

‘Is’ and ‘Ought’ in Wittgenstein’s Philosophical Perspectives

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*“An ‘inner process’ stands in need of outward criteria. The meaning of a word is its use
in the language.” (Wittgenstein, PI §580, §43).*

Abstract

The paper explores the relationship between facts or the ‘is’, and values or the ‘ought’ within the framework of Wittgenstein’s philosophy. It argues that the notion of value is ontology-specific and context-dependent, emphasizing Wittgenstein’s moral discourse, which transcends empirical analysis yet shapes the perspectives and purposes of individuals. Ethical values cannot be divorced from human existence. For the value perspectives, the absolute contrast between fact and value in every situation is ultimately untenable. Thus, the point of articulation in this paper is Wittgenstein’s transition from the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (TLP), where moral issues are understood as non-empirical or absolute, to the *Philosophical Investigations* (PI), which situates ethics as contextuality of human understanding. It seems to be a matter of dichotomy. This paper shall attempt to draw attention to the fact that ethics is not merely an abstract construct but is deeply entrenched in the fabric of human interactions, requiring a reflective understanding of the contexts in which ethical judgments are made.

Keywords: Is and Ought, Ethics, Absolutism, Contextuality, Philosophy of Wittgenstein.

Introduction

The “is” refers to what is the case or factual occurrences that describe facts about the world. For instance, ‘people lie to protect themselves’ is a factual proposition about the world. The “ought” pertains to normative values and what should be the case. It prescribes values or duties. Like what should happen. For instance, ‘people ought not to lie’. Significantly, the relation between “is” and “ought” in Wittgenstein’s philosophy can be well understood in both his early and later works. In the early work TLP, Wittgenstein draws a sharp distinction between facts and values. He argues that the world is “the totality of facts, not of

things”ⁱ and language meaningfully represents only these facts through propositions. Ethical statements, however, do not describe states of affairs and therefore cannot be expressed in meaningful propositions. As he famously states, “it is clear that ethics cannot be put into words.”ⁱⁱ Thus, “ought” lays outside the domain of “is”. Ought values belong to the unsayable realm, which is why Wittgenstein remarks that they can only be “shown” but not “said.”ⁱⁱⁱ

This position reflects a radical version of the fact-value distinction, similar to Hume’s separation of “is” and “ought,” but Wittgenstein goes further by denying the logical expressibility of ethical propositions altogether. Logic deals with truth and falsity in describing facts. Ethics, for him, is transcendental. It does not add to the factual content of the world that logic is concerned with, but concerns the way one views the world as a whole.^{iv} In his later writings, particularly in *PI*, Wittgenstein moves away from this strict separation. He rejects the idea that meaning is tied to logical form and instead emphasizes language as a set of “language-games” embedded in forms of life. Within this framework, the ethical language “ought” is not meaningless but gains meaning through its use in specific social practices.^v Statements about what one “ought” to do are part of normative language-games, governed by shared rules and cultural contexts. In the latter view, the gap between “is” and “ought” is not an absolute metaphysical division but a functional distinction within language. Ethical judgments are no longer seen as ineffable but as meaningful expressions within particular human activities. For example, saying “you ought to tell the truth” functions as a rule or guidance within a moral practice rather than as a description of a fact. There is no extensive distinction among them logically after clear communication. All distinct discourses that develop the view that facts are relative realities and values are absolute seem untenable. This raises significant questions about the interplay of reality and ethics.

The Origin of Ought Values and Beyondness

“After all, Wittgenstein’s moral philosophy arose from the war, specifically as a result of his own combat experience in the Eastern Front in the summer of 1916.”^{vi} Therefore, according to the war field experience, “Wittgenstein conceived of ethics as both transcendental and inexpressible”^{vii} in relation to the world we see. The actions in the war were indescribable. It destroyed lives in a moment without considering their value. Such actions raised questions in his mind and heart about the value of life. “The great logician,” Wittgenstein, fired after a true fire baptism, asked about morality. Then Wittgenstein articulates that ethics is seen as transcendental, meaning it goes beyond mere empirical observation and factual statements.^{viii} It is not something that can be fully captured or expressed in scientific terms. Instead, ethics is about what is valuable and meaningful in life. Ethics must be relevant to everyday life

and may not be isolated from the world. Ethical judgments are not abstract but are applied in practical contexts.^{ix} Meanwhile, ought values can change depending on the context and situation. While ethics provides a framework for judging actions, the application of these principles can vary depending on circumstances and community context. It is a “form of life which is shaped by our language and social practices. Ethical meaning is derivable from how we view the world as a whole and how we engage in language games that reflect our values”.^x Meaningfulness is in daily life practice. The fact that it is thought to be articulated correctly and shown in the right way. Similarly, a thought about facts in the way things happen. We express both of them in language. It is a rational apparatus for them to understand and to use the language to express. The logic of language takes care of how they are.

