Ludwig Wittgenstein

Lecture on Ethics

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WILEY Blackwell

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1

Introduction

The Content of a Lecture on Ethics

I

(1) Ludwig Wittgenstein delivered a lecture on ethics in Cambridge on November 17, 1929. Wittgenstein was forty years old and recently returned to Cambridge and academic philosophy after more than a decade away. The audience was a group called "The Heretics" who were not academic philosophers. The group was established to promote discussion of problems of religion and philosophy. Past speakers to The Heretics had included Virginia Woolf and past members included Wittgenstein's dear friend David Pinsent who had died in the First World War. Wittgenstein was invited to speak by C.K. Ogden, a co-founder of The Heretics, who had been central in the publishing of Wittgenstein's book *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* in 1922. The content of Wittgenstein's lecture survives in the drafts he prepared for the lecture. (The drafts are found in chapter 2 and chapters 6–9 of this volume.)

The "Lecture on Ethics," as it is now known, is a unique work in Wittgenstein's philosophical output.[1] It is the sole lecture he delivered to a general, non-philosophical audience. It is the sole work

[1] We use the word "Lecture," capitalized, to refer to any handwritten or typed version of the draft of the lecture. The word "lecture," not capitalized, is used to refer to Wittgenstein's talk to The Heretics on Sunday, November 17, 1929.

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Wittgenstein prepared exclusively about ethics. It is the sole lecture for which several complete drafts have survived. The four drafts of the lecture posited in this volume suggest Wittgenstein spoke directly from his prepared text, against his usual practice. All of these qualities give the lecture a special importance.

(2) Ethics, being the Lecture's subject, is its most important aspect in the context of Wittgenstein's philosophical work. The Lecture is a sustained, written treatment of ethics, prepared for an audience. In the rest of his work, Wittgenstein wrote very little about ethics and almost none of it for an audience. Scattered throughout his philosophy working papers are short remarks about ethics, but none is even a page long; none constitutes a sustained train of thought.[2] Collected, these remarks would be scarcely more than a dozen pages. In the sole book published in his lifetime, the *Tractatus*, there are three somewhat terse pages on ethics.[3] These are themselves culled from a dozen pages in Wittgenstein's diary from the second half of 1916.[4] Those other of Wittgenstein's surviving diaries record perhaps another dozen pages drawn from a few months in 1931 and the first half of 1937.[5] Simply by the quantity of content, Wittgenstein's Lecture is a major part of Wittgenstein's writing on ethics.

The singular philosophical importance of the Lecture derives from its being a considered train of thought that is a statement

[2] These are mostly collected in L. Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value: A Selection from the Posthumous Remains*, rev. 2nd edn with English translation, ed. G.H. von Wright, H. Nyman, and A. Pichler, trans. P Winch (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998).

[3] §6.4ff. All references to the *Tractatus* will be by section number. L. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. C.K. Ogden (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981).

[4] References to wartime notebooks will be by *NB* and date (abbreviated in order of day, month, year). L. Wittgenstein, *Notebooks, 1914–1916*, 2nd edn, ed. G.H. von Wright and G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1979).

[5] References to these later notebooks will be by *DB* (originally for *Denkbewegungen: Tagebücher, 1930–1932/1936–1937*) and date. L. Wittgenstein, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: Public and Private Occasions*, ed. J. Klagge and A. Nordmann (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003).

regarding ethics. It is not a personal note that records a moment of insight or a meditation. (Many of Wittgenstein's diary entries concerning ethics were written in a code to prevent them from being easily read by anyone but Wittgenstein.)[6] Rather, as Wittgenstein conceived the lecture, he intended to communicate to his audience as one human being speaking to other human beings. By this we can understand that he meant to make himself available personally to the audience without deference to his philosophical achievements or academic status. On the above basis, the Lecture has a good claim to being the most important work on ethics in Wittgenstein's body of work.

(3) If it is accepted that the lecture is important for documenting Wittgenstein's view of ethics, one could nonetheless speculate that ethics was not of much importance to Wittgenstein since he wrote so little about it compared to other philosophical topics. This speculative conclusion is not at all credible. The conduct of Wittgenstein's life, his correspondence, and the testimony of his friends and students all confirm that ethical concerns were of the utmost importance in Wittgenstein's life. Wittgenstein's diaries document his sometimes tortuous struggle to live up to his own high ethical standards. His friends recall his preoccupation with, above all else, being honest about the conduct of one's life. Neither was Wittgenstein reluctant to talk about ethical matters with his friends and fellows.

