

Ethics, the Real and Wonder in Wittgenstein¹

Sergio Benvenuto

DRAFT: This text is a first draft. In particular, bibliography and quotations are still to be edited.

Abstract

The author starts from the assumption that Wittgenstein's theory of ethics (and of aesthetics) does not change radically when he shifts from the first to the second stage of his thought. Besides, continuity between W.'s two philosophies is based on his constant need to distinguish what can be said and what can only be shown—and ethics is what shows itself but cannot be said. The author analyzes how we might understand the “mystical” (inexpressible) feature of ethics, connecting the earlier W's ontological concern to the later W.'s anthropological concern. In both conceptions, W. highlights the transcendental vocation of the human being, and ethics is an *active* dimension of transcendentality. In his earlier thought, ethics is not part of the world, i.e. of facts, but it is related to “what”; in his later thought, ethics is not a linguistic game, but opens us to a form of life not “playable” as such.

The author deals especially with the question of otherness, which seems to be lacking in W.'s reflection, and with W.'s transcendental solipsism (which in the second stage of his thought takes the form of the impossibility of a private language): going beyond W's explicit formulations, the author notes that the otherness in ethics is invested in its ontological dimension, i.e., in the fact that the other is considered as “real” and not as an object-for-me. The author also attempts an original comparison between W.'s ethical vision as “in excess with respect to language” and C. Lévi-Strauss's theory on notions on the kind of “mana”, where an excess of the signifier on signified is in play. That ethics “brims over” language should then be attributed to the transcendental vocation of language itself, to its willingness to say the inexpressible.

Wittgenstein deals with ethics above all in the first stage of his thought. He writes about it in the *Tractatus*, in his *Notebooks* of 1914-16, and in his *Lecture on Ethics* (1929 or 1930). What might one think then about his later silence on ethics in the second stage of his thought? Is it a sign of his lack of interest in ethics after he had adopted his new philosophical style? Or is it rather a sign that he did not find anything essential to add to what he had previously said?

I am among those who believe that Wittgenstein's thought contains a fundamental unity of inspiration. I don't reject – as for example Rorty (1989) did – the early Wittgenstein as a “metaphysical” and “positivist” thinker, in order to exalt the later Wittgenstein as a “pragmatist” and “hermeneutical” one. In my opinion, the later Wittgenstein develops the *Tractatus'* ethico-

¹ I thank Claudia Vaughn for help with the English text.

mystical conceptual knots, which then become central to giving shape to his conception of meaning as usage, etc. (De Carolis 1999)

Wittgenstein always asked, “How can our statements have sense? How is it that when we speak we usually understand each other?” With him, the question of sense clearly prevails over the question of truth (Badiou 2009). Let’s see how his answers differ in his two stages of thought by using one of his favorite examples, chess. In his first stage, he considers the material objects—the chessboard and pieces—as pictures or representations of the game’s structure as such: the chosen notation on the one hand, and the (intelligible) reality of chess with all its innumerable possibilities on the other, have the same logical form. In his later stage, he seeks the answer rather in the game itself, that is, in the public rules which the players adhere to, and in the competitive form of the game itself. While in his early stage he focused on the ontological side of the game, he later focused on the anthropological side of it. And while in the first stage the linguistic representation implied something non-representable (nouns and things), in the second stage the linguistic game implies a *terra incognita*, an originary activity which gives sense to our games (forms of life). In his early philosophy, nothing meaningful can be said that is not *relational*, while in his later thought nothing meaningful can be said that is not *public*; just as in the first phase ethics and aesthetics are the *unrelated* beyond the sayable, so in the second phase life gives the public meaning of what we say and do.

He often states that what he is saying about ethics is also true for aesthetics. In the *Tractatus*, he writes, “(Ethics and aesthetics are one and the same.)” (6.421). And in his *Lecture on Ethics* (LE): “Now I am going to use the term Ethics in a slightly wider sense, in a sense in fact which includes what I believe to be the most essential part of what is generally called Aesthetics”. And what might be this most essential part of aesthetics which is valid for ethics as well? Wittgenstein doesn’t say either here or elsewhere. I will take a guess at it later (section 10).

1. Being a good guy is not like playing a game

In his lecture on ethics, Wittgenstein starts from a very Kantian distinction²: in our usage of the term *good*, there is a common or relative sense from one side, and a truly ethical, or absolute, sense from the other. As an example of the relative sense, he uses the expression “a good pianist” – once again, we are confronted with the aesthetical dimension. The pianist is good insofar as he can play well. And if I say of a road that “it is the right road”, it is right relative to a certain goal. Kant would say here that we are dealing with “hypothetical imperatives”.

² Since his youth Wittgenstein had been passionate about Schopenhauer, through whom he was deeply influenced by Kantianism.

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 pretty badly but I don't want to play any better," all the other man could say would be "Ah, then that's all right."

I find that this example of tennis is actually an anticipated—and definitive—critique of later attempts by the so-called analytical philosophers to describe ethics in terms of linguistic games. At that time, Wittgenstein had not yet worked out his conception of *Sprachspiele*. But I find it important that—on the eve of this conceptual turning point—he would specify very clearly that *ethics is not a linguistic game*. In short, his task was not to describe the ethical life as a system of prescriptions or commands. I would say that Wittgenstein considers ethics not only, nor essentially, a discourse, that is, not something reducible to a speech act or performative utterance---an *act*, yes, but not necessarily *speech*.

Take the commandment, "Thou shalt not kill!" Technically speaking, this is an imperative act which constitutes the interlocutor (any human being) as someone who will or will not obey this command; so that the interlocutor will be either good or bad, or, before a court of justice, guilty or innocent, etc. But there is a difference between the commandment "Thou shalt not kill!" and the commandment which I might give to a lowly private in Abu Grahib to "torture the prisoner!" Even in this case the command constitutes the private as someone who will or will not obey the order, but the two orders—as Wittgenstein would observe—are not articulated on the same imperative level. These two prescriptions only superficially have the same grammar, but they express two different forms of life. Furthermore, if I obey the order in Abu Grahib, if I behave as "a good soldier", I cease to be *a good one* in the ethical sense. I transgress the supposed Kantian categorical imperative, "Don't torture anyone, not even your enemies". If I do obey, I commit what in military language is called a "dishonorable" action. Thinking of ethical acts and the commandments presupposed by them only as *speech acts*, does not allow us to grasp the specificity of the ethical command compared to all other commands. It would mean tarring every prescription with the same moral brush. Moreover, the problem remains about who is the agent of this act (some might answer God). Just like Pirandello's Six Characters, so were the ethical commands always in search of an Author.

