the sun will rise tomorrow. It is only the philosopher who questions how can we be sure that it is the case. But we don't have a *theory* in the usual sense that the sun will rise, we don't even think about it. In the same way, we don't have a *theory* that we will find our glasses on the dining table, we just decide that it is the first place that we should look.

If we accept Wittgenstein's urge for us to resist theory, it is equally as important to do so on matters of ethics. This is a challenge because we have a deep-rooted tendency to theorise in ethics. We insist on searching for the foundations of ethics which will allow us to make abstract generalisations. We search (albeit futilely) for a solid basis of morality upon which to build our theories as if there were no gap between fact and value. Conflicting conclusions about this world will be reached by different individuals, yet there is no way of resolving which is the correct view. At the heart of ethics is the belief that there are ways of behaving that everyone can recognise as right and wrong or at least that there are ways to determine how to make such judgements. This claim is not derived from logic

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<sup>18</sup> Zettel §220

<sup>19</sup> Wittgenstein, L. 1968. *Philosophical Investigations*. (Trans. G.E.M. Anscombe) Oxford: Basil Blackwell. §67.

or rationality, nor supported by empirical evidence but follows from a particular way of understanding the world. The situation can be polarised by maintaining that on the one hand, there is view that an absolute moral truth exists, and on the other, that all moral truths are dependent on environment and context. As D.Z. Phillips pointed out, the same facts may have different moral significance according to differing moral practices and contexts. Such diversity does not allow for a single definition of this thing called 'morality'<sup>20</sup> All we can do is gesture vainly.

Ethics, for Wittgenstein was an intensely personal and serious matter. In some respects, the debate over the universality of morality is irrelevant for Wittgenstein. It isn't just about good conduct and character, but rather the sense of life, the state of one's soul, and ultimately about 'being decent:' it is about the attitude one has towards the world. This is in stark contrast to professional ethics which is often an anonymous, impersonal and syllogistic exercise which formulates categorical imperatives telling others how they should behave or reaches conclusions based upon utilitarian calculations.

Wittgenstein would have been undoubtedly reviled by our dependence on experts, in particular ethical experts. For him, moral decision making is an intensely personal matter and he maintained that the attempt to treat ethics as a science was wholly mistaken. Despite the apparent differences between the author of the *Tractatus* and the author of the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein's view of ethics remained consistent. He continued to maintain that:

*If I could explain the essence of the ethical only by means of a theory, then what is ethical would be of no value whatsoever.*<sup>21</sup>

Wittgenstein's whole approach to philosophy and to ethics is in total contradiction with the way that professional ethicists undertake their work which rests on ethical theory.<sup>22</sup> He urged us to be resistant against the temptation to offer a theory of ethical judgement: an explanation for why a person may value some things (honesty, classical music) over others (spending time with family,

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<sup>20</sup> Phillips, D.Z. 1992. *Interventions In Ethics*. Hong Kong: Macmillan Press Ltd. p viii.

<sup>21</sup> Waismann, F. 1979. Wittgenstein and the Vienna Circle: Conversations. (Ed. Brian McGuinness, trans. Joachim Schulte and Brian McGuinness) Oxford: Blackwell. p116-17 (cited in Johnston, P. 'Bioethics, Wisdom, and Expertise.' In C. Elliott. (Ed.) 2001. *Slow Cures and Bad Philosophers: Essays on Wittgenstein, Medicine, and Bioethics*. Durham and London: Duke University Press. p149).

<sup>22</sup> As Elliott recognises, there are particular groups that have followed Wittgenstein to a certain degree: feminists, clinical ethicists, medical anthropologists, literary scholars and casuists have all criticised the traditional preference of moral theory to real-life concrete cases. (Elliott, C. (Ed.) 2001. *Slow Cures and Bad Philosophers: Essays on Wittgenstein, Medicine, and Bioethics*. Durham and London: Duke University Press. p5).

