THE POWERLESSNESS OF WILL
A theme in Wittgenstein's early philosophy

Lars Hertzberg

I. Will and the Picture Theory

1. Ludwig Wittgenstein's Notebooks 1914-1916 contains his philosophical diary, kept during two of the years in which he was developing the philosophical position formulated in the Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus. In the entry for 11 June, 1916, he asks himself: 'What do I know about God and the purpose of life?' In answer to his question, he lists a number of propositions:

> I know that this world exists.
> That I am placed in it like my eye in its visual field.
> That something about it is problematic, which we call its meaning.
> That this meaning does not lie in it but outside it.
> That life is the world.
> That my will penetrates the world.
> That my will is good or evil.
> Therefore that good and evil are somehow connected with the meaning of the world.
> The meaning of life, i.e. the meaning of the world, we can call God.
> And connect with this the comparison of God to a father.
> To pray is to think about the meaning of life.
> I cannot bend the happenings of the world to my will: I am completely powerless.

> I can only make myself independent of the world -- and so in a certain sense master it -- by renouncing any influence on happenings.[1]

These remarks form the overture to an extended treatment of the themes broached in them. The theme introduced in the last two propositions is taken up in the next entry (5 July):

> The world is independent of my will.
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> Even if everything we wish for were to happen, this would still only be, so to speak, a grace of fate, for what would guarantee it is not any logical connection between will and world, and we could not in turn will the supposed physical connection (p. 73).

These are surprising claims. It is true that we cannot, simply by willing, bring into existence the physical connection that enables us to put our decisions into effect. In my actions I am constrained, among other things, by the fact that there are some things I am physically incapable of doing. But this does not seem to be a ground for denying that there are an indefinite number of other things which I am physically capable of bringing about and which are, accordingly, in my power.

The entry continues as follows:

> If good or evil willing affects the world, it can only affect the boundaries of the world, not the facts, [it can affect] what cannot be portrayed by language but can only be shewn in language (Notebooks, p. 73).
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> In short, it must make the world a wholly different one.

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[1] Ludwig Wittgenstein, Notebooks 1914-1916, ed. by G. H. von Wright and G. E. M. Anscombe (second edition, Basil Blackwell, Oxford 1979), pp. 72 f. I have in the main followed the translation by G.E.M. Anscombe, though I depart from it in a few cases.

> The world must, so to speak, wax and wane as a whole. As if by accession or loss of meaning.
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> As in death, too, the world does not change but stops existing. (Ibid.)[2]

It seems evident that in making these claims, Wittgenstein is spelling out some of the consequences of the conception of thought and language that he was developing in the Notebooks, and which was to receive its fullest formulation in his Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus. In fact, many of the remarks he makes in the course of his discussion of these issues in the Notebooks (including the last two quoted above), occur verbatim or in slightly modified form in the concluding pages of the Tractatus.

In this chapter, I shall try to sketch out the line of thought that seems to have led Wittgenstein to adopt the view of the will that he was advancing in the Notebooks and in the Tractatus. In order to make the attraction this view may have held for him apparent, I wish to present it in as favourable a light as possible, reserving my criticisms for a later chapter. I shall then discuss the views concerning the ethical will, happiness and the meaning of life that he was outlining in these works.

We should bear in mind that the Notebooks is a collection of diary notes, appearing in the order in which they were written and never prepared for publication by their author. They are, as it were, a laboratory for philosophical ideas, and it is hardly surprising if we find Wittgenstein trying out different, even contradictory positions on the questions he is discussing. Peter Winch has exposed some of the tensions inherent in Wittgenstein's remarks in his pathbreaking essay 'Wittgenstein's Treatment of the Will'[3], from which my discussion has drawn a great deal of inspiration. In particular, he convincingly argues that Wittgenstein, near the end of the section on the will, makes some remarks that point beyond the position required by the picture theory of language, towards the type of treatment he was to give these issues in Philosophical Investigations. I shall return to this point in a later chapter.

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[2] The remarks quoted here correspond to Tractatus 6.43-6.431.

[3] Reprinted in his collection Ethics and Action, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London 1972.

The provisional nature of the Notebooks, as well as the somewhat oracular (and, occasionally, melodramatic) mode of epxression that Wittgenstein favoured in this period, pose particular problems for the interpreter. The reader is forced to interpolate, and I do not wish to claim that my own interpolations are the only possible ones. I would emphasize, however, that my principal concern is not with the question what Wittgenstein actually wanted to say, but rather with what we can learn from his remarks concerning the issues he discusses.

In Wittgenstein's remarks about the will there are explicit references to Schopenhauer, as well as allusions to Spinoza and perhaps to the Stoics. A study could be written trying to place his remarks in the context of a history of ideas. However, I am writing from the conviction that we can also learn a great deal simply by concentrating on his own remarks.

2. Why did Wittgenstein's early thoughts about the nature of language lead him to conclude that the world is independent of my will? The central thought of the Tractatus is that the sense of everything that can be meaningfully said must be expressible by means of an elementary proposition or a combination of elementary propositions. The elementary proposition depicts a simple state of affairs; the truth of each elementary proposition is logically independent of that of any other. A notorious problem for the reader of the Tractatus is that Wittgenstein does not give a single example of what he means by elementary propositions (indeed, it seems clear that no actual sentence could fulfill what is required of one). However, from what Wittgenstein says it is obvious that in his view, the elementary proposition is characterized by the fact that its truth is to be determined exclusively by comparing what the proposition says with what is the case at some given point in space and time; a proposition making simultaneous reference to several points in space and time would have to be composite.