Wittgenstein's reflection on ethics clearly distinguishes itself from others which developed on the British scene, and in particular from "prescriptivism", the philosophical trend which reduces the moral discourse to prescriptions, human behavior rules, "principles of action", bound to a specific speech act, that of prescribing (Hare 1952). This theory, like others, aims at *reducing* the complexity of ethical discourses and acts to a given "grammar". But Wittgenstein refuses to make

reductions of this kind, that is, to determine a supposed—even grammatical—*essence* of ethics. Besides, Wittgenstein refuses to state any theory on ethics (and aesthetics) or on an essential meta-rule which would regulate the ethical rules. But then, what is there to say on ethics?

For Wittgenstein, what matters is to delineate *the place* of ethics. But a place in which space? In the *Tractatus* he had said that the place of ethics lay in the *mystical*. That is, that ethics *lies* in a “supernatural” space beyond nature. He can only give us some *exemplary* affective equivalents of ethics.

2. Wonder

In his lecture on ethics, he evokes what he calls “my experience par excellence” (LE). He gives as an example his *feeling absolutely safe, whatever happens*. Another example is his wondering at the existence of the world³.

It is notable that these two examples are basically opposed. In fact, the feeling of being absolutely safe could be assimilated to the child’s earliest feeling that “I will always have my mommy!” I have my safe hearth. Instead, this wonder at the world’s existence presupposes my own extraneousness to the world, a subjective distance from it, so that the world can appear as surprising—if not even *unheimlich*, uncanny, and foreign to the home (*Heim*). We feel safe in our environment (*Umwelt*), while in our wonder at the existence of the world, we consider the whole world (*Welt*) as pure contingency. Thus, ethics is evoked here through both a radically domestic figure and a radical extraneousness from any domestic feeling.

I wonder if these divergent affective examples do not describe in an awry way the sort of essential polarity of what we usually call ethics (are they two ways of conceiving ethics? Or two faces of the same ethical coin?). On one side, the homespun dimension of ethics, as in the Greek term *ethos*: habit, the custom of “we do it like this because everyone else here does it this way”, being observant of one’s group’s norms and values. It is the *historical-ethnic*—or *environmental*—dimension of ethics, which *Philosophical Investigations* will put in the foreground. But any ethics, even the most conformist one, has an inverse pole, by which it tends to respect the world as *sub specie aeterni* and as “- *begrenztes - Ganzes*” (a limited whole) (T, 6.45)⁴. This is the *ontological* dimension of ethics. In any case, I believe that when

³ He also mentioned the *feeling of guilt* (LE.), although here it is not clear whether this feeling of guilt is unfounded, or whether it is the allegorical form which guilt takes on in religion, when we say that God disapproves of our conduct.

⁴ “Limited” not “finite” (*endlich*). This does not exclude then that the world can be infinite: but an infinite, taken as a

Wittgenstein binds ethics and aesthetics to the “limited whole”, he aims not so much at a universalist approach, but rather at thematizing *the absolute* as opposed to the relative contingency. For him, the world is constituted by states of affairs, thus only by relations; instead, the world as a limited whole is in relation with nothing other than itself, and eternity is not a very long lapse of time but temporality itself taken altogether. With “*Ganzes*” he introduces the impossible dimension of the absolute. Ethics is an absolute value because it thematizes the world as absolute, i.e. unbound by any relation.

To make this ontological (absolute) pole perceptible, Wittgenstein evokes wonder. In short, that the world can appear to us as a miracle. For Aristotle, *taumazein*, to wonder at, was the initial sentiment which pushed towards philosophizing.⁵ But it should be noted that for Aristotle wonder is only the beginning of the philosophical nagging: later, philosophy explains everything, and wonder disappears. Instead, for Wittgenstein ethics keeps the feeling of wonder alive, and leads humans to run up against the limits of their own language, as he says—a quixotic enterprise in which even philosophical strength takes part. Philosophical saying itself is an ethical *act*, insofar as both philosophy and ethics *show something unsayable*. Science explains more and more the contingent, but the philosopher is not satisfied by these explanations (which will always be hypothetical, irretrievably counter-factual statements, “if... then...”). “The drive towards the mystical (*Der Trieb zum Mystischen*)—Wittgenstein wrote in *Notebooks* (25.5.15)—comes from science’s inability to satisfy our desires”. We can say, in Heideggerian terms, that science responds always on the ontic level, while the problems which interest us most as subjects are ontological ones.⁶ For Wittgenstein, philosophical questioning, ethics and wonder are strongly implicated in ontological desire.

But wonder for what? Certainly not for what science is not (yet) able to explain, but wonder for the fact that things are. A Heideggerian would say that it is not wonder for a fact, but for the Being as event.

Wittgenstein also stresses that “the miracle of the existence of the world” is not a proposition in the language, but that the miracle, in a certain sense, is the existence of the language itself. We will consider this statement later. At that time, he still thought that the world was coextensive with meaningful language, that is, that there is

whole, is in fact limited.

⁵ *Metaphysics*, 983a.

