

Ethics as a Condition of the World: The Inexpressible, the Transcendental and the Point of the *Tractatus*

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THIS PAPER PRESENTS A READING of the *Tractatus*'s remarks on ethics. Drawing on work by Anselm Müller, subsequently developed by Anthony Price, the reading makes of some of Wittgenstein's most striking and most puzzling early remarks a recognizable and insightful account of ethical experience, while also accommodating the equally striking formal quality of those remarks.

The account identifies a distinctive ethical achievement that requires a distance from particular concrete goods that one might pursue and a responsiveness to those goods as a whole—to one's world as a whole; only through such openness is one open to the abstract objective that is doing what is best; and only through openness to that does one express oneself in, and assume responsibility for, one's actions. This account allows us to understand why, for example, Wittgenstein connects “absolute or ethical value” with “wonder at the existence of the world” (LE p. 41) and with “understand[ing] the question about the meaning of life” (NB 8.7.16)¹. But it also makes sense of why that is precisely a question, and why those to whom “the meaning of life ... become[s] clear” cannot “say in what this meaning consist[s]” (NB 6–7.7.16). The responsiveness to a good which ethical subjects distinctively manifest is a responsiveness not to some distinctive and describable state of affairs but to the

¹ References to Wittgenstein's works use the abbreviations given in the bibliography, followed by page or section number, or entry date. Though there are discrepancies (see p. 177 of PNB), the content of NB and PNB overlap and, where the passages cited or quoted appear in both, I give NB as the reference, and PNB when only in the latter.

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question of what is best—willing determination of what here and now that is.

This account yields a vision of self-expression not as hearkening to some inner voice but as an openness to one's life as a whole; and this, in turns, opens up a way of approaching the puzzle of Wittgenstein's insistence that "of [the willing subject] we cannot speak" (TLP 6.423). I also suggest that we find here one possible sense for Wittgenstein's famous remark to Ludwig von Ficker that "the point of [the *Tractatus*] is ethical" (LLF p. 94), in that openness to the world as a whole —openness to how things are as such and as a whole— emerges as fundamentally a practical, rather than theoretical achievement.

§ 1. The main texts and their difficulty

The key texts for this paper's project are passages late in the *Tractatus* —the 6.4s and early 6.5s, many of which were first formulated in Wittgenstein's wartime notebooks across a six-week period running from the beginning of July to mid-August 1916². Remarks made to correspondents in the period also have significance here, as does Wittgenstein's "Lecture on Ethics". Though written a decade later, the latter is, as Anscombe describes it, "extremely "Tractatusy"" (Anscombe 2011, p. 177), just how Tractatusy being revealed by how it sheds light upon the earlier discussion.

How much sense we can hope to make of these texts is a serious question. Despite the clear moral intensity of Wittgenstein as a person, his remarks on ethics are brief, so any reading of them is inevitably somewhat speculative. They are also amongst his most difficult and there has been a long-standing tradition of trying to minimise their significance —in themselves and for an understanding of his broader thought— by, for example, depicting the thoughts that these remarks express as a kind of aberrant eruption in Wittgenstein's mind triggered by the extremities of the trenches —that, as Russell put it, "the war turned him into a mystic"³. Viewed in this way, these thoughts are seen as a disruption or waylaying of the core lines of thought that Wittgenstein was

² Other important passages are NB 7-9, 10.16 and 10.1.17.

³ Quoted in Klage (2022, p. 273 n. 16). Cf. Michael Morris's proposal that "[i]t is not implausible ... to attribute [Wittgenstein's] odd ethics to the effects of being on the front line": "It would not be surprising if that kind of experience led to something a little unhinged" (Morris 2008, p. 327). Wittgenstein himself anticipated this kind of reaction to his work, that of the reader who would conclude that "You can't expect more of a young chap especially when he writes a book in such noise as must have been on the Austrian front" (LO p. 57).

developing and would present through the *Tractatus*: as Peter Hacker and Hanjo Glock put it, these ideas are only “tenuously” “grafted” on to that book’s “logical trunk” and have a “primary inspiration” that “lies outside the book” (Hacker 1986, p. 105, Glock 1996, p. 108).

There is indeed no getting away from the fact that these ideas appear in remarks that Wittgenstein wrote relatively late in the period in which the *Tractatus* was crystalizing, or from the fact that he himself seems to have been dissatisfied with them, condemning himself for “still making crude mistakes” and bemoaning “the complete unclarity of all these sentences” (NB 29.7.16, 2.8.16). So, hanging over the task of establishing what thoughts lie behind them is the suspicion that their author was himself unsure. Also, we should not dismiss the worry that reading Wittgenstein’s remarks on the ethical life as a commentary on our own ethical life might be presumptuous, overlooking how alien the experience might have been of this undoubted genius whose life was lived at such a high moral and spiritual pitch and —when these remarks were being composed— under such extreme circumstances. At the same time, however, where else can we start other than by seeing those remarks as bearing on something recognizably like our own lives, especially if we are to reach an understanding of these remarks as concerning *ethics*?

§ 2. Some key themes

While we will identify other important themes as we progress, I will identify here some that seem key. The following passage includes three of these —that value “lies outside the world”, and that ethics is both inexpressible and transcendental:

The sense [*Sinn*] of the world must lie outside the world. ... In it there is no value —and if there were, it would be of no value. ... Hence also there can be no ethical propositions. ... It is clear that ethics cannot be expressed. Ethics is transcendental. (TLP 6.41–6.421)

To begin with the last of these claims, how we are to understand the notion of “the transcendental” in the early Wittgenstein is obviously a tricky question. In its most important reinterpretation in modern philosophy⁴, it is typically

⁴ Later we will pass close by the notion of a “transcendental concept” that one finds in medieval philosophy: concepts such as “one”, “true” and “being”, which, roughly speaking, are applicable to any and every object

associated with Kant, of course. But one sees in the *Tractatus*, and in the earlier 6s in particular, an effort to undermine the need to perform tasks that lie at the heart of Kant’s vision of a transcendental philosophical project. These include accounting for the traction of mathematics on the world, and explaining how the states of affairs our true beliefs represent make up a unified world, one form this takes being justifying the application of the category of causation to that world. These tasks seem to melt away if “[m]athematical propositions express no thoughts” (6.21), and “outside logic all is accident” (TLP 6.3), such that “belief in the causal nexus”, as we see asserted earlier in TLP, is “[s]uperstition” (5.1361)⁵. So we face a significant challenge in determining what to make of Wittgenstein’s invocation of the transcendental⁶.

Another way to look at Kant’s project is as asking what would have to be the case for there to be subjects the experience of which reveals a world. An answer to that question would reveal conditions of possibility —“*Bedingungen der Möglichkeit*” (1961: A27 B43)— of there being such a subject and such a world. These conditions impose limits on the forms that any such world and any such subject might take and on the knowledge that the latter might achieve, with the interesting consequence that it itself is driven beyond those limits, rendering it—to use Kant’s term— “noumenal” (1961, A 249 B306). We hear what sound like related themes in the *Tractatus*:

The thinking, presenting subject; there is no such thing. ... The subject does not belong to [*gehört nicht zur*] the world but it is a limit [*Grenze*] of the world. (TLP 5.631–5.632)

Clearly here Wittgenstein denies the existence of the subject in one sense and affirms it in another; and this discussion has its roots in remarks that do the same while, crucially for present purposes, taking us back to ethics. Wittgenstein’s first formulation of TLP 5.632 is preceded by “Good and evil only enter through the *subject*” (NB 2.8.16) and five days later, we read:

of thought.

⁵ The 6s are comments on the *Tractatus*’ articulation of the “general form of the proposition” (TLP 6), to which Sec. 14 will return, identifying there another broadly Kantian unificatory project that that work questions.

⁶ That challenge is a theme in the extended recent debate between Adrian Moore and Peter Sullivan. See, e.g., Moore (2003) and Sullivan (2003), and, for some discussion, McManus (2015).

The thinking subject is surely mere illusion. But the willing subject exists.

If the will did not exist, neither would there be that centre of the world, which we call the I, and which is the bearer of ethics. (NB 7.8.16)

We also hear a Kantian echo when we read

Ethics does not treat of the world. Ethics must be a condition [*Bedingung*] of the world ... (NB 24.7.16)⁷

as we do —here, an echo of the noumenal— when we read in the *Tractatus* that “[o]f the will as the bearer of the ethical we cannot speak” (6.423).

As indicated above, many other remarks of Wittgenstein’s will come under scrutiny as we progress. In some of the most puzzling, Wittgenstein seems to be trying to place notions to which reflection on ethics naturally turns, though he is unsure of quite how to understand them or that turn. These notions — including happiness, the meaning of life, conscience, God, and the mystical— are ones which he finds “really in some sense deeply mysterious” but, as he puts it, he “keep[s] on coming back to” them (NB 30.7.16). The later LE adds one more such notion to which Wittgenstein finds himself drawn, and which will be important in what follows:

[I]f I want to fix my mind on what I mean by absolute or ethical value ... it always happens that the idea of one particular experience presents itself to me ... I believe the best way of describing it is to say that when I have it *I wonder at the existence of the world*. (LE 41, cf. NB 20.10.16)

§ 3. Roads not taken

It will help make clear why I offer the reading that follows if I first say a few words about readings I reject. Many other commentators have examined these difficult discussions and I do not engage with the views of many of them here,

⁷ Wittgenstein appends to this “like logic”, a comparison upon which n. 44 will very briefly touch. There are other important remarks in his discussion of ethics which I believe my reading can help us address, though I will not attempt to show that here. These include those on death and time (see, e.g., TLP 6.421, 6.431 and 6.4311, cf. NB 8.7.16).

because of time, space, and a selfish interest in working out here what I think is an interesting way of approaching them⁸. So my comments here will be brief. But I will devote a little more space to one such reading in particular.

The notion that “in [the world] there is no value” may seem to intimate a brand of nihilism—that there is no such thing as value—or supernaturalism—that value is real enough, but lies in *another* world, just not *this* one. Wittgenstein does say that “[e]thics, if it is anything, is supernatural” (LE 40). But what we are to make of such remarks is a difficult issue. As we will see, Wittgenstein’s remarks make mention of God; but the notion that a straightforward theism is at work here sits uncomfortably with remarks such as that “God is, how things stand” (NB 1.8.16)⁹; and ideally we would accommodate testimony such as Paul Engelmann’s, who claims of Wittgenstein that “[n]othing was further from his mind than the attempt to paint a picture of a world beyond (either before or after death), about which we cannot speak” (Engelmann 1967, p. 79).