In this view of language, however, propositions about the will seem to constitute a problem. The difficulty is that of accounting for the sense in which our actions are an expression of our will, or, in more common parlance, for the fact that the intentions we have, or the decisions we make, have something to do with the way we act. Suppose a man announces his decision to mow the lawn the next day. The act of deciding to which his words refer, if they are true, would, it seems, have to have occurred before, or to occur at, the moment of speaking. But we also want to say that,

in the normal course of affairs, his decision must have some impact on his behaviour the next day. Obviously it is in the nature of a decision to result in the course of action decided upon; if the man does not mow the lawn that day, then, unless his failure can be accounted for by reference to some unforeseen circumstance (such as a change in the weather, some urgent business requiring his attention, or even just his forgetting about the lawn), his wife would have grounds for doubting whether he had been sincere in announcing the decision. Analogously, for him to have said, 'I've decided to mow the lawn tomorrow, let's see whether I'll do it' would be odd, and we should hardly know what to make of it; at most, it might be a self-mocking confession of his inability to stick to his plans.

So we want to say that his decision, while existing at the moment of speaking, also had to be involved, in some sense, in his doing what he did the next day; indeed, the man's behaviour the next day could be taken to show whether or not he really meant what he said the day before. But the question is, how are we to account for this on the view of language of the Tractatus? To which states of affairs are we to compare the man's utterance in order to decide whether it was true? Here we seem faced with a dilemma: either the decision consists exclusively in some state or states of affairs obtaining at the moment of speaking -- presumably, in certain mental occurrences -- but then there is no accounting for the idea that it has something to do with the action itself; or else his announcement involves a reference to something beside those mental occurrences, that is, to states of affairs pertaining to his actions the next day; but then we arrive at the paradoxical consequence that the man was not in a position to say with certainty that he had decided to mow the lawn until he actually did it.

The dilemma seems inescapable if one accepts the view of language of the Tractatus, for on that view, connections between states of affairs cannot be among the features of the world. By comparing propositions with states of affairs, we can determine, say, that the proposition p was true at time t_1 and that the proposition q was true at time t_2, but there is no state of affairs (nor any set of states of affairs) to which we can compare the proposition 'p at t_1: therefore q at t_2' in order to determine its truth. In other words, there is no room for the thought that, when someone makes a decision or has an intention, what is the case at that moment might be of a nature to result in some particular action at a later moment.

> One elementary proposition cannot be deduced from another.
>
> There is no possible way of making an inference from the existence of one situation to the existence of another, entirely different situation. (TLP 5.134-5.135.)

This also entails, of course, that causal connections between states of affairs are not among the features of the world:

> We cannot infer the events of the future from those of the present.
> Belief in the causal nexus is superstition. (5.1361).
>
> There is no compulsion making one thing happen because another has happened. The only necessity that exists is logical necessity. (6.37).

Accordingly, assertions about the future must be hypothetical, invoking past experience in conjunction with an assumption about the uniformity of nature (cp.TLP 6.3-6.36311). Since that assumption cannot be known to hold, they can never constitute knowledge.

As far as decisions and intentions are concerned, the consequence of accepting this view, as we saw, is that we are forced to choose between two options. Either we must surrender the idea that the decision or intention is connected with the action, or else we have to accept the consequence that a person is not in a position to say with certainty what his decisions or intentions are until he acts on them. Wittgenstein evidently opts for the former course, but the result in either case would have been the same: the idea that in planning ahead, making decisions, forming intentions, I am exercising control over my future actions is an illusion, whether we choose to express that point by saying that my intentions are not connected with my actions, or by saying that I do not know what I intend to do until I act.

Nor is this point restricted to cases in which there is a time lapse between the intention and the action. If we take the intention to consist in states of affairs that do not include the action itself, there is no accounting for the idea, say, that my

mowing the lawn is an expression of my intention to mow the lawn even when the intention and the action are simultaneous, since I could have had the same intention without carrying it out. (Nothing is changed, by the way, even if we take the intention to include the action, for even when they are simultaneous, there can be no basis for the claim that the parts of the intention other than the physical action itself, the thoughts, experiences, or whatever mental occurrences an intention is taken to involve on this view, is responsible for the other part of the intention: my performing the action.)

In brief, the idea that in acting we exercise control over events -- i.e. that we are agents -- will be a problem for any view which takes that control to consist in the performing of certain mental acts which then result in physical activity. What seems to make such a view of the will inevitable, on the other hand, is the assumption that, when a person says what she is doing or is about to do, her claim to be believed, unless based on her observing the action itself, can only derive from the existence of a contingent connection between her present state and actions of that type. This assumption, in turn, is evidently forced on us by the requirement that the only thing that can make an assertion true is some state of affairs that can be observed to hold at the time to which the assertion refers; otherwise its reference to that point in time is spurious. In short, if we adopt a view of the relation between language and reality along the lines of that expressed in the Tractatus, the notion of agency is apparently bound to be incomprehensible.

In a later chapter, I shall try to show why Wittgenstein's later philosophy can be regarded as offering a way around these difficulties, possibilities that are, in fact, already hinted at in the Notebooks.

3. As we saw, Wittgenstein explained his claim that it would be merely a 'grace of fate' if the things we wish for were to happen by pointing out that there is no logical connection between the will and the world, and that we cannot will the supposed physical connection. Here we may be inclined to retort that it does not matter how the requisite physical connection is established; for our ability to act, it is sufficient that it does obtain.

However, I would suggest that Wittgenstein is drawing into question the distinction between wishing and willing (intending, deciding), a distinction that seems

to be essential to an understanding of what it means to be an agent. I shall try to reconstruct what may have been his line of thought. This, I hope, will give us a clearer understanding of what is involved in the idea of the powerlessness of the will and the consequent denial of agency.

The use of the words 'intend' and 'wish' seems to be connected with whether we take the relevant state of affairs to be in the agent's control or not. If I say 'I intend to mow the lawn', I let it be understood that I expect to carry out my plan, and that I do not foresee any obstacles to doing so. I would not say that I wish to perform some action unless I thought there might be a reason why I should not or could not do it. On the other hand, we may express wishes concerning things that are totally or almost totally out of our control. Thus, I may wish that the rain might end, that I were taller, that I had been born in the 18th century, or that George Bush will be defeated in the next election.