⁶ As is well known, for Heidegger the ontic is what concerns beings (*Seiende*), the ontological is what concerns the Being (*das Sein*).

isomorphism between language and world. We can also say that the world is everything which, thanks to our language, has sense. But ethics and aesthetics—like everything which for Wittgenstein is absolute—express the desire to go beyond the world and language, beyond sense. There will never be a science of ethics, a meta-ethics which founds our ethics. Rather, ethics “is a document of a tendency in the human mind [towards the absolute value] which I personally cannot help respecting deeply” (LE,). Ethics is not a fact. It documents and signals a desire. In different terms, the human being seeks the Being as something absolute, beyond scientific counter-factual hypotheses. But the point is that this Being gives itself always and only in a relative way in the language, as long as we don’t intuit it as eternal and as a limited whole, i.e. *absolutus*, unbound from any relation with the other.

Thus, ethical (and aesthetical) experience is something which only apparently—or only when it somehow fails—depends on norms, rules, and commandments, but in reality invests a dimension of being which does not coincide with the world.

3. Being there

How, then, can we then think of this “mystical” dimension or place of the Being?

6.522 Es gibt allerdings Unaussprechliches. Dies *zeigt sich*, es ist das Mystische.

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

For Wittgenstein *there is* the mystical. It should be noted that in German “there is” is *es gibt*, “it gives itself”. This particularity has been exploited by the phenomenological tradition: *to exist means giving itself to subjects*. In this sense, *dies zeigt sich*, “it makes itself manifest”, appears as a quasi-tautology of *es gibt*. This is like saying: “what gives itself, that is, shows itself, cannot be said.” (And what can be said cannot be shown, except as meaning.) This “being there” or giving itself or showing itself (our intuition?) is not part of the world: it is a part or register of the Being which is not reducible to the world. Nor is it “another world”—it is not the intelligible world insofar as independent from the concrete world. Anyway, if the

mystical is not part of the world, to which region of the Being does it belong? Or even, which modality of being does it have?

We should also note that Wittgenstein, in considering ethics and aesthetics as something “mystical”, does not reduce them to subjective ways—in a psychological sense—of being related to the world⁷. Yet when we think of ethics, we think of something practical, of actions; and when we think of aesthetics, we think of something concerning our reactions, affects by which we are affected. In both cases, we think of subjective judgments. On the contrary, Wittgenstein seems to consider ethics and aesthetics by the same mystical yardstick as *objects* or *things* in the *Tractatus*. “The world is the totality of facts (*Tatsachen*), not of things (*Dinge*)” (T, 1.1): ethics and aesthetics instead seem to concern things, not facts—and things *are*, even if they cannot be pictured. Things allow us to picture, although they cannot be depicted.

Thus, the figure illustrating the concept of *object* or *thing* is not so much a kind of matter, but rather a grid or network: *things draw a kind of fundamental and necessary structure* of the world⁸. True propositions represent the contingent in the sense that they fill some small squares of the grid and not others. This selective occupation does not have a necessary why—the world is as it is, but it could have been otherwise. True propositions mark with existence places which *are* eternal, necessary, absolute. Is the mystical or inexpressible then a *substance* of the world which is similar to a fundamental *form*? And does this substance coincide with the logical form? In the same way, can we say that the way of being of ethics and aesthetics is at once *substantial* and *formal*?

Can we then say that as far as ethics and aesthetics belong to the formal—and thus not worldly—ambit of ontology, Wittgenstein is in some way a forerunner of theories which have exalted the constitutive role of language taken as a purely formal structure?

4. Language is ontological

⁷ This is not opposed to the fact that he recounts completely subjective sensations (of which we have spoken) as exemplary of the ethical experience. In fact, the ontological dimension of ethics is manifest especially in subjective “senseless” experiences. We’ll see later how this is not just a contradiction.

⁸ Here I prefer to use the word things (*Dinge*) rather than objects (*Gegenstände*) because I want to stress the independence of the things in relation to us, their not being just objects-for-us.

Now I am tempted to say that the right expression in language for the miracle of the existence of the world, though it is not any proposition *in* language, is the existence of language itself. (LE, p.)

Is it possible to interpret this sentence of the lecture as structuralist ante litteram? It seems to say that, when we talk about the world, we can speak of it only because of language, which allows us to think (to describe) the world. For the world to appear miraculous, in fact, language (which is miraculous thanks to itself) is needed: thanks to language, the actual existence of the world can pose itself as something only possible (we believe that if something is contingent, actual, it is because it was already a priori possible). Language allows us to think even the possibility of the non-existence of the world, and then to wonder at its existence. Could even a very intelligent dog ever think that instead of the world there could have been nothing? *What* could a dog think if it were to think this question without language?

It is thanks to language that we can think of something as miraculous. A miracle is an event without a natural cause, something naturally impossible. Looking at the world (as a limited whole) as a miracle means to grasp the contingent against a background of impossible. Is it what I would call *the real*: something impossible in the world, but which, short-circuiting the possible, manifests itself in the contingency. Everything that is contingent is part of the world, but is the world itself as a whole contingent? In which sense is the whole world an *event*?

It was inevitable for Wittgenstein to think that wonder at the existence of the world was the equivalent ipso facto to wonder at *the existence of language*. But why wonder *at* language and not instead wonder *by means of* it? And why make note of it just in a lecture on ethics? Which theoretical steps forward does Wittgenstein think of accomplishing by specifying that wonder at the world is also—and above all—wonder at language?

It is that the existence of language implies, from the beginning, a reference not only to the world but also to the “substance”. Elementary propositions (always *supposed* propositions but never *posed* by Wittgenstein⁹), whether true or false, combine things (not facts!) which we can consider as the world’s substance itself. It is what we might call the *transcendental vocation of language*. Language certainly judges, qualifies, orders, connects, makes relations, but it does that by starting from some-

⁹ Non only did Wittgenstein never give an example of an elementary proposition, but one wonders if that could ever be formulated on the grounds of any empirical inquiry.

thing unrelated and which it presupposes. Language, by just relativizing the absolute, makes us intuit something absolute.