Other readings I will not explore have at their foundations claims which are themselves sufficiently philosophically questionable as to deprive those readings of much interest. I have in mind readings that rest upon proposals such as there are no necessities other than logical necessities—hence, no necessities of the sort that one might imagine some ethical requirements embody—and that the only propositions are those of natural science¹⁰. These proposals are anything but *philosophically* uninteresting. But a reading of Wittgenstein that begins by ascribing them to him as premises is: faced with how *prima facie* counter-intuitive some of the conclusions to be based upon them are—such as that “ethics is inexpressible”—it is overwhelmingly tempting to think so much the worse for these far-from-intuitive premises and, hence, if we are guided by the principle of charity, for the readings that take them as premises.

A reading about which I will say a few more words reads into Wittgenstein a purely contemplative ethic. He writes

⁸ Among the views with which I will not concern myself is that of my earlier self, presented in McManus 2006. Some of its themes reappear here too, though construed—and woven together—rather differently. But that is of more interest to me than to the reader.

⁹ Cf. the preface Wittgenstein envisaged for PR: “I would like to say ‘This book is written to the glory of God’, but nowadays that ... would not be rightly understood. It means the book is written in good will, and in so far as it is not so written, but out of vanity, etc., the author would wish to see it condemned”.

¹⁰ See TLP 6.37 and 6.53 respectively.

Only one thing is necessary: to maintain one's distance from everything that happens; to *collect oneself!* (PNB 25.8.14)

Such an outlook might seem to be pressed upon one if one also believes —as Wittgenstein seems to— that “[t]he world is independent of my will” and that “there is no *logical* connection between will and world” (TLP 6.373–374, cf. NB 5.7.16). This may seem a denial —as Anscombe puts it in her reading of these remarks— of “the effectiveness of *any* act of will” (2000, p. 52). But the foundation on which such a reading and the attribution to Wittgenstein of such an ethic rest seems to me questionable to say the least.

Both of his above remarks on the will could instead be heard as truistic: the merely sane acceptance that my willing it does not make it so —and a purely contemplative ethic does not follow from that. Similarly, we read

I cannot bend the happenings in the world to my will; I am completely powerless. I can only make myself independent of the world —and so in a sense master it— by renouncing any influence on happenings. (NB 4.7.16)¹¹.

But the second sentence here seems to call on one to renounce what the first says one has not got; and the latter also seems to be a non-sequitur, as being without absolute power does not entail being without any power. It is as if Wittgenstein had heard of Niebuhr's famous prayer only its call for “the serenity to accept the things I cannot change”, but not its accompanying call for “the courage to change the things I can” (Niebuhr 1987, p. 251), a broader sentiment that Wittgenstein does seem to affirm when he exhorts himself to “do [his] best”: “[y]ou cannot do more”, but you must “[h]elp yourself and others with all your might” (PNB 30.3.16). We should also note that the author of the NB 4.7.16 remarks wrote the same day that “my will penetrates the world”; and when he wrote four days later that “my will enters the world completely from the outside as into something that is already there”, he added parenthetically “[a]s for what

¹¹ In the background here is the notion we encountered earlier that “belief in the causal nexus” is ‘[s]uperstition’ (TLP 5.1361). But one might wonder here too whether this entails that events have neither causes nor effects —that is, whether believing the causal nexus to be superstition entails that causation is too— or whether instead attacking the former might be to attack a philosophical mythologizing of the latter.

my will is, I don't know yet" (NB 8.7.16).

As indicated, some of the puzzling remarks quoted above survive into the *Tractatus*. But if they do call on us to accept the ineffectiveness of *any* act of will, they do seem to be, as Anscombe puts it, "nonsense" (2000, p. 52), and not of any illuminating sort¹². In light of them, such events within our minds could not themselves be at all what we take them to be; in her memorable phrase, such events become nothing "but a combination in a vacuum" (2000, p. 52) —a mere buzzing or humming, rather than intelligible, intentional phenomena oriented towards a world beyond them¹³. Needless to say, belief in the ineffectiveness of all acts of will also makes baffling our everyday life. While I am aware that this may remind the reader of Dr Johnson's attempted refutation of Berkeley, why would Wittgenstein, for example, sit down to write a letter to Russell asking him to sell his furniture for him when he has no reason to think Russell's will can affect the world, and indeed no reason to think he himself can bring into existence any such letter¹⁴? Philosophers can hold beliefs counter to their ordinary experience or —more likely— think that we have good philosophical reason to hold such beliefs. But there is a playfulness or even frivolity to such an outlook that seems out of kilter with what we know of Wittgenstein's character.

Must Wittgenstein, therefore, not have maintained this view? Anscombe thought he did, for all its nonsensicality. But guided again by the principle of charity, I will explore an alternative reading below, one which also makes key to the ethical life that one "maintains one's distance from everything that happens" by "collecting oneself"¹⁵.

But before turning to that, let me identify one more reading —or rather a broad kind of reading, of which supernaturalism might be seen as one vivid instance— which I will also attempt to avoid. A key demand on any adequate reading, it seems to me, is that it respects what one might call the sheer

¹² Cf. Anscombe (1971, p. 171): "It is this part of the *Tractatus* that seems to me most obviously wrong".

¹³ Cf. Anscombe's description of this "will" that affects nothing in the world" —and for which "any alteration of the facts", "even if one intended it", "is accidental" —as "chimerical" (1971, pp. 171, 172).

¹⁴ See CL 135.

¹⁵ AT PNB 29.8.14, Wittgenstein laments his "not quite manag[ing] to carry out [his] resolution to practice complete passivity", and it is worth noting that it is consistent with the reading I will offer that, under appropriate circumstances, "practi[sing] complete passivity" might be what acting ethically calls for— one's "doing one's best". The Austrian front might indeed illustrate circumstances in which this might at least seem to be so. (Cf. PNB 25.5.16: "Being shelled. As God wills it!")

“formality” of Wittgenstein’s discussion. To do so we must as much as possible stay with the little he says and resist the temptation, when trying to make sense of that “little”, to think that he really does have more to say —indeed that that “more” might be, to adapt Hacker’s words, his “primary inspiration”, though, for some reason or other, he chooses, or thinks it best, not to say it¹⁶. But the challenge we face is that the above temptation is hard to resist, because it is hard to see how such a formal discussion can have, in any recognizable way, something to do with *ethics*.

§ 4. Anselm Müller on the idea of an “absolute requirement”

Part of what draws the eye to LE is that, while *Tractatus* is explanatory where the *Tractatus* is declamatory; and Müller starts his discussion with a well-known passage that illustrates this in distinguishing what Wittgenstein calls “absolute judgments of value” from “relative judgments of value”:

Supposing 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 (LE, p. 38–39).

Wittgenstein proposes that “[t]he essence of this difference seems to be obviously 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: Instead of saying “This is the right way to Granchester”, I could equally well have said, “This is the right way you

¹⁶ Ascribing unspoken commitments to Wittgenstein as explaining his remarks on ethics obviously risks depicting him as inconsistent, because the unspoken can be expressed but isn’t, whereas what we read is that “ethics is inexpressible”. We pass here close by the debate between “resolute” readers and their critics, as we will again in Sec. 13. This is a difficult debate, in part, because what resolution requires is itself a theme in the debate. (For discussion, see, e.g., Sullivan 2002, Conant and Diamond 2004, and McManus 2006: ch. 4 and 2014.) So I will focus here on the above, related, though admittedly hazily-specified aspiration to preserve the “formality” of Wittgenstein’s outlook.

have to go if you want to get to Granchester in the shortest time“; “This man is a good runner” simply means that he runs a certain number of miles in a certain number of minutes, etc. Now what I wish to contend is that, although all judgments of relative value can be shown to be mere statements of facts, no statement of fact can ever be, or imply, a judgment of absolute value (LE, p. 39).

The basis of this contention is not exactly obvious. But Wittgenstein’s proposal that “the word good in the relative sense simply means coming up to a certain predetermined standard” (LE 38) would seem to give us a sense in which “[e]very judgment of relative value is a mere statement of facts”, because such a judgment passes no comment on the significance of the relevant “predetermined standard”. Wittgenstein continues with his Grantchester example:

The right road is the road which leads to an arbitrarily predetermined end and it is quite clear to us all that there is no sense in talking about the right road apart from such a predetermined goal. Now let us see what we could possibly mean by the expression, “*the absolutely right road*”. I think it would be the road which *everybody* on seeing it would, *with logical necessity*, have to go, or be ashamed for not going. And similarly the *absolute good*, if it is a describable state of affairs, would be one which everybody, independent of his tastes and inclinations, would *necessarily* bring about or feel guilty for not bringing about. And I want to say that such a state of affairs is a chimera (LE, p. 40).

But do we? And while such a state of affairs being a chimera would render *false* all efforts to describe a state of affairs of absolute value, why would it render ethics *inexpressible*? —a notion we find echoed in LE too when Wittgenstein offers this report of his reaction when presented with a description of such a (chimerical) state of affairs:

I at once see clearly, as it were in a flash of light, 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, *ab initio*, on the ground of its significance (LE, p. 44).

The following section will return to this rejection. Here though let us look at how Müller further elaborates the “job description” for this problematic “absolute value”.

Statements of relative value ascribe goodness “to something *in virtue of* its

appropriateness to a purpose *which we might not have had*” (Müller 1989, p. 220). To return to Wittgenstein’s tennis example, the statement of relative value there asserts that the person’s “performance does not come up to the standard implied in intending to play tennis” (p. 225), an intention which he might not have. It “refer[s] us to a specifiable pattern of living”, in which we might not intend to engage, and assesses how we live “in view of a standard that might not have been laid down” (pp. 221, 220). To echo TLP 6.41, since these statements do not settle whether meeting that standard matters, or whether we care whether it is met, they express merely “accidental” demands. A statement of absolute value, on the other hand, would instead seem to have to refer us to a “standard implied in intending anything at all”; the absolutely valuable is so for us “in virtue of no particular aim, or in virtue of wanting anything at all” (pp. 225, 236). Such a “a fundamental super-intention” is implied “[i]n *anything you do*”, an intention which “there is no question of your being able to stop having” (p. 228).