outdoor pursuits). Wittgenstein said to anyone offering an explanation of such value, "Whatever one said to me, I would reject it; not indeed because the explanation is false but because it is an *explanation*."<sup>23</sup> Wittgenstein was not being unreasonably obtuse in this attitude, he wished to emphasise that an explanation for ethical judgement is simply *inappropriate*. This is problematic for many philosophers and they do not wish to accept a morality that has no theoretical foundation. Such a view seems to suggest that any moral judgement we make is dangerously idiosyncratic.<sup>24</sup> I would agree with Carl Elliot who suggested that the biggest fear for professional ethicists is that if we disregard moral theory, then they can no longer be regarded as experts and their role becomes redundant. This has controversial results: if we take seriously the idea that professional ethicists are in no more a privileged position than any other person, then it would result in the situation that a widely read and educated ethicist's view is no better than the average layperson, or that the ethics teacher has no more authority on ethical issues than her students. The upshot of this is that the professional ethicist does not have access to knowledge that others do not, but that if she offers guidance or direction, her view must be taken in the same way as anyone else's on the matter. Elliot suggests that this would be beneficial in that it would lead to the professional ethicist having to take on the real job of philosopher in sorting out sense from nonsense, and identifying where we have been bewitched by our language. It is a brave philosopher who takes seriously Wittgenstein's statement that philosophy "leaves everything as it is."<sup>25</sup> When philosophers see events and actions that they believe to be morally corrupt and reprehensible, Wittgenstein's picture of philosophy seems treacherously conservative. The fundamentally pertinent question is then, how can we press for moral and political change whilst adhering to Wittgenstein's method? This is a question that Wittgensteinian scholars have had to wrestle with. Some, such as DeGrazia, have rejected Wittgenstein's proposals and have argued that Wittgenstein's opposition to ethical theory was wrong. But even without rejecting Wittgenstein's method completely it does not rule out radical moral reform if Wittgenstein's approach is understood as an argument against an authoritative and privileged position in the evaluation of ethical and epistemological issues. Alice Cray suggests that Wittgenstein's method enables a clearer conception of the change that we wish to bring about, even when that change is radical. This view argues that the way in which we live our life is not constrained by critical concepts and enables us to make sense of social change which differ extensively from

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<sup>23</sup> Waismann, F. (ed. B.F. McGuinness) 1967. *Wittgenstein und der Wiener Kreis*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell. p116-117. (cited in Edwards, J. C. 1982. *Ethics Without Philosophy: Wittgenstein and the Moral Life*. University Press of Florida. p98).

<sup>24</sup> Elliott, C. (Ed.) 2001. *Slow Cures and Bad Philosophers: Essays on Wittgenstein, Medicine, and Bioethics*. Durham and London: Duke University Press. p5.

<sup>25</sup> Wittgenstein, L. 1968. *Philosophical Investigations*. (Trans. G.E.M. Anscombe) Oxford: Basil Blackwell. §124.

those with which we are used to.<sup>26</sup> As Elliott states, even if we accept that there cannot be a God's-eye view, there are moves within our framework that still hold, such as plausible reason-giving, fidelity to truth, and other conceptual commitments.<sup>27</sup>

*For whoever thought that philosophy, even good philosophy, would take away the ethical difficulties of life...? Certainly not Wittgenstein. It would be enough if it could teach us where those difficulties truly lie. Maybe then we could begin to start trying to make a better run at them.*<sup>28</sup>

To clarify, Wittgenstein does not reject theory and explanation as concepts in themselves: for they do have a place in some aspects of the world, whether it is scientific, sociological or psychological. What Wittgenstein rejects (although perhaps not in his earliest work, the *Tractatus*) is the picture of the philosopher as adjudicator or legislator as if the philosopher has access to a special form of knowledge of fact or as someone who is able to 'map out the bounds of sense.'

*'Theory' and 'explanation' clearly play a central role in the theoretical and applied sciences. Wittgenstein obviously does not advocate that practitioners in these disciplines should 'give up theory'; however, he does counsel against the confusion that arises when scientific theories are removed from their scientific setting and extended into 'philosophical explanations'...*<sup>29</sup>

When Wittgenstein warns us against advancing theory and constructing explanations<sup>30</sup> he is trying to pull us away from the tempting belief that philosophy can dig to the roots of reality in order to tell us how the world 'really is.' The type of pictures that Wittgenstein wanted to draw us away from were those such as, the Kantian picture of transcendental rules that underlie understanding; the Cartesian picture of mind as a private, inner space where one is acquainted with oneself; the empiricist picture

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<sup>26</sup> Crary, A. 'Wittgenstein's Philosophy in Relation to Political Thought.' In A.Crary, & R.Read (Eds.) 2000. *The New Wittgenstein*. London and New York, Routledge. p118.

<sup>27</sup> Elliott, C. (Ed.) 2001. *Slow Cures and Bad Philosophers: Essays on Wittgenstein, Medicine, and Bioethics*. Durham and London: Duke University Press. p6-7.

<sup>28</sup> Edwards, J. C. 'Religion, Superstition, and Medicine.' In C. Elliott. (Ed.) 2001. *Slow Cures and Bad Philosophers: Essays on Wittgenstein, Medicine, and Bioethics*. Durham and London: Duke University Press. p31.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*. p23.