Now some of the things I wish for are things over which I do have some influence. While driving a car at night I may suddenly notice myself becoming drowsy, and the fear of falling asleep at the wheel may make me wide awake. Still, if I am tired enough, just wishing to stay awake will not keep me from falling asleep, nor will any of the things I might try, such as forcing my eyes open, rubbing my face, turning up the radio, etc. Staying awake, then, is not an action it is in my power to perform or not as I choose, but still it does depend on me to some extent.[4]

It might be natural to construe what is happening in this case in the following terms: wishing to stay awake means having a certain feeling about the prospect of falling asleep. The feeling may be more or less intense; the more intense it is, the greater the likelihood that it will be fulfilled. But no matter how intense it is, I may be overpowered by sleep.

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[4] It is true that I might say in such a case: 'I intend to stay awake', but this is rather a special use of the word 'intend'. I am not informing anyone that, faced with the options of staying awake and falling asleep, I have decided in favour of the former; what I am saying is rather that I am determined to overcome the danger of falling asleep and confident that I shall succeed.

Another case might be this: I have a busy day ahead of me, and I'm afraid that I may forget about a call I have to make exactly at ten. The more important the call, we assume, the greater the likelihood that I shall remember to make it, but it is possible I shall forget about it even if I consider it important.

This may have been the way in which Wittgenstein thought about wishing in writing the Notebooks. If he did, we could then imagine him proceeding as follows: there is no difference in principle between staying awake or remembering to make the phone call, on he one hand, and doing any of the things we normally take it to be completely in our power to do (such as opening the front door and picking up the newspaper), on the other hand. Whenever we act, he seems to have thought, we have favourable feelings towards some occurrence, and then, in the normal case, our body proceeds to bring about that occurrence. But the feeling we have does not guarantee that our body will move in the requisite fashion, any more than it guarantees that I will stay awake or will remember to make the call. The fact that we are more likely to succeed in some cases than in others is completely contingent, something we learn about through experience. We can, as it were, do no more than clench our mental teeth and hope for the best.

There is, accordingly, no basis for supposing that there is a difference in principle between events over which we have control and events over which we have merely some degree of influence; or in other words, between what may be an object of intention and what may simply be an object of wishing.

To dramatize this point, Wittgenstein considers the case of a paralyzed man who can 'use none of his limbs and hence could, in the ordinary sense, not exercise his will' (Notebooks, pp. 76 f.). An effort of will is not sufficient to prevent our becoming like that man; what this shows, it could be thought, is that it is only by the grace of fate that we are able to do whatever we can do. (One could, of course, imagine intermediate cases here: say, someone who was not completely paralyzed but was only able to act in a more or less haphazard fashion: he sometimes succeeded in doing what he meant to do, but he could never count on it.[5])

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[5] Wittgenstein considers an instance of what could be called haphazard behaviour in Philosophical Investigations, para 617. I shall get back to that later on [not in this paper].

In denying the distinction between intending and wishing, Wittgenstein, as we shall see, is not departing from what was (and still to some extent seems to be) the received view among philosophers. What made his position peculiar was the fact that he drew a conclusion most philosophers before him had failed to draw: he saw that the assimilation of wishing to intending entails a denial of agency.

The end result is that, on the view being considered, my relation to my own behaviour is in fact no different in principle from my relation to any other event in the world. This seems to be the point expressed in the following remarks:

> A stone, the body of an animal, the body of a human being, my body, all stand on the same level.
>
> That is why what happens, whether it comes from a stone or from my body is neither good nor bad (p. 84).

(I.e., even in the latter case, considerations of good or bad do not have the power of determining what will actually happen.)

Further on, Wittgenstein writes,

> ... the consideration of willing makes it look as if one part of the world were closer to me than another (which would be intolerable).
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> But of course it is undeniable that in a popular sense there are things that I do, and other things not done by me.
>
> Thus the will would not stand equivalently in relation to the world, which must be impossible (p. 88)[6].

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[6] Anscombe translates the central part of this remark as follows: 'the will would not confront the world as its equivalent'. The translation I am suggesting has the advantage of leaving it open, as does the original ('stuende also der Wille der Welt nicht aequivalent gegenueber'), whether the equivalence is taken to hold among the different events in the world or between the will and those events.

Evidently, according to Wittgenstein the popular view of agency takes there to be a difference in kind between different types of event with respect to my ability to control them. But in a clear perspective on language there can be no room for such a notion, since empirical correlation is the only kind of connection there can be between different events: I have as much, or as little, to do with managing to stay awake as with any action of mine.

4. The view of language formulated by Wittgenstein in the Notebooks and the Tractatus seems to hold a strong appeal for us. The nature of this appeal can, I believe, be brought out by means of a metaphor. Suppose we compare the situation of the human subject confronting the world with that of an individual trying to give an account of what is to be seen in a strip of film. Let us imagine that in one frame she sees what looks like a hand, its fingers stretching out in the direction of a round, ball-like object. She may decide that the frame shows a hand and a ball but that it is impossible to tell, by the single frame, whether the hand has just let go of the ball or whether it is about to catch it. The surrounding frames may resolve that question; on the other hand, they may make her withdraw even her initial description of what she had seen. For it might be that as what she took to be a ball hit what she took to be a hand, the 'hand' exploded as if it had been made of snow, or the 'ball' dissolved into a puff of smoke. We might take this to show that the observer did 'not actually' see, or know, that the frame showed a hand or a ball; she had been too rash in giving that description.

It seems natural to suppose, however, that if she were only careful enough in framing her description, she must be able to describe what she saw in a way that would not be threatened by whatever the surrounding frames showed. It may not be immediately apparent what that description would have to be like: she may be sticking her neck out even by simply attributing a shape or colour to the object in the picture: after all, the 'ball' if shown from a different angle might turn out to be a flat disk, or maybe a round light shining on a wall. Perhaps the only way to be safe is to refrain from attributing any representative qualities to the strip of film at all, and simply to describe the properties of the strip itself (cp. sense-data).