Put in other terms, while statements of relative value ascribe goodness to a behaviour in virtue of its appropriateness to some particular task or aim of mine, a statement of absolute value ascribes goodness to a behaviour in virtue of its appropriateness to something one might envisage as “my overall task” or “some overall aim, as it were” (pp. 225, 236). This, in turn, might be identified with “my life as a whole” going well —with “living well” as such; and here perhaps we meet “an inescapable task that goes with every human life” —“the idea that life ha[s] a meaning or a purpose” (pp. 225, 221, 227, 228).

These thoughts might encourage us to attribute to Wittgenstein a substantive notion of “the meaning of life”, especially when read alongside remarks such as

I keep on coming back to this! Simply that the happy life is good, the unhappy bad. (NB 30.7.16).

the notion that happiness is an “overall aim” or “purpose” the achievement of which is our “living well” being familiar enough, of course, from utilitarianism and, as we will see in a moment, sometimes ascribed to Aristotle. We also might think we see a substantive vision of the good life in those extended passages in which Wittgenstein talks precisely of the meaning of life, of the good life as one of “harmony with the world”, of God —who we might imagine setting for us

such an aim or purpose— and of the voice of conscience¹⁷. How we ought to understand these notions will be a theme in what follows; but just to take the latter, William Lyons has recently proposed that “the classical Christian account of conscience” is “a *cognitive* account of conscience”, one of “a voice” that delivers “message[s] about right and wrong conduct” (2009, p. 481). But ascribing such a vision of the good life seems precisely inconsistent with the formality that Sec. 3 identified and makes puzzling the supposed inexpressibility of ethics that Sec. 2 identified. However, as the next section will show, there is a way of interpreting these ideas, and the logic that Müller identifies, that undermines such an ascription, preserves that formality, and gives sense to that inexpressibility.

§ 5. Price on two understandings of “living well” —abstract and concrete

Anthony Price sets some of Müller’s thoughts to work in developing a reading of Aristotle. Price begins with a distinction that J. L. Austin marks between two different ways in which Aristotle takes an interest in *eudaimonia*:

Aristotle means to ask firstly: what is the analysis or definition of *eudaimonia*? And secondly: what life ... satisfies that definition or specification? (Austin 1961. p. 16)

It is one thing, as Austin puts it, to ask “what fills the bill” and another what the bill to be filled is (p. 16). For example, one might understand *eudaimonia* as the abstract goal of “living well” or “acting well”, but believe either that “[w]hat *counts as* [doing so] from context to context is concrete and variable” (Price 2011p. 4), or instead that we can specify a concrete and comprehensive understanding of “living well”. Renderings of *eudaimonia* as “happiness” or “human flourishing” might suggest the latter —a vision of what Sarah Broadie calls a “grand end”: “an explicit, comprehensive, substantial vision of that good”, a “blueprint of the good [that] guides its possessor in all his deliberations, and in terms [which] his rational choices can be explained and justified” (Broadie 1991, p. 198). Whether or not we should ascribe such a vision

¹⁷ I have quoted from some of these passages already and will quote from others below.

to Aristotle is not our concern here¹⁸. Ascribing one to Wittgenstein would be puzzling in that it would seem to be expressible or describable; and I will argue instead that his “absolute good” is better understood as the abstract objective of “living well”, which is also, in a recognizable sense, “inexpressible”, because it is not “a describable state of affairs” (LE, p. 40).

To make this case, let us note further important properties of the abstract objective that Price identifies. One is that *all* who decide how to act share it. They may differ in what they think “living well” amounts to in concrete terms here and now. But they aim to act in a way that they deem to be their acting well, seeking what they seek “under the guise of the good”, as the current rendering of the medieval notion goes. As Price puts it,

Acting well ... is the end inherent in all deliberate action. The kernel of this is simply that, in deliberating, an agent tries to identify what, for him then and there, is *the thing to do*. (Price 2011, p. 68)

Interestingly, this abstract objective shares key features with Müller’s “overall aim”, which is set for “every human life”. In particular, it is not one end of choice among others, nor an objective that one might question or for which one might propose a better alternative. If one envisages identifying such an objective in *concrete* terms, this will seem fanciful: to take two apposite proposals, neither happiness nor flourishing will clearly do, unless one relinquishes the goal of understanding them too in concrete, non-formal, non-abstract terms. But if — for instance— we understand the abstract objective as “doing what is best here and now”, as I will suggest in what follows, then that does meet the above requirements. To adapt a related thought of David Wiggins’, “nothing suitable by way of practical or ethical concern ... would be left over (outside the ambit of [this objective])” (1987, p. 223) on the basis of which it might be challenged: there is nothing left over that might trump “what is best”. Any alternative would only be pursued because *it* was deemed best, it instead being deemed to be what it is to act well here and now — “*the thing to do*”. Particular concrete goods can compete with each other, so to speak, over the pursuit of which would be best

¹⁸ Some interpreters do (e. g. Kraut 1993) and others do not —Broadie herself, for example, and Martin Heidegger, or so I argue in McManus 2020, which also draws on Price’s discussion. In other recent pieces (e.g., McManus 2019), I argue that similar themes to those I discuss in this paper can be found in Heidegger’s work too.

here and now. But they cannot compete —because they *do not* compete— with the abstract good of doing what is best here and now. This gives us a way to hear further formulations of Müller’s, who argues of that which has absolute value that “[i]t would not be up to me not to tend towards this aim ... for *any* option I took would already be inspired by *it*” (1989, p. 236). Hence, one might say of the latter,

It is an aim I do not *set* myself. It is there as soon as I am there; it is as little of my choosing as my existence is; it is somehow set before me. (Müller 1989: 238)

It is so because, as Price puts it, it is “*the* good of choice and action” (Price 2011: 39).

The above considerations give us a different way to hear some of Wittgenstein’s formulations. For example, I would here ask the reader to reread the passage quoted above from LE p. 40 —on “*the* absolutely right road”. Our discussion since sets in a new light two expressions one finds there: “on seeing it” and “if it is a describable state of affairs”.

“What is best” does, in fact, seem to represent a “road which everybody on seeing it would, *with logical necessity*, have to go, or be ashamed for not going”, a “good” “which everybody, independent of his tastes and inclinations, would *necessarily* bring about or feel guilty for not bringing about”¹⁹. Wittgenstein does declare that good to be a chimera, but crucially that that is so *if* that good is taken to be “a describable state of affairs”. But we have seen above a sense for “what is best” according to which that is precisely *not* a “describable state of affairs”. As Price puts it, the abstract objective of “living well” —“*the* good of choice and action”— is a “pure object of will” rather than a substantive, concrete end; it is a “bare abstraction”, “the mere notion of *the thing to do*” (Price 2011, pp. 39, 5, 68). Following Müller again (1989, p. 236), Price suggests that “living well” serves as the goal for our actions as the truth serves as the goal for belief. But “the question ‘Why do you believe that *p*, rather than that *q*?’ is not happily answered by replying ‘Because it is true that *p*, but not that *q*’”(Price 2011, p. 23). In Broadie’s terms, that is not a way in which one’s beliefs “can be explained

¹⁹ I set aside here questions that emerge in the demandingness literature (cf., e.g., Chappell 2009), where one of the issues is precisely whether failure to do what is best merits shame or guilt. In what follows, I endorse something akin to the intuition that it does, an intuition without which there would be no such literature, though Sec. 10 will refine what the intuition I endorse is. See also n. 22 below.

and justified”. In this sense, “living well” “isn’t a reason for doing one thing rather than another” and so “doesn’t properly belong *within* practical reasoning at all” (Price 2011, p. 40 n. 8)²⁰.

While these notions may identify for us a perspective which is—to refer back to Sec. 3— suitably formal, does this evasion of Scylla not lead us straight to Charybdis? Does the very formality of this perspective not rob it of a recognizable bearing on *ethics*? Another way to put this worry would be to worry that the “bare abstraction” identified above leaves us with nothing worth discussing—in the “bare logic” of this “thinnest of abstractions”, “the mere notion of *the thing to do*” (Price 2011, pp. 76, 221). To give the complaint one more formulation, if this is “*the good of choice and action*” surely everyone pursues it anyway. But that is not so for reasons which direct us to the other expression we singled out in the LE, p. 40 passage: “on seeing it”. What makes “what is best” a significant, discussion-worthy normative goal is that I may *fail* to act in its light. The above passage continues “No state of affairs has, in itself, what I would like to call the coercive power of an absolute judge” (LE, p. 40); and we have seen above a sense in which the authority of “*the good of choice and action*” cannot be challenged. But, nonetheless, one can fail to act in light of that good—and without *challenging* it— by one’s attention wandering from it; and that failure does indeed have a recognizable bearing on ethics.

§ 6. An immorality of half-truths

To fill out this proposal, examples of ethical failure that Müller offers are, I think, suggestive. He envisages someone correcting themselves by saying “No, I mustn’t tell this half-truth about X, however useful it would be for my career” (p. 240). A second example is someone remonstrating with another in saying “You must decide whether or not to speak to this man, you cannot leave it to chance” (p. 240)²¹.

What I propose we see in such examples are failures to subject one’s acts to

²⁰ This view might bring to mind more recent brands of constitutivism, in that the abstract objective, “what is best”, is “*the good of choice and action*” and can thus be said to be a constitutive good for both. But, to use Eric Wiland’s expression (2012, p. 141), it differs in that the rabbit which advocates of the brands mentioned seek to pull from their hats is a *concrete* good.

²¹ How representative these examples are of what we ordinarily think “ethical failure” is is a topic to which Sec. 11 will return.

the discipline of being what is best, and oneself to the discipline of doing what is best. In the first example, what the person says is not simply false and it will indeed be useful for her career; so she achieves two recognizable and real-enough goods. But they are also recognizably “relative” in that acting here solely in light of them may not be doing “what is best”. The same can be said of the second case. There, let us suppose, the person does not go out of her way to avoid speaking to the man in question about this presumably-important issue. That would be reprehensible; so in not doing that, she does here achieve at least this recognizable and real-enough good. But it is also recognizably merely a “relative” good, in that, in leaving to chance whether this issue is indeed raised with the man, she too fails to subject her acts to the discipline of being what would be best.