In fact, what is presupposed to language is *discovered* by language! It is not that language, referring to something that non-speaking beings (animals, or what in us is animal) intuit perfectly, tries awkwardly to evoke it pictorially. It is not that language supplies a sort of propositional surrogate to our not linguistically mediated, blissful relationship to the thing itself. It is not that language “logically” designates something which would offer itself immediately in our pre-logical experience. On the contrary, language gives us access to something which does not offer itself in *Erlebnis*, in the immediate experience and intuition. Certainly a dog has a rich relation with the world, often richer than our own—the dog Argus was the only one to recognize Ulysses upon his return to Ithaca. But we can suppose that simply because it cannot speak, the dog doesn’t care about something which *his* world presupposes—the *real itself*. Simply because I speak, and because I qualify (predicate, i.e. picture) the world, I imply something which *is not represented* by my propositions-representations. According to Wittgenstein, ethics and aesthetics concern precisely this part which is not represented by language, but which would never emerge without it.

5. Uniqueness and values

By transcendentalist tradition, we intend first of all Kant and what derived from him, what Anglo-Americans call “Continental thought”—ranging from Hegel, Nietzsche, and phenomenology up until more recent “continental” authors.

Connecting Wittgenstein’s conceptualization to the transcendentalist “Continental” tradition—as I do here—may seem abusive to all those who read Wittgenstein through the lens of analytic philosophy. And yet, Wittgenstein’s position, not only on ethics and aesthetics, is authentically transcendentalist.

In particular, both phenomenology and Wittgenstein clearly separate ethics from psychology. By “psychology” I mean both a precise anti-transcendentalist vision and the scientific research which takes ethics (aesthetics, forms of life) as an *object* of objective inquiries.

Wittgenstein and phenomenology both start from a fundamental distinction between the psychological subject (which is part of the world) and the transcendental

subject (who transcends its own world because the latter constitutes itself in relation to the former)¹⁰. This transcendental subject shows itself—in the sense that it is thematizable by the thought—when we look at our ethical or aesthetical life. That is, when we consider not the objective world, but our values.

If there is any value (*Wenn es einen Wert gibt*) that does have value, it must lie outside the whole sphere of what happens and is the case. For all that happens and is the case is accidental. (T, 6.41)

This statement, among others, illustrates Wittgenstein's transcendentalism. The world is where everything happens in a contingent way, it is the dimension of being-so and not of being-what or -why, the world is only everything which happens. "In the world... everything happens as it does happen: in it no value exists--and if it did exist, it would have no value." (T, 6.41). Both ethical and aesthetical values are thus exclusive of the contingency of the world as a pure event.

Nevertheless, modern cognitive sciences and the philosophies which developed around them, are committed to making values themselves an object of science. In contrast with Wittgenstein and phenomenology, they ignore the transcendentalism of values and attempt to make the mind, and thus ethical and aesthetical values, an object of scientific inquiry among other objects. The human mind, *via* sciences, aims to describe the mind itself as its own object of research, without incurring, despite this, paradoxes of self-reference.

Now, Wittgenstein never excluded that certain sciences can deal objectively with the human mind and subjective values. Nevertheless, we could say that cognitive sciences always deal with the mind and values *of the other*, even of one's own mind and values as if they were *others'*. This is a little like thinking of myself as dead; of course I can imagine myself dead, and describe myself as such, as if I had survived myself. But in this case, I would not be describing my death *as my own*, but as an other's. In the same way, the ethics which interests Wittgenstein is not that which sociology, psychology or the neurosciences can study with interesting results; instead, it is that which poses me the problem of what *I* should do. We are not dealing here with a psychological ego, but with a metaphysical *I*—the one for whom the world is *my world*. Wittgenstein initially thematized this dimension as solipsism.

¹⁰ In phenomenological terms: from one side there is the worldly subject before the phenomenological *epoché*, on the other there is the intentional subject as being-in-the-world.

“Only from an awareness of the *uniqueness of my life*—he writes in *Notebooks* (1.8.1916) – do religion – science – and art rise”¹¹. He attempts to say here what other philosophies thematized as the question of radical subjectivity—of *Dasein*, Heidegger would say—intended as what slips away from every psychological objectivation. For Heidegger, *Dasein* is project, for Wittgenstein it is an awareness of one’s own uniqueness. This uniqueness of the “metaphysical” subject is co-extensive to that of the world. Uniqueness is the absolute.

6. The cup and water

In short, transcendentalism implies a deep congruity between the ontological dimension (as different from the ontic one) on the one hand, and the radically subjective dimension (as different from the psychological one) on the other. In Wittgenstein’s terms: we need to understand how realism and solipsism *are* the same thing. For Wittgenstein “there is no such thing (*ein Unding*) as the soul--the subject” (T, 5.5421). Here he makes a meaningful choice, because *Unding* is literally a *non-thing*: the subject of psychology is *no-thing*. But precisely because the subject is an *unthing*, it can only be transcendental. While the psychological subject, this pseudo-thing, is correlated to the objective world (and becomes itself an object of study as part of the world), the transcendental subject is correlated to the ontological, that is--in *Tractatus* terms—because it is correlated to the uniqueness of the world, the former invests the latter as a thing (*Dinge*), not as set of facts. It invests the world as “what” and not as “how”. Wittgenstein thematizes transcendental subjectivity, especially when he says that solipsism¹² cannot be said, but rather shows itself transcendently in the realism itself. Wittgenstein does not *theorize*, in short, solipsism and realism: these two correlated positions *show themselves* in his very philosophy.

This correlation between transcendental subjectivity and ontology—between *Unding* and *Dinge*, so to speak—is evident when he identifies the limits of the world with the limits of our language: at the same time he speaks of something “mystical” beyond these limits. If what is essential in ethics and aesthetics is not in the world, does it then belong to an extra-world, a transcendent world? Of course not,

¹¹ I propose here my own provisional translation of the original text.

¹² “For what the solipsist *means* is quite correct; only it cannot be said, but makes itself *manifest*. The world is my world: this is manifest in the fact that the limits of language (of that language which I alone understand) mean the limits of my world.” (T, 5.62).

transcendentalism is not transcendence, it is not hypothesizing entities whose substance and order are different from those of the concrete world. In Kant, the transcendental approach opposes itself to both the “transcendental” and the “empirical”. And yet, how can we deny that transcendentalism, from Kant on, derives from the transcendent? Is not transcendentalism a secularized, lay version of the transcendent? This is the accusation positivists address to both phenomenologies and to Wittgenstein: of pre-sup-posing something which transcends the posed world.