In despite of the undeniable importance that ethics had for Wittgenstein, it is striking that his philosophical work contains so little about ethics. One suggestion for this apparent contrast is that for Wittgenstein, philosophy itself was a kind of ethical endeavor. Indeed Wittgenstein advertised the manuscript of the *Tractatus* to a would-be publisher as a work whose point was ethical. (The ethical content was in the unwritten second part of the book, which

[6] The coded entries Wittgenstein made have been published separately and reference will be made by *GT* and date. L. Wittgenstein, *Geheime Tagebücher, 1914–1916*, ed. W. Baum (Vienna: Turia & Kant, 1991).

Wittgenstein maintained was necessarily unwritten.)[7] The suggestion that philosophy is itself an ethical undertaking could further imply that Wittgenstein had no need for a specific philosophical ethics. If sound, this would explain the dearth of writings on ethics in Wittgenstein's corpus.

There is without question some merit to this suggestion. Wittgenstein did think that philosophy was an activity that demanded many of the same virtues as living decently. Philosophy required courage and honesty and the determination to go the "bloody hard way" toward philosophical conclusions.[8] The temptations to deceive oneself about the clarity or motives of one's thinking are constant and never lastingly silenced. Philosophy could also have results that were practical and beneficial for living decently. Going from confusion to clarity could help. Understanding that the foundations supposed for a system of thought are not as we thought can also help. The diligence and honesty required for philosophy is a potentially invaluable aid to seeing the truth about one's own life. True to his convictions in this regard, Wittgenstein's own philosophical work often suffered when he became mired in self-reproach for his misdeeds or indecent motives.

We should accept that Wittgenstein thought that philosophy was an ethical endeavor. We should accept in turn that Wittgenstein thought philosophy demanded the same virtues as those required to live decently. We can also accept that philosophy serves ethical ends in this and other ways. We should however reject as false the thoughts that philosophy *always* cultivates virtues that result in living more decently or that philosophy *always* serves ethical ends. It is evident that philosophy does not always serve ethical ends since it has sometimes been used to serve evil ends, such as oppression or division. That philosophy always cultivates the virtues is

[7] Wittgenstein remarked on this in a letter to a potential publisher. C.G. Luckhardt, *Wittgenstein: Sources and Perspectives* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1979), pp. 94–95.

[8] R. Rhees, *Without Answers*, ed. D.Z. Phillips (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969), p. 169.

also self-evidently false: While all ethical matters that deserve the name are serious or important, the same cannot be said for all philosophical matters. So progress in philosophy is not of itself progress in something important. Therefore, even if philosophy is an ethical endeavor in the sense accepted above, there is still a distinctive activity within philosophy whose focus and content is ethics. Wittgenstein in the Lecture suggests that ethics is, among other things, the inquiry into what is of "importance" or "really important."[9]

(4) It remains to be explained why so little of Wittgenstein's philosophical work concerns ethics. A most direct explanation is found in Wittgenstein's opinion that most of what was said or written about ethics was misguided, self-important claptrap – just chatter and empty talking.[10] For that reason, he would have been very wary of contributing to prevailing contemporary discussions of ethics. Wittgenstein said he would have liked to reveal ethical chatter for the claptrap he took it to be, even to put an end to it. Yet the way to silence claptrap is not obviously to join the discussion on its own terms for that would be to treat the claptrap as significant. The chatterers themselves must come to recognize what they say and write as claptrap, as expressing something empty or unrelated to ethics. Here too, *more* writing about ethics seems an improbable way to stimulate the recognition of ethical writing as claptrap.

If we accept this explanation for the dearth of Wittgenstein's writing about ethics, the need for a related explanation arises. Supposing Wittgenstein thought that talk of ethics is claptrap, what

[9] MS 139b1,2. We indicate the page references to drafts of the Lecture by the conventionally agreed manuscript number, variant and page numbers. This reference indicates pages 1 and 2 of MS 139b, which is presented with normalized text as chapter 2.