Against this background, the conception of language of the Tractatus could be expressed as follows: every conceivable event has a 'no-risk' description (i.e. a

description in terms of elementary propositions), and the sense of everything that can be meaningfully said about the world must be capable of being completely spelled out in terms of such descriptions. A corollary of this is that we can only claim to know the truth of an assertion to the extent to which we have established the truth of all the no-risk descriptions presupposed by it.

The attraction of this view is that it presents the sense of what we say as being independent of what merely happens to be the case. If broken down into small enough constituents, our language on this view will not cease to have an application no matter how different the world might become from the world as we know it. It is true that the sense of many of the assertions we normally make does depend on our living in a world of a certain kind. An ordinary sentence like 'There's an alarm clock over on that table' presupposes the existence of a human practice of manufacturing and using alarm clocks (as well as tables); the speaker, in uttering it, furthermore takes it for granted that he is able to identify the object in front of him, on the basis of its appearance, as having, or having been designed to have, the complex functions of an alarm clock. For a person coming from a radically different environment, the same presuppositions might not hold, they might not even be intelligible to him. But even so, he and the speaker should be able to agree on some way of describing what they saw, provided both have normal powers of vision. After all, we want to say, they are both responding to the same visual input.

In fact, the existence of a no-risk level of description seems to be a precondition for there to be a link-up between language and reality at all. Unless there were propositions the truth-value of which could be established conclusively by comparing them directly to the facts (all other propositions getting their sense via these), our propositions would have no determinate sense; for what else is there, beside the facts, that could possibly determine their truth? Accordingly, if I know the meaning of an elementary proposition, this has to mean that, if ideally placed to verify it, I must be able to decide, without a possibility for error, whether it is true or false.

The Notebooks and the Tractatus, to this extent, seem to belong squarely in the empiricist tradition of philosophy. The picture theory of language, I would argue, is an inevitable consequence of taking the following two things for granted: that the sense of our utterances is inextricably bound up with their capacity for representing facts (i.e. for being true or false); and, that their sense must be accessible to me

as speaker of this language. Indeed, one of the chief merits of Wittgenstein's early work, as I see it, was that he drew out the consequences of those assumptions more radically than anyone had dared to do before him, among them the conclusion that our will is powerless and that, accordingly, agency is an illusion.[7]

The questioning of the first of these assumptions was to hold a central place in Wittgenstein's repudiation of his earlier thought. The general drift of that criticism could, perhaps, be put as follows: in writing the Tractatus, he had assumed that what enables us to speak meaningfully is our having at our disposal a system of propositions, the nature of which it is to be capable of expressing specific meanings. The central task of philosophy, he had thought, was to show how meaning is possible by laying bare the preconditions for such a system. What he was to realize later was not so much that his earlier solution of this task was erroneous, as that the task itself was misconceived.

There is no general answer to the question what gives linguistic expressions meaning, because there is no general question. Expressions have meaning as we use them and as we respond to their use by others; we raise considerations of meaning, of understanding and failures to understand, in the course of speaking to one another: there is no question about meaning prior to speaking. (This point is missed by those who attribute to Wittgenstein a 'use theory' of meaning; such a theory, of course, would simply constitute another answer to the same general non-question.)

To speak about the meaningfulness of sentences is derivative from this: whether we call a sentence meaningful or not (where this is not merely a comment on its grammatical form) usually depends on whether we can imagine a situation in which someone might utter those words. Since what we can imagine (or can imagine easily or well) is often rather an indeterminate matter, this means that, traditional

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[7] Another, more constructive merit was the insight that 'logic must take care of itself', i.e. that the logic of our language is not dependent on the existence of certain underlying logical facts or entities. On this, cp. Cora Diamond, 'Philosophy and the Mind' and 'Wittgenstein and Metaphysics', in her collection, The Realistic Spirit. Wittgenstein, Philosophy, and the Mind (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1991).

views to the contrary, the issue of meaningfulness, as it applies to sentences, will often turn out to be hazy or open-ended.

The variety of things meant by 'meaning' is seen, for instance, in the variety of responses that will constitute a failure to understand what has been said or written in the context of various activities: say, bringing a slab instead of a beam, parking in a tow-away zone, taking offence at an imaginary slight, failing to enjoy a poem or a joke, getting the solution wrong to a task in arithmetic, taking someone who says 'Drop in some time' at his words, giving an erroneous translation, ordering a meat dish in a Chinese restaurant, losing one's way, etc.

As for the idea that, as speaker of a language I must have access to the sense of its expressions, that misconstrues the whole issue. My primary relation to my own language is not one of knowing what various words or utterances mean, but of being a participant in the activities in the context of which issues of meaning are negotiated. Others may judge that I have misunderstood something that was said, but in doing so they are simply exercising their prerogative as fellow participants in the activity, not claiming access to a higher truth. Which means that it is no business of philosophy to set them straight, or me.

In a later chapter we shall see how the problem of understanding agency vanishes once we liberate the language we use in speaking of human action from the empiricist straightjacket.

5. Wittgenstein, as we saw, just after asserting that the world is independent of my will, went on to admit that 'good or evil willing' can affect 'the boundaries of the world, not the facts, what cannot be portrayed by language but can only be shown in language'. He is here alluding to a distinction that is central to the Tractatus. For our present purposes, the distinction can, I believe, be briefly expounded as follows. The capacity of elementary sentences for depicting states of affairs is due to the elementary sentence having the same logical structure as the state of affairs depicted. To be able to read off an elementary sentence one must be clear about what there is about the sentence that is supposed to correspond to the character of the state of affairs; i.e. one must understand in what ways the sentence would have to be different in order to be true if the facts were different: just as a photograph portraying an object in black and white will only tell me that the object portrayed is black and white if I realize that the

picture is a representation in colour of what it depicts, that is, if I realize that the black and white colours of the representation are not dictated by the medium of representation (by the pictorial form).