For Wittgenstein, ethical and aesthetical experiences do not manifest an extra-world, a beyond-heaven (*hyperouranios*)—as in the Platonic myth (in *Phaedrus*) of *ideai*—simply because there is no World beyond ours: nevertheless, they manifest, in their own way, an unsayable dimension of the world, a something which through the world presupposes and shows itself, but which cannot be said and posed. Ethics and aesthetics remind us of a *being there (es gibt)* which language continuously removes as far as it pictures the world. The mystical establishes different limits to the world—it waxes and wanes.¹³ Just as in language: at the level of elementary propositions one refers to *some thing*—elementary beings—which are not depicted by any proposition (otherwise they would not be elementary beings). And what we call “world” always has the form that language shares with the Being, that is, the world is the putting in relation parts of the Being. In Heidegger’s terms, language, giving an ontic form to the Being, veils the ontological dimension that this form still presupposes.

But how does language evoke something which exceeds it? We have seen that remaining in “nature” means to deal only with relative values and goods, while ethics, which refers to absolute values and goods, brims over nature, “as a teacup will only hold a teacup full of water and if I were to pour out a gallon over it” (LE, p.). Ethics is a way of being in excess with respect to language (here compared to a teacup), a surplus which language is unable to contain and give form. And yet through language we often speak of ethical questions. What then does Wittgenstein want to say when he denounces this excess of ethics over language?

7. Ethical *mana*

This excess of ethics in relation to language recalls how Claude Lévi-Strauss (1950) posed the question of certain concepts of some cultures far from our own,

¹³ Thanks to philosophy, “In short the effect must be that it becomes an altogether different world. It must, so to speak, wax and wane as a whole.” (T, 6.43).

concepts which confront us with serious problems of translatability. What do Melanesians mean by *mana*? And what do Algonquins mean by *manitu*, Iroquois by *orenda*, Dakotas by *wakan*? For previous anthropologists, all these notions were religious concepts like the Latin *sacer*, sacred and accursed. *Mana*, for example, would be something infinite and invisible, a force which thus heralds our Judeo-Christian notion of the divine. Instead, for Lévi-Strauss these terms denote a void of meaning, an indeterminate value of signification. Thanks to movies on the Wild West, even we think that *manitu* is a divinity. In reality, Father Thavenet wrote, *manitu* "...refers very specifically to any unfamiliar being which does not yet have a name: a woman was telling of her fear of a salamander, a *manitu*; people laughed at her, and told her the name. The pearls of the merchant are the flakes of a *manitu* and the cloth, this marvelous thing, is the skin of a *manitu*." ¹⁴ In short, *mana* is almost an expression of exclamation –an exclamation projected on to the stupefying thing.

For Lévi-Strauss the function of these terms is to “fill a gap between the signifier and the signified, or, more precisely, to signal that in a certain circumstance, on a certain occasion, a relationship of inadequacy comes to be established between the signifier and the signified” (Lévi-Strauss , p. XLIV) ¹⁵. In effect, signifier and signified were constituted simultaneously, but knowledge—the intellectual process which allows the mutual identification of certain aspects of the signifier with certain aspects of the signified—proceeds very slowly. So that man “from the start had at his disposal an integrality of signifier which was not easy for him to assign to a signified, given as such without yet being known. There is always an inadequateness between the two...which results from the existence of an excess of signifier in relation to signified elements to which it can be linked” (p. LXIX) ¹⁶. It is precisely this cognitive inadequateness which explains notions like *mana* or *manitu*.

Going beyond Lévi-Strauss, Agamben (2008, p. 93) signals how this inadequateness concerns not only the relationship between the signifier and the signified, but also I would say the *practical* relationship between the speaking subject and her actions. *Homo sapiens* is also *homo iustus*, that is, an ethical agent. In this sense, concepts like *mana* or *manitu* would be the gnoseological equivalent of ethical concepts, like cursing or blessing (*maledicere* or *benedicere*). The latter signal a gap between speech and acts.

¹⁴

¹⁵ I propose here my own provisional translation of the original text.

¹⁶ I propose here my own provisional translation of the original text.

Now, if we apply to ethics according to Wittgenstein what Lévi-Strauss and Agamben say on this gap between language and the world, between speech and actions, we can say that Wittgenstein signals here an unavoidable inadequateness—which no philosophical *theory* can ever fill up—between our power-to-say and our ethical acts. In fact, Wittgenstein tries to express verbally what we want to say through expressions like “absolute good” or “absolute value”: an impossible task, because for him language can speak meaningfully only of relative things and, thus, we have to use relative terms to evoke something absolute.

To do this, Wittgenstein in his lecture on ethics refers to emotional experiences which we have heretofore addressed. But why just *those* experiences? Because they are feelings which signal an absolutist relation to the world—considered *sub specie aeternitatis*—and to life. Wittgenstein feels safe, but not because he has taken the necessary precautions to avoid all dangers. He wonders at the world not because he knows that our universe expands, for example, but for the simple fact that the world is. These sensations refer not to *how* the world is, but to *what* it is, i.e. to its being—to its being an absolute event, unbound from temporality (temporality is in the world, but the world itself is not *in* time). And these sensations are connected also to the fact that the world is always and only mine.

Melanesians use the word *mana* to speak about something which signifies without having a name and thus without being known, that is, something which stupifies them. In the same way, when we say “absolute value” we are talking about something which is signified even without being describable yet. Just as on the cognitive level there is an historical gap between signifier and signified, analogously on the practical level there is an irremediable gap between the world of our objects (those we like or dislike, which we want to keep or discard) and things in themselves. The explicit ethical norm thus comes into play in order to signal this gap between the world as *mine* and the Being as *other*, and to try to suture it in some ways. Just as the human’s entry into the symbolic dimension, in language, makes the world meaningful, in the same way the human’s entry into linguistic games makes him ethically and politically assessable.