[10] Luckhardt, *Wittgenstein*, 95; F. Waismann, *Wittgenstein and the Vienna Circle*, ed. B. McGuinness, trans. J. Schulte and B. McGuinness (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1979), p. 69.

did he think of his very own lecture? Was it also claptrap? We cannot explain it as a momentary lapse. Wittgenstein made several drafts for the lecture, it was not a lecture on the spur of the moment. Neither can we explain it as a case of Wittgenstein getting cajoled into a lecture with no way subsequently to get out. Wittgenstein more than once backed out of giving lectures he had agreed to deliver. Moreover, he nowhere repudiates the lecture as a regrettable mistake. On the contrary, in contemporaneous and subsequent discussions with others Wittgenstein made similar points with similar turns of phrase as the ones he used in the Lecture.[11]

The balance of considerations as well as the earnest character of Wittgenstein's opening remarks in the lecture urge the thought that Wittgenstein did not think he was adding to the claptrap.[12] If this is right, then the difference between what Wittgenstein said in his lecture on ethics and the claptrap spoken by others remains to be explained. Explaining the difference will require introducing Wittgenstein's view of ethics, beginning with his main point in the Lecture.

II

(1) Wittgenstein arrives at the main point of his lecture late in his discussion. He announces "the main point of the paper" and seems to emphasize the point by repeating it:

> it is the paradox that an experience, a fact should seem to have absolute value. And I will make my point still more acute by saying 'it is the paradox that an experience, a fact, should seem to have supernatural value'.[13]

[11] See 30.12.1929 and 17.12.30 in Waismann, *Wittgenstein and the Vienna Circle*, pp. 68ff. and 115ff.

[12] Cp. MS 139b1–3, see also §II.9.

[13] MS 139b15–16.

Up to this point, Wittgenstein had puzzled over relative and absolute senses in language. He had also given examples that elicited from him expressions used in absolute or ethical senses. For example, when wondering at the existence of the world, he felt inclined to say, "How extraordinary that anything should exist."[14] These discussions of language and examples of experiences of absolute value that preceded the main point have been mere precursors to making his main point. The main point does not follow from these precedents nor is it a summation. Indeed, to understand the main point and the *purpose* of the lecture, we will have to reconstruct it by moving back and forth in the text of the Lecture. Not only will we move non-sequentially, we will have to consider the content of the Lecture that is overt and covert or latent.

For his main point, Wittgenstein gives the general form of those experiences that arouse in us thoughts of value, those that bring the ethical to mind. The form is paradoxical. At first it is difficult to see why, since a paradox arises when we are drawn toward *two* contradictory beliefs.[15] Wittgenstein gives just one belief: that an experience seems to have absolute value, the kind of value Wittgenstein suggested is problematic. For a paradox, we should be drawn toward the contradictory belief that an experience does not have absolute value. Wittgenstein does think, however, that we are drawn to this belief too. Earlier in the lecture he puzzled over and denied that absolute value could be found in the world. It is not found in the description of a murder[16] or of the whole world,[17] viz. a state of affairs whose value was such as to coerce our pursuit of it on pain of being judged if we do not is an illusion.[18] If absolute value is not found in the world, how could one seem to have an experience with it?

[14] MS 139b11.

[15] Whether this is aptly called a paradox may be doubted and Wittgenstein originally called it a paradox with the admission that "I know not how to call it," MS 139a16.

[16] MS 139b8.

[17] MS 139b7.

[18] MS 139b9–10.

Wittgenstein's reformulation of his main point to make it more "acute" makes a subtle change that makes the paradox more perspicuous by substituting 'supernatural' for 'absolute' value. This exposes a tension between natural and supernatural, or between facts and seeming experiences of value. Just before introducing the main point, Wittgenstein emphasized that experiences occur in the natural world of ordinary facts, saying, "surely, [experiences] are facts; they have taken place then and there, lasted a certain definite time and consequently are describable."[19] The paradox is more acute then, because on the one hand we have an experience having something seemingly supernatural – that is, something *beyond* the natural world – yet on the other hand all experiences are within the natural world, the world of facts. In short, what makes experiences that arouse ethical thoughts seem paradoxical is that something that *occurs* in the natural world should seem to have something found in the supernatural world.