For a sentence to try to express, not just what happens to be the case but what is necessarily the case, then, would defeat the very conditions for its having sense. If a sentence is to be necessarily true this would have to mean that we only have to understand the sentence in order to accept it as true, but this entails that, no matter what the circumstances are, there is no way in which the sentence would have to be different in order to be true. But then there is nothing about the sentence to connect it to anything beside itself: it has no logical structure.

Nevertheless we constantly do attempt to express things that cannot, on this account, be expressed since they lay a claim to acceptance independent of what happens to be the case. According to Wittgenstein, this amounts to an attempt to say things that can only be shown. Among these are the traditional claims of philosophers concerning the ultimate nature of reality as being material or spiritual or both -- claims that are clearly intended to be independent of contingent fact -- but also, as Wittgenstein acknowledges, his own attempts to formulate the conditions for meaning, i.e. the picture theory itself. The same is true of many things said outside of philosophy, among them religious claims, value judgments or utterances about the meaning of life.

What claims like these have in common, we might say, is this: it would be misunderstanding of their character to suppose that, if we accept them, we do so because we have been in a position to compare what they say with the facts (or because we trust that the person uttering them has been in such a position); rather, our acceptance can only be based on the fact that the claims recommend themselves to us as such.

The idea that such utterances might be said to express anything even though they violate the conditions for sense is, of course, problematic. Wittgenstein does not hesitate to call them nonsensical. Yet it seems clear that what gives religious, ethical and aesthetic judgments their importance and thus distinguishes them from mere gibberish (and also, I suppose, from the nonsense involved in the general claims made by philosophers) is the fact that our accepting them is something that will manifest itself in the difference they make to our lives. The point could, perhaps, be put in the following terms (albeit alien to the ascetic terminology of the Tractatus):

even if ethical or religious claims are not, in the ordinary sense, true of facts in the world, there is still an issue of whether or not the speaker means them, whether he is sincere in uttering them, whereas this is not true, or is true only in a highly attenuated sense, concerning the general pronouncements of metaphysical philosophers. Thus, reflection on ethical and religious judgments apparently points towards Wittgenstein's later insistence that issues of meaning are connected with the use of language. (In Wittgenstein's later work, of course, the need for upholding a pervasive distinction between things said and things shown no longer exists.)

Next, I shall try to clarify Wittgenstein's idea that good and evil willing can only affect what can be shown.

II. The Ethical Will and the Meaning of Life

1. In accordance with the picture theory of language, as we have seen, if my willing to perform an action is regarded as one of the occurrences in the world, there is no room for the thought that the volition was responsible for my performing the action. There is, by the way, no more room for the thought that I am responsible for the volition occurring. For some reason, Wittgenstein does not mention this side of the matter in the Notebooks or in the Tractatus, although he holds this idea up for criticism in the Philosophical Investigations (para 611):

> 'Willing too is merely an experience,' one would like to say (the 'will' too only 'idea'). It comes when it comes, and I cannot bring it about.

Actually, the latter thought is even harder to accommodate on the Tractatus view, for here there do not seem to be two different occurrences that could be correlated (unless we were to think of my act of will as being brought about by another act of will, which would entail an infinite regress); and hence there cannot even be a question of empirical correlation.

With regard to the will, then, I am on this account like the spectator of a film. Among the occurrences I witness are some I call my acts of will and some I call my actions, but there is no basis for saying that these occurrences are somehow due to

me or that I am more closely related to them than to any of the other events in the film. In the sphere of things being so, there is no foothold for responsibility: 'The world is given me, i.e. my will approaches the world completely from outside, as something already completed' (Notebooks, p. 74).

The point that the good or evil will cannot affect the facts, what can be said, might seem to follow directly from this. If our success in bringing about things in an external sense is out of our hands, it is natural to conclude that this can have no bearing on our moral worth. However, it is clear that Wittgenstein wants to say more than this. Thus, just after the entry about the world being independent of my will and good and evil willing affecting only things that can be shown, he writes:

> ... in this sense Dostoyevsky seems to be right when he says that whoever is happy is fulfilling the purpose of existence (Notebooks, p. 73).

And later on:

> In order to live happily I must be in agreement with the world. And this of course means 'being happy'.
>
> I am then, so to speak, in agreement with that alien will on which I appear dependent. That is to say: 'I am doing the will of God' (ibid, p. 75).
>
> I keep coming back to this: simply the happy life is good, the unhappy bad (ibid, p. 78).

Based on conversations he had with Wittgenstein during the period before writing the Notebooks, his friend Paul Engelmann expressed the following thought, which I assume captures Wittgenstein's view:

> If I am unhappy and know that my unhappiness reflects a gross discrepancy between myself and life as it is, I have solved nothing: I shall be on the wrong track and I shall never find a way out of the chaos of my emotions and thoughts so long as I have not achieved the supreme and

> crucial insight that that discrepancy is not the fault of life as it is, but of myself as I am.[8]

2. As Wittgenstein's readers we may balk at being told to accept the world as we find it. It seems that we are not only given permission to shut our eyes to the evils of the world, to the cruelties and injustices that are perpetually being perpetrated all around us, but are actually enjoined to do so -- and this as a condition of moral goodness.

This, I would argue, is not the way Wittgenstein's remarks are to be read. Such a reading, it is true, might be thought to be in harmony with things known about his outlook on life. He undeniably was an individualist by temperament, someone to whom the idea of doing good collectively by being involved, say, in a political cause would have been alien. And even apart from that, he would certainly have had grave doubts concerning the sorts of ideas about 'making the world a better place' that are frequently invoked in connection with such causes. If taken literally, such ideas presuppose the notion of a unified condition called 'the state of the world' which is taken somehow to be open to correction through our deliberate efforts. It is safe to say that Wittgenstein would have rejected that notion as senseless during all stages of his philosophical development.

For all that, it is hard to see how Wittgenstein's distaste for political activism or his distrust of the idea of progress would translate itself into the idea that being happy about the way things are is a mark of the ethical will. And if, on the other hand, such extraneous considerations are disregarded, it is no less difficult to see why, even if Wittgenstein's point about the powerlessness of the will is granted, this should entail a prohibition even on trying to do good.