8. Does the other matter?

Many have noted that Wittgenstein, when he talks about ethics, never talks *about others*. His ethical examples, as we have seen, are of a subjective and affective

character. One might suspect that his vision of ethics is solipsistic (just as his ontology is transcendently solipsist). Does this not mark the limits even of the ethics of Wittgenstein the man? When Rhees proposes as an example of an ethical dilemma that of Brutus (WE, p.), Wittgenstein answers that this question (like any ethical dilemma) is not even philosophically discussable: “You could never know what went through his mind before he decided to kill Caesar. What he might have felt...” For him, what matters is what took place in Brutus’ mind, not his public act.

Many think, instead, that all prescriptions we consider ethical—like our Ten Commandments—in fact imply only one essential point: *the other matters*. Ethics would regulate my relations with my fellow beings. In some cultures s/he is a person from my village or country, in others any human, and in still others, even animals are fellow beings. Being ethically evil always means, in any culture, a lack of respect for the other recognized as worthy of respect in that culture: to use him as my tool rather than consider him an other subject with whom to have reciprocal and normative relationships.

Let us suppose that the essential feature in all these forms of life which today we consider ethical is simply taking into account the other’s subjectivity. Still, a problem remains: what relation do I have with this system of norms which regulates my relationship with others?

Of course I can think—like cognitivists do today—that all, or nearly all, ethical norms are functional to a good communal life: that a society can survive better the less people kill each other, the less they steal from each other, and the more they are monogamous, etc. But, still supposing that this functionalist and utilitarianist reduction of ethics is convincing, the problem—which for Wittgenstein is *essentially* the ethical one—would still remain: the fact that I, in the uniqueness I am for myself, am told not to kill or steal.

That is, what does it mean, the fact that *I* feel an *absolute* duty to subject myself to these socially functional norms, even when they go against my vital interests? Any possible psychological or sociological research aimed at understanding which types of persons act ethically and which do not, does not even scratch the essential question: *my own way of being implicated (implicato)*¹⁷ *in the ethical norm*. And only in this light does the question of ethics stop being a grammatical issue and become a “mystical” one.

¹⁷ *Implicato* in Italian means at once *involved*, *implied* and *implicated*.

But in which sense is this mystical quality concerned with the question of the other who matters?

9. **Ontological love**

Let's evoke an experience which can be placed halfway between ethics and aesthetics: to love someone. *What* do we love in a person? It often happens that one asks one's lover, "but *what* do you love about me?" or "*why* do you love me?" And everyone knows that the only satisfying answer would be: "I love you because you exist! I love your existence".

Of course we can study love scientifically as we do everything else (like neurosciences do today): in this case, we should take for granted that what we love in the other are certain isolatable *features* which, for determined reasons (i.e. through deterministic processes), attract us. In this view, we love the other because s/he is the gestalt of a series of (complexly) interwoven objects which attract us: if some of these objects or features were to cease, our love could disappear. And if I or my lover change with time, love might end. We love the other insofar as s/he is so-and-so, not because *s/he is just him or her*. We might say that "the important thing instead is that my beloved *exists*, beyond all her qualities, the proof being that I would give my life in order to let her live". But even in this case, the scientific game consists in analyzing, in deconstructing (science is always deconstructive), love's claim to aim at the beloved's being. Science does not care about the Being, it acknowledges only relations among entities; it aims to articulate true propositions, and not to show truths which can only show themselves. For those who believe in science, loving the other's being is an illusion, because being itself is an illusion.

And yet love—like ethics and aesthetics—always implies a tension towards the other's being, considered as *an eternal whole*. As an Italian comedian says, "Love is eternal as long as it lasts". The beloved other is not reducible to the (physical and psychical) "beings" which constitute her, and love seems not to be reducible to a relation between a loving subject and a series of loved objects. In short, *in love I am ontologically implicated*. In love, the other matters *for me* in and for itself, not only as my love object¹⁸. Everything which makes the other lovable is experienced by the

¹⁸ German has two terms for "object", *Objekt* and *Gegenstand*. Freud uses the first term to designate the object invested by drive and desire. Here we refer to *Objekt*, as *what has a value for me*.

lover as the showing of a being that I suppose as absolute, i.e. beyond any relation with me. But indeed, is this supposition only an experience, *Erlebnis*, which the scientific game will reveal as illusion? Certainly, but, as we have seen, for Wittgenstein, as for phenomenology, this experience (*Erlebnis*) is not just an affective byproduct of essential relationships, but rather, that the affective state *shows* the essential relationship. Love situates the beloved outside the world, *sub specie aeternitatis*, in the sense that love is not “propositional”, but rather invests the other as a being, not only as *Objekt*.

10. Works of art

The transcendental of love is analogous to the transcendental of an art work. Even this represents an object, or presents itself as an object, *sub specie aeternitatis*; and this object which it is or represents is absolute (a limited whole), something which must survive us. The art work, for Wittgenstein, is not so much one tool among others to reach an independent end—for example, to amuse us—but rather an end in itself. So what matters in a musical piece, for example (music was especially important for Wittgenstein) is not what it makes us feel, but the musical piece itself. This is like Wittgenstein’s famous objection to Russell: if I want an apple to appease my hunger, and instead get a fist in the stomach, which does appease it, could I say that an apple is the equivalent of a fist? Of course, this clashes with the empiricist assumption—with common sense—for which every work is a piece of art if it makes us feel some specific emotion. The point is that, for Wittgenstein, we feel emotions just because we accept the work as such, as something existing unto itself. We the spectators or listeners adjust ourselves affectively to the work, and we are able to appreciate it as such.

If I say “Beethoven’s *Ninth Symphony* is wonderful”, do I appreciate it only because it gives me pleasure to listen to it? Rather, it gives me pleasure because it is wonderful. That is, the work of art—certainly seductive—stands on its own, but seems to demand my affection and consideration. Like the loved one, the art work poses itself as eternal and absolute. Art is a way to impose new entities in the world; entities which are neither subjects nor just objects.