<sup>30</sup> Wittgenstein, L. 1968. *Philosophical Investigations*. (Trans. G.E.M. Anscombe) Oxford: Basil Blackwell. §109.

that the human is nothing more than a 'bundle of perceptions;' or even his earlier view in the *Tractatus* that there is an essence of language.<sup>31</sup>

Where does this leave us? It is not that Wittgenstein criticises moral theories in favour of one of his own. Rather he is critical of the desire for a theory at all. What Wittgenstein seeks to do is place these moral theories before us so that we can see for ourselves the differences between them and come to understand what is meant when speaking of views, differences, disputes, problems and disagreements in these contexts. From this, we are able to see that the construction of theory does not help in our aim.<sup>32</sup> However, this charge against the traditional moral philosopher's construction of theory (in that it claims that it has access to the knowledge as to the right way to proceed in ethical problems) runs so much against the grain of this type of philosophy, that it has been practically ignored.<sup>33</sup> Perhaps all we can hope to take from Wittgenstein is that we have to be careful in the way we can *misinterpret* language to produce a 'theory' about something that seems at first glance to be founded on sound premises. Once we are shown that we are standing on slippery ground, we realise how easy it is to slide around.

When Wittgenstein warned us that:

*Philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language*<sup>34</sup>

he was referring to misunderstandings brought about because we take similar looking words and think that they are of the same form (as elaborated in Ryle's 'category mistake'<sup>35</sup>).<sup>36</sup> For instance, as Hertzberg identifies:

*...we often express our moral bewilderment in the form of a question, "What is the right thing to do here?", "Is it permitted to...?". Or again, we may express it by saying that we do not know what to do, etc. Thus we give our bewilderment a form which seems to presuppose that we lack knowledge concerning the moral side of the issue,*

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<sup>31</sup> Pleasants, N. 1999. *Wittgenstein and the Idea of a Critical Social Theory: A Critique of Giddens, Habermas and Bhaskar*. London and New York: Routledge. p21-22.

<sup>32</sup> Phillips, D.Z. 1992. *Interventions In Ethics*. Hong Kong: Macmillan Press Ltd. p68.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.* p61.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.* §109.

<sup>35</sup> Ryle's 'category mistake' is discussed in more detail in 'Defining the Human,' Chapter 2, p76-80.

<sup>36</sup> Wittgenstein, L. 1968. *Philosophical Investigations*. (Trans. G.E.M. Anscombe) Oxford: Basil Blackwell. §132 & §133.

*and that if someone were to supply us with that piece of knowledge, our difficulty would be solved. However, the notion of ignorance that is involved here is of a radically different kind from that involved, say, in talking about some fact of biology or statistics.*<sup>37</sup>

The area of applied ethics presupposes the possibility that there is an amount of knowledge, unbeknown to the individual studying the ethical issue that will illuminate the answer to the problem. We are being bewitched through our language because we mistakenly believe that the question, “What is the right thing to do?” is of the same form as the question, “What time does the next train leave for Exeter?” Bernard Williams suggests that the source of this problem can be traced back to Socrates’ question of how we ought to live. The structure of our language means that we are misled in understanding of ethics. Although Socrates himself didn’t think that the answer to such a question was one that could be discovered, Williams argues that since the time Socrates posed it, philosophers have been unable to resist trying to find an answer in the same way we answer empirical questions. We need to avert our gaze from the picture such a question presents in the same way we must attempt to resist the picture of dualism that Descartes presented.<sup>38</sup>

Wittgenstein’s method aims to bring about clarity by being aware of the pictures that language can present to us. What he does not do is tell us what is the ‘right’ picture – for this in itself is a bewitchment by our language and a nonsensical proposition. This is ultimately how Wittgenstein is able to ‘leave everything as it is.’<sup>39</sup>

The question we may be left wondering from all this then is; if we are dismissing relativism and indeed, resisting theory *per se* what are we to do with important moral issues upon which decisions must be made?

Following Wittgenstein’s method doesn’t advocate that ethics isn’t important but contrary to this: that ethics is of *fundamental* importance. This is exactly the reason as to why books on ethics are deeply flawed and why we are unable to say anything about ethical problems - issues of ‘moral

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<sup>37</sup> Hertzberg, L. ‘Moral Escapism and Applied Ethics’. Philosophical Papers November 2002. p6.Forthcoming. (Can be found on <http://www.abo.fi/fak/hf/filosofi/Staff/lhertzbe/> [Accessed September 14 2005]).