Now, as presented, these examples are, of course, under-described and each might be filled out to provide instances of doing what one sees as best. So the first person might have weighed her career and the interests of X and decided that the former really does matter more; and the second person might have decided that it would be best not to raise the issue with the man because she thinks that doing so will allow more important ends to be met. But as Müller presents them, I think they are offered as cases in which these individuals have allowed their attention to drift away from what is best. Their acts need not be merely doing what would be adequate or tolerable, or merely not clearly and straight-forwardly reprehensible. Rather these could indeed be acts which these individuals have very good reason to perform; and surely that is the reason why such ethical failures can remain hidden from their authors and from others. But the sense in which they represent failures, nonetheless, is that these acts are not what would have been best. If these actors were to open themselves up to the question of what is best—to echo LE, p. 40, if they were to *see* that absolute good—they would be ashamed of their actions as those who acted in the same way but in light of that question would not be²². The latter might suspect she will be criticised by others perhaps; but she still believes her action was best all the same.

Having cases of such a failure at the forefront of our minds helps give us

²² The worry about demandingness mentioned in n. 19 resurfaces here. Whether or not shame is precisely the relevant feeling, and whether or not feeling it is quite a matter of “logical necessity” (see LE 39 quoted above), Sec. 10 will identify a relevantly similar tension that, like shame, can be seen as an aversion to looking at one’s own life.

some sense, I will argue, of what might drive the most puzzling remarks of Wittgenstein's that Sec. 2 documented, including those that might appear to express belief in a concrete "grand end", and those on the ethical subject of which "we cannot speak". It gathers them around a suitably formal feat—that of openness to one's world as a whole—though one with a recognizable bearing on ethics.

§ 7. Absolute value, intimations of supernaturalism or nihilism, and the revelation of a world

Let us consider what it is that the agents in the previous section's examples fail to acknowledge. To take the first, would I be acting ethically if I took into account my career but also the need to be frank with whomever it is my comment addresses? The answer would seem still to be "No" if these admittedly-expanded concerns remained my only concerns, because I would still not be addressing the question of what is best. To address that, I must be open to my situation—the world as it here and now presents itself—as a whole and all the goods which in that situation I might achieve.

To develop this thought, consider this remark of Wittgenstein's:

The first thought in setting up an ethical law of the form "thou shalt ..." is: And what if I do not do it. But it is clear that ethics has nothing to do with punishment and reward in the ordinary sense (TLP 6.422).

This remark, initially formulated at the end of July 1916, clearly leaves open the possibility that ethics *does* have something to do with punishment and reward in an *extraordinary* sense, as Wittgenstein's identification of "the good life" with "the happy life" (NB 30.7.16, quoted above) might be seen as confirming, an identification to which Sec. 8 will return. But first let us identify a sense for Wittgenstein's negative claim about "punishment and reward in the ordinary sense".

A way to hear this claim that our reading suggests is that, whatever punishment or reward one's act elicits, the agent who focuses only on that is not acting ethically. An agent who does act ethically recognizes instead that there is an issue—what is best—that goes beyond any such particular relative good. No relative good can resolve that issue because what is best is only resolvable by

reference to consideration of *all* relevant such goods *as a whole*. It is to ask what one's situation as a whole amounts to —one's world as a whole here and now. To orient oneself by absolute value, one might say, is to orient oneself then to an issue that lies outside the mere matters of fact that statements of relative value articulate. To echo TLP 6.41, inside the world, “there is no [absolute] value”; and to follow Wittgenstein's perplexing formulation, “if there were, it would be of no value” —or at least no absolute value— as anything inside the world cannot in itself and by itself be “what is best”.

Wittgenstein tells us that “the only life that is happy“ —that “is good”— “is the life that can renounce the amenities [*Annehmlichkeiten*] of the world” (NB 13.8.16). But what might sound here like supernaturalism or nihilism —or indeed asceticism or Schopenhauerianism— is already required merely by weddedness to the higher —though formal— good that is “what is best”, in that orienting oneself by that is to be capable of renouncing any good one finds within the world. It is to see a question mark over the importance of —to “maintain one's distance” from— any such merely relative good. If one cannot, then the question of “what is best” is closed to one²³.

This gives us a way of understanding Wittgenstein's connecting of “absolute or ethical value” with “wonder at the existence of the world” (LE, p. 41). What I must be reminded of, as it were²⁴, if I am to act ethically is not this or that concrete good but instead that they populate a world —that, for all their (relative) significance, they *in themselves* cannot be “what is best”, as they can be that only in relation to the other goods servable in my world. One may act as a good father, a good son, or a good tennis player, or be good at getting to Grantchester. But if one confines one's attention to these feats *within* one's world, one is not acting ethically. For the achieving of any such feat to be that, it must be what would be best and that is a feature which no state of affairs within the world can possess on its own, because it is a feature which manifests itself only within the context of a world. Thus one might contrast, as Wittgenstein

²³ An interesting topic which I will not explore here is how these thoughts align, or fail to align, with Moore's in *Principia Ethica* and, in particular, those around the idea of a “naturalistic fallacy” (1903: 62). Wittgenstein had a low opinion of the book—writing to Russell “I do not like it at all” (CL 13)—but that is consistent with it shaping his thought.

²⁴ Sec. 13 will return to the question of how to characterise this realisation that Wittgenstein here associates with wonder and I characterise here—borrowing from the later Wittgenstein (cf. PI 127)—as “being reminded”.

does, “[t]he usual way of looking at things”, which “sees objects as it were from the midst of them”, with “the good life”, which sees objects “[i]n such a way that they have the whole world as background” (NB 7.10.16). The agent who has fallen into assessing their actions by reference only to some relative good —“I have to do my job”, “I have to follow orders”, “I have to take care of my family”— must then be reminded, as it were, of the existence of the world rather than merely some overlooked state of affairs —*if*, that is, they are to act ethically. The “object” —the “pure object of will”— that they must have before their eyes, and in light of which they distinctively act, is the world.

§ 8. Happiness, harmony, and agreement with the world

This notion of an openness to the world offers a sense for remarks of Wittgenstein’s that might otherwise tempt us to ascribe to him belief in a comprehensive, concrete good that might “guide [an agent] in all his deliberations” (Broadie, quoted above). The present section focuses on his remarks on happiness, and the following section on those on the meaning of life.

Wittgenstein’s identification of the good life as the happy life elicits from him a question:

[I]f I *now* ask myself: But why should I live *happily*, then this of itself seems to me to be a tautological question; the happy life seems to be justified, of itself, it seems that it *is* the only right life. (NB 30.7.16)

But Wittgenstein also wonders whether he wants to say more. He continues

[W]e could say: The happy life seems to be in some sense more *harmonious* [*harmonischer*] than the unhappy. But in what sense?? (NB 30.7.16)

Earlier that month, we wrote

When my conscience upsets my equilibrium, then I am not in agreement with [*in*

Übereinstimmung mit] something. But what is this? Is it *the world*? (NB 8.7.16)²⁵

And the same day he experiments with this thought:

In order to live happily I must be in agreement with the world. And that is what “being happy” *means*. (NB 8.7.16)

Two days earlier we find formulations of perplexing remarks that will find a place in the *Tractatus*:

If good or bad willing changes the world, it can only change the limits of the world, not the facts; ...

In brief, the world must thereby become quite another. It must so to speak wax or wane as a whole.

The world of the happy is quite another than that of the unhappy. (6.43)

Despite the initial promise of their talk of happiness, these remarks share in the same puzzling formality that mark so many of Wittgenstein’s remarks on ethics. But our discussion above suggests a way of reading them. Through their multiple conceptual equations, we arrive at the conclusion that the good life is a life lived in harmony not with any particular fact but with the world, and the life of bad willing must then be in disagreement—disharmony—with the world. This suggests that the world that good willing confronts differs from that which bad willing confronts—or, as the reading I have offered above has it, fails to confront—not merely in their content, the particular facts they contain²⁶. Rather, as that reading suggests, bad willing is a failure of openness. As the *Notebook* source of 6.43 glosses this “waning” of the “whole”, this shrinking inwards of the limits of the world is “[a]s if by ... loss of sense [*Sinn*]”, while the “waxing of the world”—which the conscience that “upsets [the] equilibrium” of the unhappy man of bad will prompts—is an “accession of sense” (NB 5.7.16). As the following section will discuss further, to grasp the *Sinn* of a proposition

²⁵ For what it is worth, *Übereinstimmung* gives us an etymological echo of Wittgenstein’s invocation of “harmony”, the root meaning of “*Stimmung*” being the tuning of a musical instrument.

²⁶ Contrast Russell 1914, p. 45: “The difference between a good world and a bad one is a difference in the particular characteristics of the particular things that exist in these worlds”.

is to grasp a way that the world can be and the reading I have offered understands the closing off from the world that is a failure to act ethically as failure to engage with the world as the whole that it is —the space of possible actions and of possible facts that might solicit them contracted to only those that some relative good or other illuminates²⁷. The world of the happy is qualitatively different from —is “quite another than”— that of the unhappy.

§ 9. The transparency of the good, and of the meaning of life

A choice of wording that I have largely obscured in discussion so far is emerging as important here. In another of the clusters of remarks that suggests endorsement —coherent or otherwise— of a comprehensive, concrete good, the expression I have rendered as “the meaning of life” —a rendering which encourages the endorsement I will contest— is “*der Sinn des Lebens*”. In NB, Anscombe and von Wright render this as “the meaning of life”, as does Marjorie Perloff in PNB; and in the context of ordinary German, this is not wildly misleading either. But we are not in such a context here, but rather in Frege’s shadow. There choosing “*Sinn*” over “*Bedeutung*” has a significance, on which Wittgenstein offers the following gloss in the 1914 dictation for G. E. Moore:

The *Bedeutung* of a proposition is the fact that corresponds to it ... That a proposition has a relation (in wide sense) to Reality, other than that of *Bedeutung*, is shewn by the fact that you can understand it when you don’t know the *Bedeutung*, i.e. don’t know whether it is true or false. Let us express this by saying “It has sense” (*Sinn*). (NB, p. 112).