(2) The main point of his paper, Wittgenstein states, is that the experiences that give rise to thoughts of the ethical are paradoxical in form. Wittgenstein argues from this point to the conclusion of the lecture that the paradox cannot be resolved so as to retain both of the beliefs that create the paradox. The paradox is genuine. To resolve the paradox we should reject one belief. The lecture urges this rejection, as we will see below. The obvious belief to reject from the two in the paradox is that concerning absolute or supernatural value since such value was immediately, demonstrably problematic: If we reject belief in experiences having absolute or supernatural value, we accept that all experiences that have value have value that is relative or natural. And, in turn, we should also accept that the experiences that seem to have absolute value only *seem* to do so, since we accepted that all experiences have relative or natural value. Thus, whatever the origin of thoughts of absolute value, of what arouses thoughts of the ethical, these thoughts are unlike anything we call experience. However, as Wittgenstein avows in the

[19] MS 139b15.

last sentence of his conclusion, this does not mean the tendency to have such thoughts, or to try to express them, is one for disrespect or ridicule. (This is another point to which we will attend below, when we consider Wittgenstein's motivation for the lecture.)

(3) Before reaching this concluding statement of respect in the lecture though, Wittgenstein considers an alternative response in which the paradox is dissolved, leaving us to keep hold of both beliefs. We could insist that the experiences that seem to have supernatural value are puzzling but not inexplicable. They just await the right analysis. If true, this would resolve the paradox.

Wittgenstein is "tempted" by this approach and considers a scientific analysis of something analogous to an experience having absolute value, viz. experience of an astounding miracle. He asks his audience to imagine a miracle in which someone suddenly grows a lion's head and begins to roar. Wittgenstein first suggests a scientific approach to this miracle.

> Now whenever we should have recovered from our surprise, what I would suggest would be to fetch a doctor and have the case scientifically investigated [. . .]. And where would the miracle have got to? For it is clear that when we look at it in this way everything miraculous has disappeared; unless what we mean by this term is merely that a fact has not yet been explained by science, which again means that we have hitherto failed to group this fact with others in a scientific system. This shows that it is absurd to say 'Science has proved that there are no miracles'. The truth is that the scientific way of looking at a fact is not the way to look at it as a miracle.[20]

A scientific response preserves neither the miracle nor the experience that inclined us to speak of it as a miracle. It fails to resolve the paradox because in the scientific way of looking at things we cannot keep our experience of the miraculous. For by investigating it scientifically we have sought to dissect the miracle into facts,

[20] MS 139b16–17.

albeit ones whose precise interrelation with other facts is not yet known. If the analysis were to succeed or if we presume success to be possible, what was miraculous will no longer be so. It will simply be a part of the natural order. Rather than preserving and explaining the miracle, the scientific way of looking at it will have explained it away.

This result is a return to ground Wittgenstein covered at the outset of the lecture.[21] At that point he distinguished between words used in their relative and absolute senses. Using words like good or valuable in their relative senses – for example, this is a good chair or a valuable necklace – is ordinary and unproblematic. Good chairs are so relative to other chairs and the functions of chairs; and valuable necklaces are so relative to the price they command. By contrast, words used in an absolute or ethical sense prove problematic, because they cannot be made relative to some order. Things described as absolutely good or valuable are not just the most good or the most valuable, with something slightly less good or valuable close behind. They are outside the order of relative rankings; thus, for example, there are not little and large miracles.[22] Indeed Wittgenstein points out that here too 'miracle' is being used with relative and absolute senses.[23] To approach the miracle scientifically just is to respond as if the miracle were relative to other happenings, but that approach seems to miss the essence of a miracle, of something being miraculous in an absolute sense.