<sup>38</sup> Phillips, D.Z. 1992. *Interventions In Ethics*. Hong Kong: Macmillan Press Ltd. p102-103.

<sup>39</sup> Wittgenstein, L. 1968. *Philosophical Investigations*. (Trans. G.E.M. Anscombe) Oxford: Basil Blackwell. §124.

seriousness<sup>40</sup> cannot be abstained by the individual or given responsibility to a group of 'professional ethicists'. Real moral issues (rather than problems arising from the bewitchment by our language) are ones that we are confronted with – that 'show' themselves as matters of conscience that cannot be ignored. For instance, a pregnant woman struggling with the morality of abortion has to reach a decision; moral abstinence is not an option. But the ethical dilemma she is confronted with is (metaphorically) on the other side of the world to the legal debate that is going on between various political activists. Such legal debate assumes that there is a right and wrong answer to the questions surrounding the issues that are asked, independent of the actual situation and the real choices the people involved are required to make.<sup>41</sup>

Wittgenstein himself notably said in conversation about the teaching of ethics, how can he tell anyone else how to live – it would be like being asked by someone who was in love whether to marry and replying by telling them all the things that they would no longer be able to do if married. Wittgenstein would respond: "The idiot! How can one know how these things are in another man's life?"<sup>42</sup>

It is perhaps the first time that we are given such an explicit sense of Wittgenstein's thought regarding ethics. He indicates here that it is only individuals themselves who are able to make judgements about what they ought to do or how they ought to live: for we are unable to determine what is important and valuable to the person making such a decision. By using examples such as these we are shown how misdirected we are in formulating abstract ideas and moral maxims.

This suggests that we need to return to a conception of ethics that is tied to action. Edwards believes that it was following Descartes' meditations that ethics no longer demanded a decision to be made but rather began to be a philosophical inquiry. Due to the resulting and pervasive focus upon philosophical thought as the formulation of argument and representation of ideas, we now find it difficult to consider an ethical thought which is implicitly tied to action.<sup>43</sup> Whereas previously such expressions as, "Will you serve God or mammon?" forced individuals to make a decision and follow

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<sup>40</sup> Recognising that a moral decision has to be made - A phrase used by Hertzberg, L. in 'Moral Escapism and Applied Ethics'. *Philosophical Papers* November 2002. (Can be found on <http://www.abo.fi/fak/hf/filosofi/Staff/lhertzbe/> [Accessed September 14 2005]).

<sup>41</sup> Hertzberg, L. 'Moral Escapism and Applied Ethics'. *Philosophical Papers* November 2002. p11. (Can be found on <http://www.abo.fi/fak/hf/filosofi/Staff/lhertzbe/> [Accessed September 14 2005]).

<sup>42</sup> Bouwsma, O. 1986. *Wittgenstein: Conversations 1949-1951*, (Ed. J.L. Craft and R. E. Hustwit) Hackett, Indianapolis. p45 (cited in Johnston, P. 1999. *The Contradictions of Modern Moral Philosophy: Ethics After Wittgenstein*. London and New York: Routledge. p85).

<sup>43</sup> Edwards, J. C. 1982. *Ethics Without Philosophy: Wittgenstein and the Moral Life*. University Press of Florida. p21.

it through accordingly, once such issues were translated into epistemological ones, it enabled the individual to fall into what Edwards calls, a kind of absentmindedness. The fundamental concern for philosophers became the correct representation of reality which pre-empted any questions concerning our direct relationship with reality (what one is to do when faced with a moral dilemma?). Ultimately this leaves no place for the individual as the task becomes one of ensuring that the relationship between the idea-belief-proposition and reality is an accurate one. Objectivity becomes the ultimate aim. Edwards supports this with a quote from Kierkegaard who attacked, “the objective tendency, which proposes to make everyone an observer, and in its maximum to transform him into so objective an observer that he becomes almost a ghost.”<sup>44</sup>

What Wittgenstein rejected was the notion that all we have to choose from is having the world and forfeiting responsibility, or having responsibility and losing the world. For Wittgenstein, philosophy is an active process in order to see the world aright; it involves the use of imagination, a willingness to take new paths and new experiences, but more than that; it is about being rigorous in one’s thought.<sup>45</sup>

It appears then that we are misguided in asking questions such as “how should we live?”, or “how should one live?” but need to focus upon the personal one of “how should I live?” Wittgenstein demonstrated this in his Lecture on Ethics when he spoke in the first person. He argued that this was essential as it left him in the only position he conceived to be possible when talking about ethics: as a person speaking for himself.<sup>46</sup> Philosophy’s main objective should be the generation of a kind of self-consciousness for the individual. This is how freedom from the philosophical tendency can be achieved; first from within it and then from philosophy itself.<sup>47</sup> This again is what Wittgenstein meant when he talked about throwing away the ladder at the end of the Tractatus.