To grasp a *Sinn* is then, one might say, to grasp a question or issue —that *p* or not-*p*— and I propose that “the meaning of life” that the ethical subject grasps is also best understood as a question or issue.

“[T]o see that life has a meaning [*Sinn*]”, Wittgenstein tells us, is “to understand the question about the meaning [*Sinn*] of life” (NB 8.7.16). To understand that, my reading proposes, is to understand that there is an *issue* of how one’s life is going which outstrips consideration of one’s successes and failures as a parent, as an employee, etc. One’s life faring well is not, as it were, another success alongside success as a parent or employee, but one’s success as all that one is; and, in the above outstripping, one “see[s] that the facts of the

²⁷ Cf. NB 8.7.16’s identification of “a bad life” with a “false life”.

world”, among which one finds such particular, “relative” successes, “are not the end of the matter” (NB 8.7.16).

This suggests a reading of some of Wittgenstein’s most puzzling remarks:

The solution of the problem of life is seen in the vanishing of this problem.

(Is not this the reason why men to whom after long doubting the meaning [Sinn] of life became clear, could not then say wherein this meaning consisted?) (TLP 6.521, cf. NB 6–7.7.16)

The reading I have offered proposes that “to see that life has a meaning” is an openness to one’s world as a whole; through that, one sees how one’s life is too: “[t]he world is *my* world” (TLP 5.62)²⁸. In place of what one might call the speculative question of “the meaning of life” and what we might imagine as its possible concrete answers, to be open to the *Sinn* of life is to be open to a question²⁹, rather than an answer—something in which a meaning of life might be thought to “consist”. Instead we recognize that our life poses of us the question, “How is my life faring and how ought I to live it here and now?”. Moreover, the person who recognizes that question engages with that life as a whole in recognizing and responding to the need to determine what is best. One might say that she gets on with living her life—though, crucially, as the whole that it is. The penultimate remark Wittgenstein recorded before first formulating the 6.521 remarks reads “we could say that the man is fulfilling the purpose of existence who no longer needs to have any purpose except to live” (NB 6.7.16). “[T]he purpose of existence”—like the “meaning of life”—is not then to be found within life, one might say—as one purpose among others such as being a good father or having a rewarding career. Instead it is recognized through the formal feat of living that life as the whole that it is. But to achieve that feat is not to direct one’s attention away to another concrete objective beyond those that make up the substance—so to speak—of one’s life. To be oriented—guided by the pursuit of—what is best is to be open to those concrete goods as the whole that they are. To use an expression to which I will return, the former abstract objective becomes then transparent³⁰; and this also provides

²⁸ See n. 30.

²⁹ Cf. NB 11.6.16: “There is something problematic about [the world], which we call its meaning [*Sinn*]”.

³⁰ Wittgenstein associates the remark, “the world is *my* world”, with a truth of some sort in solipsism; and it is hard not to think here of the remark (TLP 5.64) that “solipsism strictly followed through [*durchgeführt*]”

us with a perspective, I would tentatively suggest, on Wittgenstein's remarks on the subject.

§ 10. The transparency of a good will

In the *Tractatus*, we read

The thinking, representing [*vorstellende*] subject; there is no such thing. (TLP 5.631)

I have suggested above that one reason for saying this is that tasks which we might think that that subject performs are, according to Wittgenstein, mirages conjured up by confusion. In addition to the tasks that Sec. 2 identified and which lie at the heart of Kant's transcendental project, these include unifying candidate constituents of propositions into fully-fledged propositions, and unifying language with world, by "psychological processes link[ing] language to reality" — "mental acts of meaning" "inject[ing]" "content... into the constituent names of a propositional sign", as Hacker puts it (1996, pp. 23, 683).

As these tasks melt away³¹, so does the work that a representing subject might do, along with the space in which it might live and do that work. In all of these cases, an account in which the subject did play a part would be marked by what Wittgenstein calls the wrong "logical multiplicity" (TLP 4.04). A substantive explanation of how a subject assembles a proposition from constituents, for example, allows us to imagine those constituents having, as it were, an independent life beyond their participation in propositions; and the work that such a subject would do introduces too great a "logical multiplicity" in that some propositions making sense then becomes a matter of fact determined by how those constituents and the subject that would bind them are. Such matters of fact could have been otherwise, in which case there are logical possibilities beyond those that that explanation was meant to determine as *the* logical possibilities. If we are to avoid this outcome, the work of such a subject and the need for such work must then be, as it were, squeezed out. An analogous conclusion struck Russell when faced with the notion that a proposition is

— "[t]he world being *my* world" strictly followed through— "coincides with [*zusammenfällt*]" — collapses into?— "pure realism". Cf. NB 15.10.16.

³¹ Note that Hacker thinks that Wittgenstein believes that the subject actually does perform the second task presented. McManus 2006: ch. 8 gives reasons for thinking otherwise.

unified by a logical form, an entity which —when its role is thought through— it is difficult to understand as anything other than just one more constituent whose integration itself seems to require explanation³². Wittgenstein concurs, concluding that the constituents of propositions must “fit into one another like the links in a chain” (TLP 2.03), meaning “*that there isn’t anything third* that connects the links but the links *themselves* make connexion with one another” (LO 23).³³ So much then for the representing subject.

But while “[t]he representing subject is surely mere illusion”, “the willing subject exists” (NB 7.8.16). As we have seen, Wittgenstein ascribes to the subject the reality of which he does countenance a number of puzzling characteristics. In ways that the reader might perhaps anticipate, Sec. 14 will return to his depiction of it as a boundary or limit of the world, as well as its depiction as necessary if the world is to have a “centre”. But here I will concentrate on his proposal that of this “bearer of ethics”, “which we call the I” (NB 7.8.16), “we cannot speak” (TLP 6.423). The reading I have offered suggests one possible way of understanding these obscure remarks.

A peculiarity of the logic of judgments of what is best is that they seem to be recognizably self-expressive³⁴. Wittgenstein presents statements that justify acts in light of relative goods as taking the following form:

(R) If one seeks to achieve relative good x , what ought to be done here is y .

In response to my making such a judgment, I can be asked “Yes, but what do *you* think ought to be done?” The same is not true of a statement about what overall here would be best. This is clearest if we render such a statement as an all-things-considered judgment:

(A) All things considered, what ought to be done here is y .

Were I to make such a statement, it makes no sense to ask me “Yes, but what do

³² See, e.g., Russell (1913, p. 98).

³³ These remarks actually concern objects and their relationship with states of affairs. But parallel considerations bear on propositions and their constituents.

³⁴ McManus (2019) presents the following considerations in greater detail.

you think ought to be done?” There would seem to be something akin to Moore’s paradox in my following up the expression of (A) with “... though *I* think that what ought to be done is *z*”³⁵. I can follow up (R) with such an addition because (R) leaves room for further thoughts or valuations of mine recommending other courses of action. But (A) does not³⁶. With (A) I express *myself* in a way that I do not with (R). As one might put it, with (A), I express all of myself, but not with (R).

This has a bearing on old questions concerning what self-expression is—of what it is to make a judgment of one’s own. One might think of such a judgment as —so to speak— on the same level as, or alongside, and, hence, as a rival to, considerations that judgments of form (R) express: there is what ought to be done to achieve relative good *x*, what ought to be done to achieve relative good *y*, and then there is what *I* think ought to be done —and I listen inwardly to hear my own contribution to this clamour. Such a picture leads, of course, to familiar problems: on what non-arbitrary basis could I enter that conversation? On what basis do I arrive at what I think if not considerations of the sort that judgments of the form (R) express? According to the argument presented here, my voice does not bring a further content-bearing, rival voice into that clamour, like a supposedly unifying logical form elbowing its way into a proposition, only to find itself just one more constituent to be included in the unification. Instead my voice manifests itself —to myself too— when I make a judgment of form (A) —when I take in this clamour as a whole, the many considerations that these many (R) judgments express, assessing on the basis they provide what overall should be done. Such self-expression is not then listening to some idiosyncratic inner voice, a “phenomenon” that is “part of the world” (NB 2.8.16) —here an inner world— and “only of interest to psychology” (TLP 6.423). Instead it is my looking at my situation as a whole —my world as a world³⁷.

³⁵ See nn. 19 and 22.

³⁶ To return to themes from Sec. 5, it is noteworthy that the most plausible candidates envisioned as comprehensive, concrete goods—happiness and fulfilment, for example—here behave like “relative goods”: there seems nothing obviously incongruous about saying “If one seeks to achieve happiness—or fulfilment—what ought to be done here is *y*, though *I* think that what ought to be done is *z*”.

³⁷ Obviously much more needs to be said here. For example, taking in this clamour as a whole is not merely believing a conjunction of the relative judgments it presents, but rather adjudicating or weighing the considerations they yield. But if so, how? For some discussion of this, and of how systematic an account of such matters it makes sense to expect, see McManus (2019 and 2020).

I talked above of the transparency of “what is best” and of “the *Sinn* of life”; and we might hear echoes now of Gareth Evans’ notion of “transparency”. Just as “I get myself in a position to answer the question whether I believe that *p* by putting into operation whatever procedure I have for answering the question whether *p*” (Evans 1982, p. 225), I determine *my* judgment of how to act not by hearkening to some further, inner voice but by considering what *overall* my situation calls for. I arrive at a judgment of my own not, say, by looking within to find my strongest desire —“a phenomenon ... only of interest to psychology”— but instead accomplish it by making a whole of the multiple relative goods that I might serve in my situation as a whole in bringing myself to determine what is best. When a person makes such judgments, an “I” expresses itself; but there is nothing to say about that “willing subject” beyond what its judgment happens to affirm, in that that is what that “I” thinks.