(4) If it is the absolute sense of 'miracle' that we have lost by the scientific approach, then perhaps the right approach is to focus on the use of language. Instead of reanalyzing the paradox regarding experiences having absolute value by science, perhaps a linguistic analysis will reveal our conflicting beliefs are actually compatible. Wittgenstein suggests that to see the world as a miracle is to

[21] MS 139b4–6.
[22] MS 139a18.
[23] MS 139b17.

approach it in wonder:[24] "And I will now describe the experience of wondering at the existence of the world by saying: it is the experience of seeing the world as a miracle."[25] Wondering at the existence of the world was Wittgenstein's experience "*par excellence*" for arousing in him the urge to speak using language in its absolute or ethical sense. He had given the example earlier in the lecture along with similar experiences.[26] Thus by focusing on the experience of a miracle one also focuses on those experiences of wonder in which one is moved to speak in an absolute or ethical sense. How are we to describe these experiences?

Once again, Wittgenstein is tempted by a response, this time with a focus on language: "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."[27] Wittgenstein doubts whether language has the means to express in a sentence the miracle of the existence of the world. To do so, one sentence would have to encompass, as it were, the totality of possible existence. Expressing the totality of possible existence in language would seem itself to require the totality of possible sentences. So Wittgenstein suggests that the existence of language itself can be the expression of the miracle of the world's existence.

This will not allow us to express what we want, though. The problem is that if we are to use the miracle of the existence of language to express the miracle of the existence of the world, then we must be able to see the existence of language as a miracle whenever we wish to use it for this expression. However, seeing something as a miracle is seeing it in wonder and wonder is not something that we can simply summon as we can summon more attention to some

[24] 'Wonder' and the German word 'Wunder' are near homophones and near homonyms, but 'Wunder' may also mean miracle. So it is not surprising that even writing in English, Wittgenstein naturally associated wonder and the miraculous.

[25] MS 139b17.

[26] MS 139b11.

[27] MS 139b17.

detail, for example, of a photograph before us. In our usual relationship with language we can express what we like when we like. By contrast, we have to experience wonder at the miracle of language's existence to use language in an absolute sense. So we cannot say what we want when we want with absolute sense, because we have to wait for this moment of wonder to arrive. This dependence on experiencing wonder at the miracle of language's existence is a reason to doubt that this is a way of saying anything. This doubt obliges Wittgenstein to conclude once again that seeking to speak with an absolute sense to one's words is nonsense. We say nothing.

(5) If we say nothing, why are we inclined still to say such things? Why do some experiences elicit this talk with an absolute sense? Surely if we are inclined to keep saying these things, we must mean something by it. It is just that we don't understand how the things we say mean what they do, if or when they do mean something. As Wittgenstein imagines this objection, we simply await the right logical analysis of this kind of language to understand its meaning.

Here Wittgenstein gives a curious response. He does not refute this objection by proving it wrong. Instead, he immediately rejects it:

> Now when this is urged against me I at once see clearly, as it were in a flash of light, not only that no description that I can think of would do to describe what I mean by 'absolute value', but that I would reject every significant description that anybody could possibly suggest, *ab initio*, on the ground of its significance.[28]

This is not a response with an argument. Wittgenstein sees "at once," "in a flash of light," from the start ("*ab initio*") that he will reject any description of absolute value. Each is a marker of immediate recognition without inference or deduction or reasoning. His rejection comes before he has considered any detail of what is proposed. By 'significant' Wittgenstein means 'meaningful' or sense-making. Thus, any attempt to give a meaningful description of

[28] MS 139b18.

absolute value – or absolute good, or 'miracle' used with absolute sense – is one Wittgenstein would reject solely on the grounds that it proposes a meaningful description of absolute value. Wittgenstein expands on his realization that being nonsensical – having no meaning, making no sense – is of the essence of expressions with an absolute sense. For these expressions aim beyond the natural world, they aim at the super-natural. And just as Wittgenstein had observed that experience is of the world, so too is language of the world, and so too is that of which we can speak meaningfully.

The situation is analogous to the paradox that Wittgenstein says is the main point of his paper. There we had an experience that seemed to have absolute or supernatural value. Here we have a use of language that seems to have an absolute or supernatural sense. In each case, we are inclined toward a contradictory belief, viz. that experiences are part of the natural order or that language is part of, and can solely speak of, the natural order. The contradiction between these beliefs is the paradox. Here too, Wittgenstein proposes that we resolve – rather than dissolve – the paradox by rejecting the belief we have that language with an absolute sense is meaningful. Though people are drawn to speak and write in this way, we should accept that what they appear to say and write does not make sense, at least not in the way other uses of language do. Similarly, even though people may have experiences that incline them to speak this way, the content of these experiences cannot be described in language. Indeed, these experiences only seem to have absolute or supernatural value.