These are two levels of judgments of empirical and rational, of synthetic and analytic dichotomies, which are not so in reality. Philosophers such as Putnam^{xi} and Quine^{xii} have put forward arguments to collapse this dichotomy. That is, ethics cannot be articulated apart from facts and vice versa. Rationally, both fact and values are corollaries. One can desire to do what is desirable and what ought to be. In logical judgement, what is to be and what ought to be are two parts of the same coin. The logic of language plays a common role here. It explains the existing and non-existence.^{xiii} If language does not do so, language would be nonsense, that is, meaningless, or it would not be a language at all. Wittgenstein has given ethics a special status, holding that it is “higher” in nature than the understanding of facts. In the world, war takes place at every moment, whereas on the higher rational level, there is calm. Values are higher. Values make an individual calm and peaceful. If this war continues, then everyone raises the question: “If there is any value that does have value, it must lie outside,” at a higher level, from the whole sphere of what happens and is the case.^{xiv} That is, the call of purely rational understanding, which is a non-factual higher level, from which everyone can liberate themselves from the wars of language, thought and action conflicts.

The Applicability of Ethics in the World

Now, ethics, in relation to the world, is inherently contextual. Since it is seen in the actions or social practices. The meaning of ethical values and reality is influenced by the specific circumstances, situations, or perspectives in which they are applied. That is, ethics can vary depending on societal, cultural, and situational contexts^{xv} and is relevant to the empirical world. Ethical principles inform our actions and decisions in everyday life. Ethics is applied to real-life situations and the complexities of human interactions. Ethics serves as a guide for values. Ethical considerations are essential for articulating what makes life meaningful and worth living.^{xvi} Meanwhile, applying ethics in the world can be challenging

due to the contingent reality. The complexities of human life and the diversity of perspectives can make reaching consensus on ethical issues difficult. It needs careful consideration and dialogue when applying ethical principles. The applicability of ethics in the world is characterized by its contextual nature, integration with empirical reality, reliance on language, and its role as a guide for action.

On the other hand, by stating this aphorism, he means that propositions of language remain silent to describe ethics without rational judgement. Since ethics is a matter of transcendental rational judgment that cannot be put into words for clarity, as with facts, we do.^{xvii} It means articulating ethics as it leads us to articulate the transcendental domain of facts as well. It is the self who articulates a transcendental entity by rational acumen. Value per se is bound up with human rationale. Moral truths can be admitted as fundamental truths in any rational discourse, such that all human rational activities fall within the domain of moral considerations and moral validation. Moral validation is based on the strong notion of moral truths. By recalling Moore's quote "ethics is the general enquiry into what is good"^{xviii}, Wittgenstein responds in a broad sense in his *A Lecture on Ethics* (LE) that "ethics is the enquiry into what is valuable, or, into what is really important, or ethics is the inquiry into the meaning of life, or into what makes life worth living, or into the right way of living"^{xix} and states that: "I see now that these nonsensical expressions were not nonsensical because I had not yet found the correct expressions, but that their nonsensicality was their very essence. For all I wanted to do with them was just *to go beyond* the world and that is to say beyond significant language".^{xx} In a similar way, ethics and logic are treated as being both transcendental entities that are real senses of the world. Therefore, to know them in relation to the world is mysterious. That is, when the world is expressed in terms of language, then only it is known. For Wittgenstein, "it is not how things are in the world that is mystical, but *that* it exists. Feeling the world as a limited whole-it is this that is mystical"^{xxi} because the world constitutes out of mystical entities as real senses. To understand the world either through its real sense by transcending from the world or through its constituents; both parts of articulations are extraordinary jobs. The world can be known through the essence of the world: unusual matter. Because "there are, indeed, things that cannot be put into words. They make themselves manifest. They are what is mystical".^{xxii} To know both the world and ethics calls for equal effort since they are equally important for life. Life in relation to the world is a consistent activity. It is relative according to the relativity of the world. Thus, ethics, in a relative sense, is used as a purposive utility determined in practice in our everyday life. It loses its judgment because scientific statements are filled with both truth and falsity. "There are no propositions that, in any absolute sense, are sublime, important, or trivial".^{xxiii} The term 'good' can be used meaningfully, such as 'good player', 'good singer', 'good doctor', and so on. In this way, the term 'good' signifies in practice, which makes it an

absolute sense. This understanding of ethics as a temperament has been found in Wittgenstein's later philosophy. His epistemic contextual model of language-game tells us that there is also an ethical model of contextuality.

Is and Ought in "Language-Games"^{xxiv}

Wittgenstein introduces "language-games"^{xxv} to illustrate how meaning is derived from the use of language in various forms of life. The relationship between 'is' and 'ought' can be understood through these language-games, where ethical statements are regarded as not merely abstract propositions but are grounded in the practices and activities of human being. The 'ought' is informed by the 'is' as it reflects the values and norms that emerge from our interactions and experiences. The 'is' as descriptive statements about the world, and 'ought' as normative statements about what should be, are intertwined, as ethical considerations arise from the specific practices. Ethical norms cannot be divorced from the factual context in which they are applied.^{xxvi} Wittgenstein argues that ethical principles must be applied to real-life situations. The 'ought' is not a separate realm but is connected to the 'is' through practical considerations. Ethical judgments are made based on an understanding of the facts of a situation, and the appropriateness of an 'ought' statement is evaluated in the light of the specific context.