Just as in aesthetics, even in ethics and in love we should overturn the empiricist conception of the relationship between the act and the affect. We cannot say that we are doing our duty to make ourselves and others happy: on the contrary,

we are happy because we are doing our duty, even if someone might feel unhappy because of it. In the same way, it is not that we love the other because having him around gives us pleasure: having him around gives us pleasure because we love him. In all these cases, *the thing*—the other in the ethical act, the art work, the loved one—has a value for me insofar as it is just *this* thing.

In fact, I can consider in two ways the fact that something has ethical, aesthetical and affective *value for me*. Social or cognitive sciences always suppose that something has a value because it satisfies me, while the transcendentalist point of view will assume instead that *something satisfies me* (ethically, aesthetically, affectively) *because it has a value*—just as the beloved person has a value in and of herself because she is. Which means that *the cause* of our love is her being so-and-so, while *the reason* for our love is her being itself. In short, the other's being is something scientifically unprovable, but that becomes manifest through my ethical devotion, my aesthetical appreciation or my love election.

11. I cannot know what I express

Someone might observe that Wittgenstein's theses on ethics at that time were "immature", and that a later conception of ethics—had there been one—would have been more convincing. Having later abandoned a monistic vision of language, he would no longer have stated, "My whole tendency... was to run against the boundaries of language" (LE, p.). For him, *the* language no longer exists, and a pluralistic (some would say relativistic) conception prevails, which considers *languages* in the plural. Every proposition has a sense only within a "system", and these systems (and their grammars) are indefinitely many¹⁹.

Anyway, I doubt if the younger Wittgenstein's conception of ethics was later surpassed. It is true that Wittgenstein—as far as he discovers the plurality of linguistic games and thus of forms of life which express themselves through them—assumes also the plurality of the ethical systems, their specific historicity. Now he would focus on what I had previously called the historico-ethnic, environmental dimension of ethics ("feeling absolutely safe"), although I don't believe that this would annul the ontological dimension. I wonder if the various deontic systems are

¹⁹ So that Bouveresse (1973) observes that, "The non-sense of the ethical propositions, which in the perspective of the *Tractatus* and *Lecture on Ethics* is equivalent to an aggression against the limits of language—aggression necessarily doomed to failure—can also be explained, from another point of view, with the absence of a universal system of reference which could make possible univocal attributes of (absolute) value to things and worldly events."

not variations of an ontological localization of the values which Wittgenstein had drawn much earlier. Because of ethics, an *ek-static* disposition of the human being becomes manifest, the fact that certain languages tend to go beyond languages and their grammars. But toward what?

In both stages of Wittgenstein's thought, what always stirs him is the difference between sayable and showable – that is, between “the world” and what presupposes it. In the first stage, the relevant unsayable were on the one hand things (*Dinge*) as such (the substance of the world), and on the other logical form: language can only say the *how* of the world, never the *what*, not even the “what” of the language itself. The fact that language can describe the world, cannot itself be described. The mirror cannot mirror its own specularly. In the second stage, when Wittgenstein focuses on the impossible private language, he is still dealing with the impossibility of describing and knowing; while every subject can certainly express itself, it cannot know itself. In fact, the impossibility of a private language does not at all mean that the interior life is inexistent or even irrelevant, in fact, I would say just the contrary. Of a private object he says that “It is not a *something*, but not a *nothing* either!” (PU, par. 304)—but, after all, that is what one could say even of the things (*Dinge*) of the *Tractatus*. In fact, intimate life expresses itself publicly and more or less perspicuously through public linguistic games.

By sustaining the impossibility of a private language, Wittgenstein states in another way the absolute, indescribable character of the subjective experience. For Wittgenstein, two statements such as “my molar has a cavity” and “I feel a lot of pain in my molar” seemingly have the same grammar, but usually belong to completely different linguistic games. The second statement, far from being an objective description of my subjective state, can be analyzed as an exclamation, that is, a linguistic way to express the cry: as a way to *express* my pain, not to *describe it* and thus to *know it*. After all, this is what Wittgenstein also says about typically ethical and aesthetical expressions, such as “this person is good” or “this symphony is beautiful”: adjectives like *good* or *beautiful* seem to describe qualities of the object, but in fact they are rather exclamations. Evaluating a person or a work as good or evil, as beautiful or ugly, I *express my form of life*, that is my way of living-in-the-world among persons and works. This is not something which I *say of*, but rather something I *live with*.

12. Wittgenstein, a relativist?

The paradox of Wittgenstein's thought is that on one side it is radically relativist, and on the other fundamentally absolutist (just as on the one hand it is completely skeptical solipsist thought, and on the other completely realist). The ethical, aesthetical, affective value which we give to things of the world depends on the linguistic games in which we participate: thus there is no sense in establishing ethical, aesthetical, or affective norms or criteria for all situations, cultures, and people. From the other side, that which expresses itself in linguistic games in its turn cannot be described as an historical relation between myself and things: rather, it is something absolute in my life and in my languages.

Let us recall the *Tractatus*' proposition, «The world of the happy man is a different one from that of the unhappy man» (6.43) Is this relativism?

Is the world of the happy subject different from the world of the unhappy subject because the world is strictly correlated to transcendental subjectivity? We have seen that ethics and aesthetics, just because they are beyond the world, bring into play a transcendental subjectivity. But why does Wittgenstein choose as a paradigmatic example of the plurality of worlds precisely the worlds' correlation to *pathos*, affects, and being happy or unhappy? Why can the subject only show itself through silent sentiment, why is its solipsism pathetic?