(6) Wittgenstein considered above that the problematic language of absolute value might yet receive a logical analysis that explained how it was meaningful. This he rejected immediately. Wittgenstein's rejection is curious and unsatisfying. On its face, it seems a peremptory or dogmatic refusal even to consider an explanation, solely because it is an explanation. Why does Wittgenstein respond this way? We will see below that his response serves his main purpose in the lecture, which is to warn against the false hope that any analysis could make ethics less demanding.

One way one could make sense of Wittgenstein's response is to allow that there are some things that are not to be explained. To seek to explain such things is to misunderstand them from the outset. So any attempt to explain them should be rejected solely on the grounds that it is an explanation and thus, necessarily, a misunderstanding. This understanding of Wittgenstein's response is illuminating. Consider miracles. His point in claiming that the scientific approach explains away their miraculousness accords with holding that miracles are not only presently inexplicable, but that miracles are not (by their very nature) to be explained.

There is a relevant parallel with the absolute. If someone wants something's absolute character explained, they misunderstand the absolute. Absolute is not the most of something, like the extreme end of a spectrum. For example, to adapt Wittgenstein's example of feeling absolutely safe in the lecture,[29] absolute safety is not the most safe someone can be, with another extremely safe state close behind. Absolute safety is another condition altogether that could not be achieved by maximizing or optimizing safeguards against contingent happenings. To feel or be absolutely safe is to feel that no matter what happens physically through chance or otherwise, one will be alright. Of course this kind of safety is quite outside the order of physical happenings, of chance events. There is, as it were, no relation between the physical world and the safety of absolute safety. So it is misdescription to think that an absolute is simply not-relative. One misunderstands something as absolute if one understands it as part of an order in which things are relative to each other.[30]

A parallel can be drawn with wonder, for wonder too is not relative, nor does it admit explanation, nor is it a compounding or intensifying of other qualities. When someone gazes in wonder, it is idle to ask them for an explanation of the wonder. A natural response is, "Just look." If the object of wonder does not elicit

[29] MS 139b11.

[30] One might think that everything must at least be temporally related. But what of temporal miracles, e.g. being in two places at once?

wonder from them, there is no way to bring them to see it by explanation. Consider the innocence of a child, the purity expressed in guileless delight. One can describe the guileless delight or the purity, but there is no fault of understanding if these fail to elicit wonder. Indeed, to try to explain would be to transmute the wondrous to something improbable or unusual – if this is possible. In other cases, for instance wondering at the existence of the world, it may be that the person resistant to the wonder of it – for example, a cosmologist – sees nothing.

(7) A further way to make sense of Wittgenstein's seemingly peremptory response is by his motivation, rather than an argument – since he gives none. I suggest that Wittgenstein's motivation for rejecting any explanation from the outset is that for Wittgenstein an explanation must be in terms of facts. An explanation places something in the natural order of facts and their descriptions. This in turn casts explanations into the realm of science and language. Wittgenstein will not countenance this move to science and language for the ethical and this motivates his rejection of explanations of the ethical.

In the final three sentences that form his conclusion to the lecture, Wittgenstein is clear that insofar as ethics springs from a desire to speak in an absolute sense it can be no science. More, Wittgenstein insists our attempts to speak in an absolute or ethical sense cannot add to our knowledge in any way – presumably because he holds science is the route to knowledge.[31] Much of the lecture labored the point that language with an ethical or absolute sense is nonsense[32] – so much so that many mistakenly think that is its main point.[33] Nevertheless, Wittgenstein heralded his overt conclusion in an early interjection in the lecture when he said, "if I contemplate what

[31] MS 139b19.

[32] MS 139b4–7 and MS 139b11–15 and passim.