Wittgenstein critiques the idea that ethical terms have a fixed, essential meaning. He suggests that meanings are fluid and shaped by their use in different contexts. This challenges the notion that 'ought' can be derived from 'is' in a straightforward manner. Wittgenstein argues that ethical values are not merely subjective opinions. They are integral to understanding and engagement with the world. The 'ought' to emerge from the 'is' in the sense that our ethical understanding is rooted in our lived experiences and the realities of human life. "Is an indistinct photograph a picture of a person at all? Is it always an advantage to replace an indistinct picture with a sharp one? Isn't the indistinct one often exactly what we need?"^{xxvii} "The meaning of a word is its use in the language".^{xxviii} To be meaningful, language is to be used not only to describe facts but also for manifold purposes, which make room for alternative discourses having a distinct logic. Therefore, language is context-bound. As is logic, so are language, reality and ethics. The notion of objectivity in ethics needs to be revisited to see if the so-called 'fact' is value-neutral. About values, theory and practice are celebrated. In such a life, the world and ethics are articulated equally, as they amalgamate with one another. Apart from that, for Wittgenstein, "Ethics must be a condition of the world, like logic; good and evil only enter through the *subject*; and the subject is not a part of the world, but a boundary of the world".^{xxix}

Articulating ethics as mystical, which conditions the world equal to life, is that ethics cannot be a

showcase as science does. But ethics applies to the states of affairs of the world. It is relevant to everyday life. Everyday life deals with what we think, say and act. The language within the logic aligns with social acceptance and action within ethical boundaries, thereby creating the scope for social approval. To understand the ethical meaning of life is to understand “the form of life,” which is nothing but *language-game* activity. Ethics is what is meaningful in life, which means it has an intimate relationship with the world. Therefore, “to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life”.^{xxx} The fact that the contextuality of its application in a different context is a job for a man to differentiate and decide accordingly. So concerning the nature of ‘value’, it is arguable that *values per se* are contextual and the notion of ‘purely absolute value’ is unsound. As is a reality so are language and also ethics. That is, reality determines the nature of language and ethics. The meaning of language is how it is used in a different context, as is ethics, since values are intelligible only in the domain of human actions. It is the perspectives and contexts that determine the moral worth of an action.

Conclusion

In the concluding remarks, it can be stated that the notion of ‘value’ is ontology-specific. As is the world-view, so is the value paradigm. In the TLP, ‘world’ is construed as the totality of positive and negative facts. Since the moral discourse cannot be analysed in terms of empirical discourse, it falls beyond the empirical domain. This advances the rationale to the idea that moral issues are non-empirical or transcendental. But in later writings, Wittgenstein subscribes to ethical contextuality because of his idealistic leaning, according to which there are alternative ways of understanding and encountering the world. Ethics is comprehensible only it gets to connect with the purpose and use to which ethical words are placed. There is nothing as ‘fact’, as such. It is the perspectives that determine how one perceives or interprets the facts that constitute the world. This epistemic contextualism entails ethical contextualism. Since values are context-specific, one can hardly distinguish between a set of ‘values’ and the disvalues. Though the ‘ought’ issues are parasitic on ‘is’ signifying the facticity of context the ‘ought’ statements turn out to be contextual depending not only on the consideration of contexts but also on the purposes, concerns and circumstances at hand. Values are cardinal, and therefore they are absolute, whereas the customary values are contingent. The latter derives its meaning from the former. Alternatively, “an inner process stands in need of outward criteria”.^{xxxi} In this sense, the fact-value dichotomy doesn’t hold water. “There are obvious affinities between the ideas that the solution to an ethical problem is a matter of a retrospective change in one’s attitude towards that problem and the idea found in the TLP, and “*A Lecture on Ethics*”, that ethics has to do not with what one accomplishes in the world but with one’s overall

attitude to that world”^{xxxii}. The notion of pure objectivity in respect of ‘value’ remains inaccurate.

Footnotes

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- i TLP 1.1
ii TLP 6.421
iii TLP 6.41
iv TLP 6.45
v §23, p. 15
vi Santianez, P. IX.
vii Ibid
viii NB 79
ix PI 23, 226
x Kelly 1995: 573
xi See Hilary Putnam’s, *The Collapse of the Fact/Value Dichotomy and Other Essays*, 2002.
xii See Quine’s, “Two Dogmas of Empiricism” 1953; Second Edition Revised, 1980.
xiii TLP 2.06
xiv Ibid 6.41
xv TLP 6.41
xvi LE p.5
xvii TLP 6.421
xviii LE 5
xix Ibid 5
xx Ibid 11
xxi TLP 6.44, 6.45
xxii Ibid 6.522
xxiii LE 6
xxiv PI 7, 23, 48
xxv Ibid
xxvi PI 19
xxvii PI 71
xxviii Ibid 43
xxix NB 77, 79
xxx Ibid 19
xxxi Ibid 580
xxxii Kelly, p.584

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