It could be proposed that, largely, apart from the professional ethicist and philosopher, we do recognise that ethical issues are ones that we can’t say anything about. Paul Johnston illustrates this with an example whereby the mother of a recently married young woman is left alone after the

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<sup>44</sup> Kierkegaard, S. 1941. *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. (Trans. D.F. Swenson and W. Lowrie) Princeton: Princeton University Press. p118 (cited in Edwards, J. C. 1982. *Ethics Without Philosophy: Wittgenstein and the Moral Life*. University Press of Florida. p166).

<sup>45</sup> Crary, A. ‘Wittgenstein’s Philosophy in Relation to Political Thought.’ In A.Crary, & R.Read (Eds.) 2000. *The New Wittgenstein*. London and New York, Routledge. p141.

<sup>46</sup> Waismann, F. 1979. *Wittgenstein and the Vienna Circle: Conversations*. (ed. Brian McGuinness, trans. Joachim Schulte and Brian McGuinness) Oxford: Blackwell. p117 (cited in Johnston, P. ‘Bioethics, Wisdom, and Expertise.’ In C. Elliott. (Ed.) 2001. *Slow Cures and Bad Philosophers: Essays on Wittgenstein, Medicine, and Bioethics*. Durham and London: Duke University Press. p160).

<sup>47</sup> Edwards, J. C. 1982. *Ethics Without Philosophy: Wittgenstein and the Moral Life*. University Press of Florida. p152.

death of her husband. Since the elderly widow does not wish to be placed in a home, she suggests that she lives with the newly married couple. The daughter however, realises that this will inevitably place a strain on her marriage. If we are asked the question, “what is the right thing to do? - to allow the mother to live with her daughter or to ensure the preservation of the marriage?” Johnston supposes that most people would withhold judgment, for the daughter alone is the one to make the decision. He asks, “How can we possibly judge on such an issue?” The important aspect is not that the daughter does the ‘right’ thing, but that she recognises it as a serious moral matter and deliberates on the issue. Naturally, we generally would hold that she attempts to do the right thing rather than that which she prefers but we also hold that it is only her that is in the position to determine what the right thing is.<sup>48</sup>

What all this indicates is that it is only the individual who can deliberate what he values in life, and how these affect the way he should live his life. Perhaps the most that philosophy can do is enable one to become self-conscious in a way that you explore yourself, your nature, and the decisions you make – philosophy in this sense can be used as a form of therapy.<sup>49</sup> Yet on the issue of ethics, it is not for a professional philosopher to lay down abstract imperatives which must be followed by all. This, of course, does not mean that professional ethicists should refrain from taking a stance upon ethical issues, but merely that they should make it quite clear that their position is one of an individual not an expert. It may be that they can reasonably claim to have an insight into an ethical problem but this insight is one of wisdom not expertise.<sup>50</sup>

Ultimately, ethics cannot be intellectualized; it is dependent on the will and the individual’s attitude towards the world. Such a will can only be found by looking beyond the world, as it were, and this may prove an inevitably futile and nonsensical task. Coming to accept such a view isn’t so much a defeat for philosophy rather the realisation that one was in an impossible dream. Philosophy’s skill is in clarifying the logical structure of concepts and in identifying problematic issues. Philosophy is not able to provide the answers to ethical questions but merely to untangle the confusions that arise.<sup>51</sup> This is why Wittgenstein was right when he said that on ethics, we [that is philosophers] must remain silent.

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<sup>48</sup> Johnston, P. 1999. *The Contradictions of Modern Moral Philosophy: Ethics After Wittgenstein*. London and New York: Routledge. p86-7.

<sup>49</sup> The therapeutic reading of Wittgenstein has been advocated by those such as, Phil Hutchinson, and is discussed further in the Conclusion, p197.

<sup>50</sup> Johnston, P. ‘Bioethics, Wisdom, and Expertise.’ In C. Elliott. (Ed.) 2001. *Slow Cures and Bad Philosophers: Essays on Wittgenstein, Medicine, and Bioethics*. Durham and London: Duke University Press. p160.

<sup>51</sup> Johnston, P. 1999. *The Contradictions of Modern Moral Philosophy: Ethics After Wittgenstein*. London and New York: Routledge. p43.