Wittgenstein himself was evidently aware of a difficulty here. In the Notebooks entry for 29 July, 1916, he wrote:

> Is it possible to will good, to will evil, and not to will?
>
> Or is only he happy who does not will?

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[8] Paul Engelmann, Letters from Wittgenstein. With a Memoir (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1967), pp. 76 f.

'To love one's neighbour' would mean to will!

But can one want and yet not be unhappy if the want does not attain fulfilment? (And this possibility always exists.)

Is it, according to common conceptions, good to want nothing for one's neighbour, neither good nor evil?

(The question is clearly measnt as rhetorical, the obvious answer being 'No'.)

And yet in a certain sense it seems that not wanting is the only good.

Here I am still making crude mistakes! No doubt of that!

It is generally assumed that it is evil to want someone else to be unfortunate. Can this be correct? Can it be worse than to want him to be fortunate?

Here everything seems to turn, so to speak, on how one wants.

It seems one can't say anything more than: Live happily! (Pp. 77 f.)

The solution, Wittgenstein cryptically hints, lies in a distinction between different ways of wanting. What makes a difference, it appears, is whether or not one is made unhappy if one's wish is not fulfilled. In other words, we should try to wish for nothing in that sense of wishing in which, when you do not get what you wish for, that will make you unhappy. How are we to understand this? I would take it as obvious that 'being happy' is not to be understood here in the sense in which we might, at first, be inclined to understand it: as referring to a certain quality of feeling. Being happy, for Wittgenstein, does not simply mean something like 'feeling nice', but is rather a way of relating to the world: as when he says, 'to be in agreement with the

world ... of course means [heisst ja] "being happy"' -- the 'of course', here, rather obviously flying in the face of the common understanding of the word.

For Wittgenstein there is a close connection between the attitude of the happy man, and the sense in which good and evil willing can make the world wax and wane as a whole, 'as if by accession or loss of meaning'.[9] A thought that seems to me to be closely analogous to Wittgenstein's is expressed in Par Lagerkvist's novel The Dwarf, in which the world is seen through the eyes of the title character, embittered at his fate, his physical size an allegory of his mentality. The dwarf is an attendant at the court of an Italian prince during the Renaissance, and in this passage he recalls a conversation between his master and a Lionardo-like character:

> Tonight they sat up until after midnight and talked and talked as never before. They worked themselves up into an ecstasy with their talk. They spoke of nature, of its inexhaustible greatness and riches. One great continuity, a single miracle! ---
>
> How can anyone seriously believe in such fantasies? How can anyone believe in the continuity, the divine harmony in everything, as he also called it? How can anyone use such fine-sounding, meaningless words? Miracles of nature! ---
>
> Ah, life is wonderful and human existence unfathomable in its greatness!
>
> There was no end to their jubilation. They were like children dreaming of toys, so many toys that they did not know what to do with them all. I looked at them with my dwarf's eyes without moving a muscle of my ancient furrowed face. Dwarfs are not like children; they never play. ---
>
> What do they [the prince and his friend] know of the greatness of life? How do they know it is great? It is only a phrase, something they enjoy saying. One might just as well affirm that it was small, insignificant, completely unimportant, an insect that one can crush on a fingernail. And one might add that it has no objection to being

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[9] This connection is made explicit in Tractatus 6.43.

> crushed on a fingernail, being just as contented with its end as with anything else. And why should it not be so? Why should it be so anxious to exist? Why should it strive for existence or anything else either? Why should it not be completely indifferent to everything?[10]

This monologue, I would suggest, helps us understand the sense of the following remarks in the Notebooks:

> The world of the happy is a different world from that of the unhappy.
>
> The world of the happy is a happy world (p. 78).

Returning to the film metaphor once more, the master and the dwarf are like two persons watching the same film: to one of them the same events will seem great and significant, to the other small and insignificant. But the difference in their attitude will make no difference to the actual events in the film.

Wishing in the right way evidently means that the world will not be diminished, life will not suffer a loss of meaning, if you do not get your wish, nor indeed, if you get what you do not wish for. A person of good will does not make favourable contingencies a condition for accepting life as meaningful:

> The only life that is happy is the life that can renounce the amenities of the world.
>
> To it the amenities of the world are so many graces of fate (Notebooks, p. 81).

To the extent to which we permit averse or favourable circumstances to affect our affirmation of life, this shows that we do not affirm life, existence, as such, but only life under such and such conditions. Since we have no method of ensuring that the

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[10] Par Lagerkvist, The Dwarf (London, Quartet Books, 1986), trans. from the Swedish by Alexandra Dick, pp. 27-29.

circumstances will remain favourable, our attitude to life will then be dependent on circumstances beyond our control. If you enjoy life while things are going smoothly, while your projects are successful and they keep you busy, people like you and your health is good, this fact does not permit tell us very much about your attitude to life.

So having a sense of meaningfulness, of fulfilment, does not necessarily mean that you have the right attitude towards existence. Your present circumstances may simply be helping you forget that others are not so lucky, that things might take a different turn for you, that old age and death await us all. If this is so, then your sense that life has meaning is simply a guise for your ultimate lack of faith. You are then still dependent on fate. But the point is that we have to make ourselves independent.[11]

The contrast between these two ways of thinking about the issue of the meaning of life is brought out clearly in a conversation with Wittgenstein recorded by

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[11] The person who is content, it seems, has a kinship with the person educated by possibility, as characterized by Soren Kierkegaard in The Concept of Anxiety:

> Whoever is educated by anxiety is educated by possibility, and only he who is educated by possibility is educated according to his infinitude. Therefore possibility is the weightiest of all categories. It is true that we often hear the opposite stated, that possibility is so light, whereas actuality is so heavy. ... this possibility that is said to be so light is commonly regarded as the possibility of happiness, fortune, etc. But this is not possibility. It is rather a mendacious invention that human depravity has dressed up so as to have a reason for complaining of life and Governance and a pretext for becoming self-important. No, in possibility all things are equally possible, and whoever has truly been brought up by possibility has grasped the terrible as well as the joyful. So when such a person graduates from the school of possibility, and he knows better than a child knows his ABC's that he can demand absolutely nothing of life and that the terrible, perdition, annihilation live next door to every man ... he will praise actuality, and even when it rests heavily upon him, he will remember that it nevertheless is far, far lighter than possibility was. Only in this way can possibility be educative.
>
> (The Concept of Anxiety, edited and translated by Reidar Thomte in collaboration with Albert B. Anderson (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 156.)