Two features of the abstract, ‘absolute’ good are echoed here then by features of the ‘transparent’ good will. As we saw above, the abstract, ‘absolute’ good is not a describable state of affairs and is not a rival to particular, concrete, ‘relative’ goods. Similarly, the response that acknowledges the abstract, ‘absolute’ good—the willing of the ethical subject—is not the holding of a belief with some distinctive, concrete content, that (*per impossibile*) would describe that good; and nor is that acknowledging response a rival to claims about ways we must act if we are to attain particular, concrete, ‘relative’ goods. Instead the distinctive form that response takes—the response that is orientation by the absolute good that is ‘what is best’—is the formal or abstract feat of openness to one’s world as a whole and the claims made by all of the relative goods one might pursue there, whatever they might turn out to be. The abstract good is indescribable in that it would be a category error to identify it with some particular, describable, concrete state of affairs, though in any particular situation there will be some such state of affairs that realises that abstract good; similarly, the good will is indescribable—of it ‘we cannot speak’—in that it would be a category error to identify it with some particular, describable, concrete belief about how one should act, though in any particular situation there will be some such belief that realises that good will. No more than the absolute good is a grand end is the good will a similarly grand belief.

§ 11. Objections – I: A narrow conception of ethics

I will end this paper by indulging in some speculation concerning the bearing

of this discussion on Wittgenstein's elusive claim that "the point of [the *Tractatus*] is ethical". But before doing so, I will consider briefly three objections to the reading as developed so far. The first objection is that, although I have striven here to respect the "formality" of Wittgenstein's discussion of ethics while also making sense of it as a discussion *of ethics*, my reading still errs on the side of formality. The second objection emerges out of my response to the first, while the third could be seen as the flip-side of the first.

The challenge of behaving ethically upon which my discussion focuses is that of doing not what happens to be best in some —as one might say— objective sense, but rather what is best as one would oneself judge it to be were one to make that judgment. If one meets this challenge, one's will is good in that one resists what is recognizably a kind of bad faith³⁸, being satisfied with half-truths, which one would confront and recognize as such were one to "collect oneself" and take into account all the (relative) concrete goods that one oneself otherwise acknowledges. By way of a rough approximation, one might borrow from Bernard Williams (see his 1981) and say that the task is that of being properly responsive to one's internal reasons, as opposed to external reasons. But meeting that challenge is then precisely consistent with succumbing to other forms of ethical failure in that those who meet it may give weight to considerations that, in some objective, external sense, they shouldn't and not give weight to considerations that, in some objective, external sense, they should. There would seem then to be a certain thinness or narrowness —an excessive formality— to my Wittgenstein's understanding of what ethical success and failure are.

My response to this objection comes in two parts —one interpretive and one philosophical. In assessing the interpretive significance of this objection, the relevant question to ask is, of course, "Did Wittgenstein himself hold this (perhaps narrow) view?", and I think there is reason to think he did. But we also should not overstate how narrow a view of ethical success and failure this is.

As Sec. 10 explained, the success Wittgenstein identifies is self-expression, one's taking charge of one's situation as a whole, one might say. Similarly, Price observes, "to aim at *acting well* ... is what it is to take responsibility for one's own actions", and that is "arguably an essential feature of morality" (Price 2011, p. 41). "As a goal", acting well, "remains abstract": "In order to achieve it, an agent needs to take into account *whatever* significant values and disvalues he

³⁸ Cf. n. 9.

can produce or prevent by the options open to him” (Price 2011, p. 53, cf. p. 68), and the narrowness charge is that the values and disvalues to which the agent is open may themselves render him subject to ethical criticism. But failure to attend to those values and disvalues is still a recognizable and crucial ethical failure too. It is a failure to arrive at a view that can indeed be identified as one’s own and, hence, a failure to set to work the capacity one has to bring about what one oneself believes should be brought about, one’s capacity to do what oneself sees as good. That is to fail to take responsibility for one’s life and actions.

Nonetheless, applying properly one’s capacity to judge what is best is consistent with behaving reprehensibly if one’s judgment is informed by reprehensible first-order ethical opinions, that is, by responsiveness to values and disvalues to which the agent ought not to respond and non-responsiveness to values and disvalues to which the agent ought to respond—both of these being external “oughts”. But to shift now to the interpretive part of my response to this first objection, I suspect that any reading that claimed to find first-order guidance on ethical matters in Wittgenstein’s remarks would be very hard to defend³⁹. My principal reason for ascribing to Wittgenstein a focus on the second-order feat of applying properly one’s capacity to judge what is best is that doing so helps us understand aspects of his philosophy, as the previous sections have attempted to demonstrate. But it also seems to be consonant with what we know of Wittgenstein’s life.

Consider the assessment of two of his biographers. Ray Monk proposes that

[Wittgenstein’s] life might be said to have been dominated by an ethical struggle—the struggle to be *anständig* (decent), which for him, meant, above all, overcoming the temptation presented by his pride and vanity to be dishonest. (1990: 278)

Similarly, Brian McGuinness claims that

[Wittgenstein sought] to engage his friends and disciples in a moral enterprise characterized above all by the effort to see clearly and to be completely honest with oneself and others. (2002, p. 6)

³⁹ Though I will not pursue this issue further, Wittgenstein may stand in the tradition dating back at least to Aristotle for which there may be nothing for philosophy to say to those who, for example, simply do not care about the suffering of others, as justifications—like explanations—must “come to an end” (PI 1).

This struggle for honesty is naturally understood, I would suggest, as that of bringing one's own capacity to judge to bear in one's life, of arriving at a judgment of one's own by looking at what is there to be seen; and a failure to exercise this capacity for self-expression is also recognizably a failure of self-knowledge —of honesty in particular with oneself, undermined by “the temptation presented by ... pride and vanity”⁴⁰. Or so I will argue in the next section, though I will begin that argument by articulating an objection that the *Tractatus* precisely denies us the possibility of making sense of self-knowledge; my reading faces an objection too here if —by stressing that notion— it stresses a notion of which the *Tractatus* makes no sense.

12. Objections – II: The absence of an object for self-knowledge

The objection is: of what can self-knowledge be knowledge, if “there is no such thing” as “[t]he thinking, presenting subject” (TLP 5.631) and of “the willing subject”— “the bearer of ethics”— “we cannot speak”? More precisely, if the latter is merely, so to speak, a feature of the formal geometry of the world — either its “limit” or its “centre”— how can what one knows when one knows that relate to the seemingly far more personal and specific kind of self-knowledge that Wittgenstein's “moral enterprise” of “struggl[ing] to be decent” seems to aim to acquire? Are we not looking here for a self that is indeed a “part of the world” (NB 2.8.16) —even if here an inner world— and which is indeed “of interest to psychology” (TLP 6.423)?

My reading may seem to exacerbate these worries with, for example, Sec. 10's depiction of a “transparent” willing subject. But I believe that, in fact, it provides a way of dealing with them, as Sec. 9 has already hinted. I touched

⁴⁰ Cf. n. 9 and CL 66: “*Far* the most important thing is to settle accounts with myself!” A concern with the ethical significance of self-knowledge is recognizably in the *Zeitgeist* in the early decades of the 20th century, not only in existentialist literature but also in the work of figures in Wittgenstein's personal pantheon, such as Karl Kraus (see, e. g. CV, p. 16) for whom, Allan Janik and Stephen Toulmin propose, “[t]he distinguishing characteristic of all that is moral ... is integrity” (1973, p. 81). Similarly, one finds it in what Engelmann reports (in LPE, p. 116) to have been a favourite quotation of Wittgenstein's from Wilhelm Busch's *Eduards Traum*: “[J]oking apart, my friends, only a man who has a heart can feel and say truly, indeed from the heart, that he is good for nothing. That done, things will sort themselves out”.

there on Wittgenstein's remark that "[t]he world is *my* world" (TLP 5.62) and on the notion that an openness to one's world as a whole is at the same time an openness to one's life too. "The world and life is one" (TLP 5.621), the *Tractatus* asserts, and the openness to the world that characterises the ethical agent is also an openness to the agent herself. Crucially, this is not just to how things are with her *as* a mother, *as* someone developing a career, *as* striving to play tennis well, or indeed *as* the pursuer of any particular relative good. It is openness not simply to how she is faring in those particular activities but to how *she* is faring—how she is faring overall—an openness to *herself*, one might say, as an openness to how her life as the whole that it is is going. To echo Sec. 10's proposal that self-expression is not a further voice alongside those of one's reasons, the self one knows through such self-knowledge is not some further entity alongside that which here is a mother, an employee etc., but the person who is all of those things at once and in their world as a whole⁴¹. To know that the person must "collect herself": she must gather her life—and, hence, also her world—together, provide it with a "centre", and refuse to be satisfied with half-truths and the fragments—the fractions—of that life and world that such half-truths reveal.

This is an apposite moment to return to another of Wittgenstein's discussions which might suggest the endorsement—coherent or otherwise—of a comprehensive, concrete good. As we saw earlier, conscience is a concept on which Wittgenstein's notebooks touch and on a number of occasions⁴²; and, as Sec. 2 noted, one might read these passages with what Lyons depicts as "the classical Christian account of conscience" in mind: "a voice" that delivers "message[s] about right and wrong conduct". Here one might then think one finds first-order ethical instruction issuing from a concrete conception of the good.

But there is more to discussion of conscience in the Christian tradition than this. As Augustine puts it in the *Confessions*, when "conscience upbraided" him,

⁴¹ The thought that openness to oneself is openness to one's world also suggests a way to approach Wittgenstein's claims that "[t]he I is not an object", and that "I objectively confront every object" "[b]ut not the I" (NB 11.8.16), to which he adds the next day his well-known observation on the place of the eye in the visual field (cf. TLP 5.6331) and a first formulation of the remark, "the world is *my* world". How I am is how my world is and the latter is not an object I find amongst others.

⁴² Cf. NB 8.7.16 quoted above, 13.8.16 and PNB 11.2.15. For references to later discussions, see McManus (2006: chs. 13 and 14).

he “stood naked before [his] own eyes” (1961, p. 169)⁴³; and another key theme in that tradition is its depiction of such self-knowledge as achieved precisely by—as we might indeed put it—collecting ourselves. We see this, for example, in a passage from Paul which greatly influenced later discussion of conscience: “[w]hen God judges the secrets of human hearts”, “[t]heir conscience is called as witness, and their own thoughts argue the case on either side, against them or ... for them” (Romans 2, 15–16). Similarly, Calvin insists that “conscience ... does not suffer a man to suppress what he knows within himself” (1956, p. 42). Such a call of conscience is “transparent” too then in that it calls on us to apply our own judgment, not telling us what we should do, but calling for us to confront what our own thoughts collectively tell us, including —naked now before our own eyes—about ourselves⁴⁴.