In fact, *being happy* for the author is equivalent to expressing the essence of *good*—the only maxim which (mythically) describes ethics is “Live happily!” So «The world of the happy man is a different one from that of the unhappy man» can be read as: «There are as many ethics as worlds». To be ethical means to be in a happy world, a world which for Wittgenstein is, I would say, expanded and *more existing* (like the proverb “*being happy is being*”). That is, ethics, because it is not *in* the world, determines in some way an irreducible «plurality» of «worlds», a plurality of languages. And yet, the incommensurable diversity of ethics is not reducible to a moral relativism. In the «later» Wittgenstein, the transcendental feature of ethics—and of types of happiness—lessens, but does not disappear, even if instead of “worlds” we have here many “grammars” and games; this is a plurality which refers back to the irreducible problematic character of different ethical systems, to the fact that every ethical system is just a simple variant from a universal, sayable, ethical background. And the right philosophy he is pursuing is in the end the one which

initiates us to the right way of *being in the world*. Being *anständig*, decent, as he said often, in this world.

In his letter to von Ficker, Wittgenstein said of the *Tractatus*:

My work consists of two parts: one is what I wrote, and the second is all I have *not* written. And this second part is the important one²⁰.

This non-written part is precisely the ethical side, which the *Tractatus* delimits «so to say, from inside; and I am convinced that the ethical should be *rigorously* limited only in that way» (BrVF, p. 72)²¹.

Thus, through everything the *Tractatus* says, it *shows* something—the ethical (or «mystical»). So, what matters in a philosophical text is what it shows rather than what it says. And what is shown rather than said is more on the order of a form than of a content (a fact or state of things). A proposition, when it *tells* a fact, can only *show* its logical form (T, 2.172). Analogously, the ethical dimension to which Wittgenstein refers is on the order of a form; the ethical would probably be the *form shown* by the *Tractatus*, by the text which, in spite of everything, tells.

Also in his later thought, the term *Form* comes back in a dimension of the unsayable, now connected to the «form of life», *Lebensform*, which itself cannot be said (in *Investigations*—where this expression appears only five times—it is never defined). «Form of life» takes the place of the mystical—what the *Tractatus* as a *whole* shows in its numbered propositions—because it supplies “the key” to understanding the linguistic games’ rules and grammar. Forms of life show themselves in our games, but in their turn are not games.

13. *Klarheit*

²⁰ I propose here my own provisional translation of the original text.

²¹ I propose here my own provisional translation of the original text.

In conclusion, Wittgenstein's reflections—necessarily in fragments—on ethics and aesthetics highlight two apparently opposed dimensions which are in fact intimately related.

- First dimension. The world of (ethical, aesthetic, or other) values gives us access to a dimension of the Being which does not coincide with the sayable world, but with something I would call *Real*²². Ethical actions and aesthetic passions summon us to the space of *Dinge*, of necessary and absolute things. I propose the term Real in order to distinguish it both from the representable and depictable universe on the one hand (*Umwelt* or *Welt*, environment or world) and from the universe of signs (what belongs to the logical form) and linguistic games (the grammar of usages) on the other.
- Second dimension. Wittgenstein, earlier through the thematization of solipsism, and later through that of the ineffable private and of life, confronts us with a transcendental dimension of subjectivity (transcendental because absolutely prior to psychical life). He confronts us with a (probably Schopenhauerian) subjectivity, in the sense of an undescrivable source of our being-in-the-world, which is always an historical and socialized being.

The ideal to which Wittgenstein always referred was that of a radical *clarity* (*Klarheit*), an ideal he expressed through figures like that of the limpid ether: an ideal of an “astral” philosophy, neutral as a mirror. But, pursuing this ideal, Wittgenstein realizes that every mirror, no matter how limpidly it can reflect, presupposes something which will always remain outside the mirror: on the one hand, the eye looking at the mirror, which can consider the mirror as such; on the other hand, things which mirror themselves and which can be manifest only in the mirror of language. Is Wittgenstein's philosophy the pathetic, dramatic document, of the disappointing limits of any mirror? Is it a document of everything which, in an ideal of perspicuous representation, cannot be represented? That is, does it document the two “impossible” faces of the Being—real things and myself?

²² I take this notion of the Real—as a concept distinct from Reality, i.e. from Wittgenstein's „world“—from Jacques Lacan's thought, which had an Hegelian and Heideggerian background. In short, by *Real* I mean something which we cannot say or describe in a propositional way, but which emerges (especially in certain affective experiences) as the untold supposition of what is sayable. What is *beyond* sayable and which at the same time *props* it up. In the early Wittgenstein's terms, we might say that the *Real* is that “what” presupposed—and ineffable as such—to any “how”, while the meaningful language of science can describe only a “how” and never the “what”. We might say that, insofar as science speaks about reality, ethics evokes the dimension of the Real.

I will refer to Wittgenstein's works by the following items:

LE	<i>A Lecture on Ethics</i> , in <i>Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief</i> , Oxford 1966.
WE	" <i>The Development of Wittgenstein's Views on Ethics</i> ", by Rush Rhees, <i>Moral Questions</i> , ed. D.Z. Phillips, Basingstoke: 1999.
PU	<i>Philosophische Untersuchungen</i> ; Eng. Tr. Oxford 1953.
T	<i>Logisch-philosophische Abhandlung</i> ; Eng. Tr. London 1961.
TB	<i>Notebooks 1914-1916</i> , Oxford 1961.
BrVF	<i>Briefe an Ludwig von Ficker</i> , G.H. von Wright & W. Methlagl, eds., Salzburg 1969.

The pages I refer to here are those of the English translations of these works, while the *Tractatus* is quoted through the numbers as labeled by the author, and *Notebooks* through the dates of the notes.

G. Agamben (2008) *Il sacramento del linguaggio. Archeologia del giuramento*, Laterza, Roma.

A. Badiou (2009) *L'antiphilosophie de Wittgenstein*, Nous, Paris.

J. Bouveresse (1973) *La rime et la raison*, Ed. de Minuit, Paris.

M. De Carolis (1999) *Una lettura del "Tractatus" di Wittgenstein*, Cronopio, Napoli 1999.

R.M. Hare (1952) *The Language of Morals*, Oxford.

C. Lévi-Strauss, "Introduction to Marcel Mauss's Work".

R. Rorty (1989) "Wittgenstein e Heidegger: due percorsi incrociati", *Lettera Internazionale*, 22, pp. 21-26.