Bertrand Russell. They were discussing the text: 'What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul?'

> I said it depended on having a large purpose that one is true to. He said he thought it depended more on suffering and the power to endure it. I was surprised -- I hadn't expected that kind of thing from him.[12]

Russell's reaction evidently shows a superficial understanding of the issue: he was giving his own opinion of what made life worth living and expected Wittgenstein to give his. Wittgenstein's answer baffled him because what he said was the 'kind of thing' you would only expect from a religious person. He was probably inclined to lay this down to Wittgenstein's melancholy moods and his eccentricity. But in the light of his remarks in the Notebooks, it seems clear that Wittgenstein was not voicing another opinion on what makes life meaningful. On the contrary, he would have argued, life is not made meaningful by anything: that would be tantamount to saying that its meaning depends on the facts. It is incumbent on us to retain our faith in existence whatever happens.

This seems to be the point of the following remarks in the Notebooks:

> The solution to the problem of life is to be seen in the disappearance of this problem. ----
>
> Isn't this the reason why men to whom the meaning of life had become clear after long doubting could not say what this meaning consisted in? ----
>
> To believe in a God means to understand the question about the meaning of life.

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[12] Quoted by Ray Monk, Ludwig Wittgenstein. The Duty of Genius (London & New York: The Penguin Books, 1991), p. 51.

> To believe in a God means to see that the facts of the world are not the end of the matter.
>
> To believe in God means to see that life has a meaning (p. 74).

And, in the Tractatus:

> The facts all contribute only to setting the problem, not to its solution (6.4321).

Perhaps in talking about a 'large purpose' Russell was thinking about something like his own experience in writing the Principia Mathematica, forgetting that for someone to have the ability, or the opportunity, to engage in such a project is itself a grace of fate (not to mention the fact that men and women have been known to lose their souls to 'large purposes'). It is true that someone to whom everyday life offers no other challenges than getting through deadly routines at work, or coping with chronic pain, homelessness, loneliness or unemployment, may try to console herself with the thought that her life, too, in one way or another, is part of a larger purpose, but in such a case that thought will hardly have the power to sustain her; rather she would need strength to sustain the thought.

This may be the point expressed in the following remark of the Note-books:

> ... that person is fulfilling the purpose of existence who no longer needs to have any purpose except to live. That is to say, who is content (p. 73).

3. Given that the reading of Wittgenstein's remarks suggested here is correct, there are two points about the position I have outlined that may require comment. On the one hand, we may find the close connection being taken for granted between affirming the meaning of existence and the ethical will a surprising one. On the other hand, we may consider the standards set by Wittgenstein -- that our affirmation of life should be independent of whatever happens to us or to anyone -- impossibly high. We may, indeed, find something paradoxical in his setting up any requirements at all just after

declaring that we are powerless to affect events in the world. I shall try to address each of these points in turn.

The entry for 10 January, 1917, which is the last entry in the Notebooks, reads as follows:

> If suicide is allowed then everything is allowed.
>
> If anything is not allowed then suicide is not allowed.
>
> This throws light on the nature of ethics, for suicide is, so to speak, the elementary sin.
>
> And when one investigates it it is like investigating mercury vapour in order to comprehend the nature of vapours.
>
> Or isn't even suicide neither good nor evil in itself![13]

I would suggest that, in all the remarks except the last one, Wittgenstein is not talking about the act of suicide as such, but rather about the attitude to life it is taken to symbolize (the attitude expressed, for example, in Hamlet's suicide monologue). The act, regarded as an event in the world, is perhaps neither good nor evil; it seems philistine, anyway, to add condemnation to the burden of someone who finds life unbearable. The point to be seen is that there is a moral demand not to turn one's back on life, a demand that does not derive from any other, more basic consideration. (What to think about those who fail to live up to the demand is a different matter, one that does not even arise from the radically first person perspective of the Notebooks.)

Here Wittgenstein is obviously echoing Ivan's remark in Dostoyevsky's Brothers Karamazov: 'If there is no God, then everything is allowed', underscoring the parallel between the rejection of life and the rejection of God. But why should he take there to be such a parallel? Why should ethics be thought to be dependent on the

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[13] Anscombe's rendering of the last remark seems to weaken the reversal: 'Or is even suicide in itself neither good nor evil?'

affirmation of life? Should we not think about the ability to retain our faith in existence as a matter of fortune rather than an obligation?

The following would perhaps be a way of bringing out the connection: doing wrong knowingly is always a turning of one's back on life, a (more or less temporary) surrender to cynicism. A person altogether lost to cynicism is someone who sees no reason to abstain from dishonesty or cruelty if that should serve his purpose. Nor will he be made indignant by the meanness he encounters (even though he may put on a show of indignation if there is something to be gained). 'At bottom', we might say, 'nothing really matters to him': he can see no reason for limiting the pursuit of his desires. Like Callicles in the Gorgias, he could not care less about the fact that the life he leads is an ugly one, since life is never anything but ugly anyway. He has no access to the Socratic thought that the evil-doer is 'miserable and pitiable'. Against this background, the thought of suicide as the elementary sin becomes intelligible: the attitude symbolized by the act of suicide can be regarded as the least common denominator of all cases of wrong-doing (which is not tantamount to saying that it is the worst possible sin).