Such thoughts also give us a new way to hear formulations to which Müller is led. “The conception of absolute requirement” that he identifies —and which I have identified as the abstract demand to do what is best— is one that calls on me to “give my life a shape that [is] at one, and agree[s], with me”; this is a call to “be true to my innermost tendency ... on pain of losing myself” (pp. 242, 236, cf. 244). My reading identifies two senses in which this is so. Through what Sec. 10 argued we should understand as self-expression, we achieve what the present section argues is self-knowledge. I see myself, and I see for myself what I then see. I look not just as a father or as a teacher and I see myself rather than just myself as a father or as a teacher. Similarly, we can revisit Müller’s proposals quoted above that the “absolute requirement” “is there as soon as I am there”, “is as little of my choosing as my existence is”, and “is somehow set before me”. If it isn’t, or rather if I allow myself to look away from it, it is because I am not set before myself either: *I am looking away from myself*.

§ 13. Objections – III: An ethic that is not narrow enough

The last objection I will consider is the flip-side of the first in that, while the latter worries that my reading ascribes to Wittgenstein a conception of ethics that is too formal, the former worries it is too substantial —too concrete, or not

⁴³ On pride and vanity as principal obstacles to acknowledging one’s conscience, and, hence, to seeing oneself for oneself, see Augustine (1961, pp. 247–48).

⁴⁴ For what it is worth, this is the point from which I would begin in presenting my account of the comparison that n. 7 mentions.

narrow enough. In particular, he might be seen as pressing upon us something like the demand that we live our lives as wholes, rather than allowing ourselves to be captivated by certain roles or goals amongst those we have.

But as Sec. 5 argued, the demand to do what by one's own lights is best is not one that one can intelligibly oppose. One can question whether what is proposed as best is indeed best, but not question doing what is best. The failure then with which pursuing this good contrasts is not then a weddedness to an incorrect substantive moral philosophical thesis; rather it is a state of confusion or inattention. In this sense, "[a] bad life is an unreasonable life", one in which "you are irrational" (PNB 189), though characterising this condition and what it is to escape it is difficult.

In Sec. 7, I used the metaphor of "being reminded", though one might also envisage escaping this condition as being —as it were— awoken; and the words to which those who might wake us seem naturally to turn take on a character that can also seem puzzling but which reflects the work those words do. Outside of the context of that use, where we might perhaps imagine them as *informing* the sleeper, the information they provide seems so trivial as to render the need to relay it mystifying in itself. (The notion of "reminding" goes some way to addressing this concern, though arguably not far enough). Similarly, imagined as part of an *argument* with the sleeper, then they would have to represent a *counter*-argument to that which cannot be argued *for* —that which is, as our final section will note, "palpably senseless" (TLP 6.51). Moreover, given that we misunderstand these words if we see them as *opposing* an incorrect moral philosophical thesis, we also misunderstand them if we see them as *proposing* a correct moral philosophical thesis.

I have in mind here statements such as "You are not just a father, you are a human being!" or "Your life is happening now!" To echo Price, one might say that these utterances are not offering "reasons for doing one thing rather than another" and so do not "properly belong *within* practical reasoning at all". In Sec. 9's terms, they seek not to change the hearer's mind on an issue, but to get them to acknowledge where there is indeed an issue. Correspondingly, the closest to an articulation of *learning* something in waking —from the inattentive living of no more than a fragment of one's life— might well be, as LE proposes, "wonder at the existence of the world". That reaction too cannot be understood as mere revision of belief but recognition that one had been living as if the "palpably senseless" were true. Nor does it provide one with a "reason for doing one thing rather than another", some guidance on which to draw in living one's

life, or the solution to a problem; rather on arriving at such wonder out of confusion, one then —as Sec. 9 put it— gets on with living one’s life, assuming one’s responsibility to judge, and act in, one’s here and now. One has climbed a ladder that one then throws away.

§ 14. “Ethics is transcendental”: conceiving the world as a whole, and the ethical point of the *Tractatus*

In this final section, I will offer some tentative thoughts about how my discussion might bear on Wittgenstein’s proposal that the point of the *Tractatus* is ethical.⁴⁵

Sec. 2 identified a number of projects that might be seen as “delimiting” the world by identifying substantial, philosophically–interesting, unifying structurings to the world —via the “causal nexus” and mathematics. Wittgenstein’s “dissolution” of those projects might seem to sit uneasily alongside the *Tractatus*’ articulation of a “general form of the proposition” (TLP 6) —an articulation on which indeed the 6.4s and early 6.5s, with which we have been so concerned, are comments— as that “give[s] the essence of all description” and “therefore the essence of the world” (5.471–5.4711). But the unity that this general form identifies is also one that specifically flushes out a substantial, philosophically–interesting, unifying structuring of the world —in this case that stemming from the traction that logic would have on this whole.

Frege and Russell saw logic as “the study” of that “which hold[s] of all entities”, “of what can be said of *everything*”⁴⁶. Yet Wittgenstein’s “general form” unifies by insisting that at bottom all propositions are truth–functional combinations of elementary propositions, where the latter are logically independent of each other, while truth–functions can be understood as —briefly put— no more than syntactic devices. On this basis, Wittgenstein argues that

⁴⁵ These thoughts may also have implications for the question of what right Wittgenstein might have to believe that it makes sense to imagine “the problems of philosophy” being “in essentials finally solved” (TLP preface), and the issue of whether we find in his early work “a general lesson applicable to all philosophical discourse or a piecemeal approach to philosophical propositions” (Conant and Diamond 2004, p. 71). But I will leave those matters for another day.

⁴⁶ 1901 draft of the first chapter of Russell (1903, p. 187). Cf. Frege’s description of logic as “the science of the most general laws of truth” (1897, p. 128), laws that “transcend all particulars” (1879, p. iv) and “hold [] with the utmost generality for all thinking, whatever its subject-matter” (1897, p. 128).

“[t]he propositions of logic are tautologies” (6.1)⁴⁷; and, hence, the need to account for the traction of logic on the world receives a parallel “dissolution” too. What unifies all propositions, one might say, is their *lack* of a substantial logical unity, and the same goes for the world —“the totality of facts” (TLP 1.1).

Yet the ethical subject provides the world with a “centre” —something around which the world can manifest itself as a unity— and, as a “limit of the world”, delimits it (NB 7.8.16 and TLP 5.632, quoted above). In these two ways, Wittgenstein articulates the idea that ethics is a “condition of the world” (NB 24.7.16) —what one might indeed call a transcendental condition in being a condition of our experiencing a world as a world. To develop this thought, let us bring in two final notions that are seemingly key in Wittgenstein’s discussion of ethics: “God” and “the mystical”.

Wittgenstein weaves the concept of “God” into his discussion of concepts upon which we have already touched. For example,

To believe in God means to see that life has a meaning [*Sinn*]. ... Certainly it is correct to say: Conscience is the voice of God. (NB 8.7.16)

But as mentioned earlier, this is an idiosyncratic conception of God:

How things stand, is God.
God is, how things stand. (NB 1.8.16)

remarks that immediately follow the assertion that “Ethics is transcendent [*transcendent*]” (NB 31.7.16).

By the *Tractatus*, some of these claims have been refined. For example, now “[e]thics is transcendental [*transzendental*]” (6.421), and

How the world is, is completely indifferent for what is higher. God does not reveal himself [*offenbart sich*] in the world. (6.432)

Echoing the proposal that “ethics is inexpressible”, Wittgenstein weaves another puzzling notion into the discussion:

⁴⁷ For a more detailed explanation of how, see McManus (2006: ch. 11).

Not *how* the world is, is the mystical, but *that* it is. (TLP 6.44)

There is indeed the inexpressible. ... [I]t is the mystical. (TLP 6.522)

But what does it mean to say, as these sentences entail, that “[t]here is indeed the mystical“?

Here is a possible gloss on the above passages that builds on our earlier discussion. The call of conscience —as “the voice of God”— is the call of “how things stand”. This is the call of how things as a whole are —not these or those particular things, but things in general or as a whole. Drawing on our earlier discussion this is the call of the world —of “all that is the case” (TLP 1). Similarly, “[t]o believe in God” is to believe that there is such a thing as “how things stand” —how things in general or as a whole are; and as “[t]he world is *my* world”, to that “thing” corresponds belief that “life has a meaning” —a *Sinn*. That is, there is a question of how my life as a whole is —not how I am faring in this particular role or in pursuit of that particular goal, but overall and as such.

What then of “the mystical“? While Russell was convinced that the author of the *Tractatus* had “become a complete mystic” (CL 140), Engelmann was convinced that Wittgenstein “was never a mystic in the sense of occupying his mind with mystic–gnostic fantasies” (Engelmann 1967, p. 79). So just what Wittgenstein has in mind when he talks of “the mystical” is unclear. But one possible source of inspiration here is Russell’s own essay, “Mysticism and Logic”⁴⁸.

There Russell reflects on the nature of metaphysics, which he identifies as “the attempt to conceive the world as a whole by means of thought“:

Metaphysics, or the attempt to conceive the world as a whole by means of thought, has been developed, from the first, by the union and conflict of two very different human impulses, the one urging men towards mysticism, the other urging them towards science.

⁴⁸ This appeared in the July 1914 edition of the *Hibbert Journal*. (See the preface of the collection in which the paper is reprinted and for which it provides a title.) The proposal that this paper was a significant influence on Wittgenstein certainly needs to be treated with caution, as there is almost certainly much that he would have rejected in it, it is possible that he knew of its content only through discussion (see Klagge 2022, p. 291 n. 38 for this proposal), and there clearly are other possible sources of inspiration, such as William James’ *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, lectures 16 and 17 of which are devoted to mysticism (see CL 14).