Here we may need to bring to mind the distinction between the indifference of cynicism and the indifference of depression. A cynic like Callicles (or a sociopath) is not someone who has lost his appetite for various forms of pleasure; depression, on the other hand, commonly takes the form of indifference to all the normal sources of joy or concern. For the victim of depression, however, the problem is not that things have actually ceased to matter; rather, I would claim, the problem lies in his feeling that they do not matter, and in his awareness of that feeling. The pain of depression comes from the realization that all those things still do matter, accompanied by the loss of the appropriate feeling. His conscience, as it were, is intact. If it were otherwise, he would be aware of no problem, like the cynic, whose loss is compounded by his having lost the sense of having lost something (or who thinks he has only lost an illusion).

The indifference of depression is indeed a misfortune, but this is not what Wittgenstein is talking about. To be rendered unhappy by the misery of the world, in the sense Wittgenstein has in mind, is to become to that extent like the cynic: it is to permit that misery to deafen one's conscience. If this reading of Wittgenstein is correct,

we have apparently come full circle from the notion that, for him, the good person is indifferent to the events of the world.[14]

4. But could anyone honestly claim to be happy, or content, in Wittgenstein's sense, if this means that one's faith in life must not be shaken whatever happens? And if you cannot sincerely claim to be content in this sense, does that mean that your good cheer and courage (even the courage of a Terry Anderson, say) are nothing but self-deception? Wittgenstein seems to be raising the standards so high that ordinary human beings cannot even hope to touch them.

In fact, this does not seem to be the only problem for Wittgenstein. The demand for contentment seems to derive directly from the denial of the power of will. But if we accept his claim that we are powerless to affect the events of the world, it would seem to follow that we have just as little if not less power to direct our own feelings and attitudes. Why then did Wittgenstein consider the distinction between attitudes and external actions important in this connection?

Let us begin by considering the contention that the standard is too high. Wittgenstein does not address worries like this in the Notebooks (though he does admit in passing: 'Man cannot make himself happy without more ado', p. 76).

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[14] A question that arises here but which I do not have the space to go into is whether Wittgenstein's use of the word 'happiness' in connection with the ethical will has anything to do with the normal uses of the word, or whether it is just a figure of speech. This issue connects with the perennial problem of whether the virtues are to be regarded as conditions for human flourishing. Raimond Gaita, in a commentary on Alasdair MacIntyre's After Virtue, makes a powerful attempt to show the possibility of a 'non-reductive teleology' for the virtues -- in other words, to show how the virtues can be a condition for the sense of meaning in a person's life, and yet do not derive their importance from that fact ('Virtues, Human Good, and the Unity of a Life', Inquiry 26 (1983), 407-24). In this connection, see also Peter Winch, 'Can a Good Man be Harmed?' and 'Ethical Reward and Punishment' in his Ethics and Action (op.cit.)

However, we can find some clues to the ways in which he might have met them elsewhere in his early work.

The complaint that the standard is too high would be valid, we might say, if it were thought that in characterizing the ethical will, Wittgenstein was defining a test that each one of us has to pass in order to qualify for a certain description. If we know from the outset that we will not be able to pass the test no matter how hard we try, and if success is what counts, then all our efforts will be wasted; for then it will not matter whether we almost got there or whether we did not even start out. But this is a misapprehension of what Wittgenstein was talking about, as becomes obvious if we assume that his conception of ethics in the Notebooks can be regarded in the light of his 1929 lecture on the topic[15]. The central thought of that lecture concerned the absoluteness of the ethical demand. This demand does not derive its importance from its being a condition for some specific state. Accordingly, to ask 'Why should I try to behave better?' is to express a misunderstanding; the only relevant response would be to repeat the demand. The demand is simply there: why, we cannot say; we accept it if we accept it.

Unlike most normal exhortations, the ethical demand (whether expressed as 'Be content!' or 'You ought to try to behave yourself' or in some other form) can neither be understod as merely an expression of the speaker's (or anybody else's) wish, nor as helpful advice, geared to the hearer's needs. This was perhaps part of Wittgenstein's reason for saying, in his lecture, that in trying to speak about ethics we are running against the boundaries of language. From Wittgenstein's point of view, the relation between the ethical demand and ordinary exhortations is apparently analogous to the relation between the attempt to say things that can only be shown and ordinary factual assertions.[16]

Since there is no other thing for the sake of which the demand exists, the question to what extent I have complied with it, or to what extent others comply, has

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15 'Wittgenstein's Lecture on Ethics', Philosophical Review 74 (1965), 3-12.

16 In this connection, consider also Wittgenstein's remark about religious similes and exhortations, in Culture and Value, ed. by G. H. von Wright (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980), p. 29.

no effect on what is demanded of me: the demand always remains the same. No matter how hard I have been trying, I am never home safe; but neither am I lost without redemption however much I may have bungled in the past. (Nor is it a matter of comparison: as if I only had to make sure that I did better than the statistical average. Actually the idea of a comparison between individuals makes no sense in this connection.)

In brief, then, Wittgenstein could have responded to the complaint that the standard is too high by saying that ethics is not about standards in the first place. However, this response seems to compound the other side of the problem that we are discussing. Wittgenstein's reason for claiming that the distinction between our actions and our attitude towards the world is ethically central, we suggested before, was that our moral worth cannot be dependent on what we do, since we have no control over physical events. However, it now appears that, from Wittgenstein's point of view, the notion of moral worth is an illusion. All that matters is that we should try to do our best. But this means that the reason we thought there was for making a distinction between actions and attitudes dissolves.

I think this is a valid objection to Wittgenstein's line of thought. If he had taken the idea of powerlessness as seriously in all cases as he takes it where physical actions are concerned, that would rule out ethical considerations altogether. The reason he does not recognize this, I want to suggest, is that the idea of the powerlessness of will has its roots not just in philosophical theory, but also in reflection on human life and human strivings. Because of this, the ethical aspect of Wittgenstein's early thought does not stand or fall with the theory about language and reality expounded in the Tractatus. Spelling this out would, however, take us too far afield for this occasion.