(1914, p. 20)

What then is mysticism? Russell proposes a number of identifying features. But “[o]ne of the most convincing aspects of the mystic illumination is the apparent revelation of the oneness of all things”; and in light of recognition that “the universe is one indivisible Whole”, “what seem to be its parts, if considered as substantial and self-existing, are mere illusion” (pp. 35, 36). While illusion might be an overstatement, this does seem to anticipate what Sec. 3 called apparent intimations of supernaturalism or nihilism in Wittgenstein’s discussion, a “strange feeling of unreality in common objects”, of a “loss of contact with daily things” (p. 10), which I described there as the placing of a question mark over the call that any entity makes upon us, a call it makes by facilitating the pursuit of merely relative goods. None of these demands are “substantial and self-existing”, in the familiar philosophical sense of “the substantial” as possessing a footing in reality independent of that of all other entities⁴⁹, as the significance of the claim of each upon us is always moot. The claim of any such part to elicit from us an action cannot be “substantial and self-existing”, as whether that action would be best depends on the call that other parts of the world make.

But “for the mystic”, Russell proposes, as too for the Wittgenstein of Sec. 7, this loss of “contact” “is merely the gateway to an ampler world” (p. 27), a necessity if we are to be open to the question that one’s world as a whole poses—the question of what is best⁵⁰. In line with my earlier proposal, one might say then that to claim that “there is indeed the mystical” is to claim that mysticism has an object—that there is indeed a “oneness of all things”, such a thing as how things in general or as a whole are.

There is, of course, more than a whiff of paradox about this claim, as is made clear by a remark the placement of which amongst those that have been our focus might otherwise seem incongruous. The remark is “[s]cepticism is not irrefutable, but palpably senseless” (TL 6.51). In LE, Wittgenstein claims that “it is nonsense to say that I wonder at the existence of the world, because I cannot imagine it not existing” (LE 41–42); and this might suggest one of Sec.

⁴⁹ See, e.g., Descartes’ *Principles of Philosophy*: “By substance, we can understand nothing else than a thing which so exists that it needs no other thing in order to exist” (1931, vol. 1, p. 239).

⁵⁰ In light of the “unreality in common objects”, cf. Russell on the mystic’s “identification of the good with the truly real” (p. 9).

3's philosophically uninteresting readings. But if we bear in mind TLP 1's specification of "the world" as "everything that is the case", the senselessness of doubting its existence is clear: it is to doubt whether it is the case that anything is the case, when, of course, if it is indeed the case that nothing is the case, then that at least is the case⁵¹. Doubting the existence of the world—at least so defined—is to doubt what one might think of as a precondition of doubt—something that must be the case for one's doubt to have content. Parallel considerations came into play earlier when we considered the notion of evaluating and finding wanting—say, in comparison to a superior alternative—the absolute good, "what is best". One cannot reject what is best on the grounds that one thinks it would be best to, or reject the aim of identifying "the thing to do" on the grounds that it is not the thing to do. So one cannot reject the task of doing what is best.

But as Sec. 6 argued, one can fail to take it up. Just as doubting the existence of the world reveals itself as an impossible renunciation of judgment, to reject the authority of what is best is to renounce the task of evaluation, the narrowing of one's openness to the world to "judgments of relative value", the "mere statement of facts" (LE 39, quoted above). Such a resistance to hearkening to the voice of conscience is a resistance to bringing one's own evaluative judgment to bear. Harkening instead requires an openness that outstrips awareness of any matter of fact. It recognizes that one's world—such facts considered as a whole—poses a question that none of those facts individually can answer. As we read in the *Tractatus*, "[t]he facts all belong only to the task and not to its performance" (6.4321): they collectively—as the world—set the task, which I perform by taking them in as a collective. Struck by such a vision, one might say, as we read in the *Notebooks*, that "[e]thics does not treat of the world" but is instead "a condition of the world" (NB 24.7.16). The agent acting ethically is not marked by their attention to any particular fact within the world but by an openness to the world as a world. In acting ethically a world manifests itself to

⁵¹ An important topic in the background but which I will not explore here is that the very notion of a "world" may seem paradoxical, in that, if "[t]he world is everything that is the case" (TLP 1) then there would seem to be no facts left over, as it were, to characterise the world: for example, its existing and its being "the totality of facts" (TLP 1.1) would themselves seem to be facts, i.e., *further* facts. Similar concerns inform Wittgenstein's reflections on the logic of general propositions and linger in the later rule-following considerations. (For discussion, see McManus 2006: ch. 12.) They also arise in connection with the notion of an "all-things-considered judgment", on which I touch later, though—perhaps importantly—most clearly concerning judging that one is performing such a judgment.

her; the former is a condition of the latter; and, hence, one might indeed say that “ethics is transcendental”.

Let us return now to the “ethical point” of the *Tractatus*. To my mind, one of the most interesting ideas to be found in the work of Stanley Cavell is the suggestion that philosophical problems may represent distorted recognitions of what are more faithfully recognized as spiritual, existential or ethical problems. For example, he proposes that “[i]n making the knowledge of others a metaphysical difficulty”, other minds sceptics “deny how real the practical difficulty is of coming to know another person, and how little we can reveal of ourselves to another's gaze, or bear of it” (Cavell 1979, p. 90). Such scepticism represents an “attempt to convert the human condition, the condition of humanity, into an intellectual difficulty”, Cavell proposes (Cavell 1979, p. 493).

In a similar spirit, a possibility concerning the “ethical point” of the *Tractatus* that I wish to tentatively suggest, and which the reading I have offered raises, is that the ambition that drives us to metaphysics —“to conceive the world as a whole by means of thought”— is actually accomplished by living ethically. To echo another remark of Cavell's⁵², the logico–metaphysical “study” of that “which hold[s] of all entities” is an interpretation of that of which ethical deliberation is an interpretation; but the challenge of thinking one's world as a whole is fundamentally not theoretical but practical. The world reveals itself — *offenbart sich*— to the ethical subject; and to use a distinction from TLP 6.45, the “revelation of the oneness of all things”—of “how things”, in general or as a whole, “stand” —is a matter of *feeling*: a responsiveness to the world as a whole as my world, rather than mere contemplation of it as an object. In place of a “study” of “what can be said of *everything*” —to echo a remark of Dostoevsky's that Wittgenstein quotes in the trenches— “Everything can be understood by the right thinking heart” (PNB 8.5.16); and one cannot “be a logician before [one is] a human being” (CL 66).

⁵² Cf. Cavell (1987, p. 6): “Tragedy is an interpretation of what scepticism is itself an interpretation of”.

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Ethics as a Condition of the World: The Inexpressible, the Transcendental and the Point of the *Tractatus*

This paper presents a reading of the *Tractatus*' remarks on ethics. Drawing on work by Anselm Müller, subsequently developed by Anthony Price, the reading makes of some of Wittgenstein's most striking and most puzzling early remarks a recognizable and insightful account of ethical experience, while also accommodating the equally striking formal quality of those remarks.

The account identifies a distinctive ethical achievement that requires a distance from particular concrete goods that one might pursue and a responsiveness to those goods as a whole—to one's world as a whole; only through such openness is one open to the abstract objective that is doing what is best; and only through openness to that does one express oneself in, and assume responsibility for, one's actions. This account allows us to understand why, for example, Wittgenstein connects "absolute or ethical value" with "wonder at the existence of the world" and with "understand[ing] the question about the meaning of life". But it also makes

sense of why that is precisely a question, and why those to whom “the meaning of life ... become[s] clear” cannot “say in what this meaning consist[s]”. The responsiveness to a good which ethical subjects distinctively manifest is a responsiveness not to some distinctive and describable state of affairs but to the question of what is best—willing determination of what here and now that is.

This account yields a vision of self-expression not as hearkening to some inner voice but as an openness to one’s life as a whole; and this, in turn, opens up a way of approaching the puzzle of Wittgenstein’s insistence that “of [the willing subject] we cannot speak”. I also suggest that we find here one possible sense for Wittgenstein’s famous remark to Ludwig von Ficker that “the point of [the *Tractatus*] is ethical”, in that openness to the world as a whole—openness to how things are as such and as a whole—emerges as fundamentally a practical, rather than theoretical achievement.

Keywords: Ethics · World · Subject · Metaphilosophy.

La ética como condición del mundo: lo inexpresable, lo transcendental y el propósito del *Tractatus*

Este artículo presenta una lectura de las observaciones del *Tractatus* acerca de la ética. Apoyándome en un trabajo de Anelm Müller, desarrollado posteriormente más por Anthony Price, la lectura convierte algunas de las observaciones tempranas más llamativas y más enigmáticas de Wittgenstein en una explicación reconocible y esclarecedora de la experiencia ética, acomodando al mismo tiempo la igualmente llamativa calidad formal de estas observaciones.

La explicación identifica un logro ético distintivo que requiere una distancia de un bien concreto particular que uno podría perseguir y una sensibilidad a este bien como un todo —al mundo de uno mismo como un todo; sólo a través de semejante abertura se abre a uno la objetividad abstracta de hacer lo que es mejor; y sólo a través de la abertura a esto se expresa uno en sus acciones y acepta la responsabilidad por ellas. Esta explicación nos permite entender porque, por ejemplo, Wittgenstein conecta “valor absoluto o ético” con “asombro sobre la existencia del mundo” y con el “entender la pregunta sobre el sentido de la vida”. Pero también encuentra el sentido del porque justamente esto es una pregunta y porque aquellos que “vieron claro el sentido de la vida” no pueden “decir en que este sentido consiste”. La sensibilidad a un bien que sujetos éticos manifiestan de manera distinta es una sensibilidad no a algún estado de cosas distintivo y describable, sino a la pregunta de lo que es la determinación mejor intencionada de lo que es aquí y ahora.

Esta explicación resulta en una visión de la expresión de uno mismo, no como escuchando alguna voz interna sino como una abertura a la vida de uno mismo como un todo; y esto, a su vez, abre un camino para aproximarse al enigma de la insistencia de Wittgenstein de que “no podemos hablar del [sujeto portador de la voluntad]”. También sugiero que aquí encontramos un posible sentido del famoso comentario de Wittgenstein a Ludwig von Ficker de que “el objetivo de [el *Tractatus*] es ético” en que la abertura al mundo como un todo —abertura a como las cosas son como tales y como un todo— surge como un logro fundamentalmente práctico y no teórico.

Palabras clave: Ética · Mundo · Sujeto · Metafilosofía.

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