[33] See, e.g., T. Redpath, "Wittgenstein and Ethics," in A. Ambrose and M. Lazerowitz (ed.), *Ludwig Wittgenstein: Philosophy and Language* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1972), pp. 95–119; E.D. Klemke, "Wittgenstein's Lecture on Ethics," *Journal of Value Inquiry* 9.2 (1975): 118–127.

ethics really would have to be if there were such a science [. . .]. It seems to me obvious that nothing we could ever think or say should be *the* thing."[34] This seems to him "obvious" – like the subsequent flash of light – which he knows is hardly an argument. Therefore he continues by describing his feeling with a curious metaphor – as he puts it – that if there really were a book on ethics it "would, with an explosion, destroy all the other books in the world."[35] It seems likely that this image is meant to convey the idea that if there were a language that could describe ethics it would be wholly unlike language as we know it.

Wittgenstein's motivation in the lecture is to isolate ethics from the realm of fact. Since, on his view, language speaks of facts when it is meaningful, he must also seek to isolate ethics from the realm of language. This motivation originates from Wittgenstein's own ethical outlook. Even without knowing his outlook, clues to his motivation can be found in the lecture. The first clue is Wittgenstein's discussion of a state of affairs that is absolutely right or good. If some facts collected into a possible state of affairs were describable as absolutely good, they would be such that anyone recognizing them as such "would, *necessarily*, bring [them] about or feel guilty for not bringing [them] about."[36] One would seek to realize the state of affairs irrespective of one's own preferences or inclinations on pain of guilt and shame. These states of affairs would therefore, in Wittgenstein's view, have a "coercive power" akin to the authority of a judge, whose critical judgment we seek to avoid.[37] Thus, if ethics consisted *in* states of affairs (facts), humans would be constrained by their coercive power, like being answerable to an authority. Responses to the ethical would occur, as it were, under coercion

[34] MS 139b8.

[35] MS 139b9. Wittgenstein's metaphors and the logic that underlay them are explained in more detail in L. Wittgenstein, *Lecture on Ethics: Introduction, Interpretation and Complete Text*, ed. E. Zamuner, E.V.D. Lascio, and D.K. Levy (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2007).

[36] MS 139b10.

[37] MS 139b10.

or obedience to authority, not by a subject's will. This conclusion Wittgenstein will not accept.

The second clue to Wittgenstein's motivation is implied by what we can do with experiences that can be described. If we can describe, for example, an experience of pleasure, Wittgenstein believes we make it "concrete" and "controllable" and thereby susceptible to scientific analysis.[38] This analysis would be part of the psychology of pleasure. (Wittgenstein thought of psychology as a natural science.) Scientific analysis is the analysis of natural fact. By becoming concrete rather than abstract, something – pleasure in this example – becomes apt for analysis, becoming as it were more substantive. In part, its becoming concrete is how it becomes controllable. It is clear though that in becoming controllable the control is not gained by the person whose pleasure it is. The person's willpower or sensibility is not augmented, for example, such that they have new control over their pleasure. Anyone can control someone's pleasure once it has been described and analyzed, for example pleasure can be dulled or intensified by chemicals. Indeed euphoria can be chemically induced selectively. In the realm of language, psychotherapy or rational argument can be used to control the sources and natures of the pleasures that one can and does experience. For example, the pleasures to which an addict is susceptible can be treated by numerous medical manipulations.

The point then is that if an experience is describable, it becomes controllable by human techniques (technology) and subject to human reasoning. A technique – mechanical, chemical or rational – can be learned to manipulate the experience and its objects. If this were so for experiences that give rise to ethical thoughts or speaking with an ethical or absolute sense, then these experiences and their objects could be made concrete and controllable. Once this was accomplished, techniques could be found and used to determine what is ethically required of a subject as well as inducing acceptance or a disposition to do so. In short, mankind could discover the knowledge of how to be better, ethically better. To be better, anyone

[38] MS 139b10.

could learn the knowledge and apply its techniques, just like any other area of human endeavor. Most significantly, this knowledge and these techniques could be used by one person to make another person better: to determine for them what is ethically required of them and induce them to accept it. The possibility that someone's ethical bearing could be decided or enacted independent of a subject's will is not one Wittgenstein can accept.

I have suggested elaborations of two indications (clues) of Wittgenstein's ethical outlook in the lecture. The first emerged in Wittgenstein's asserting the impossibility of a state of affairs that could coerce us ethically. The second was latent in Wittgenstein's remarks about how description and analysis facilitated control. Both reveal commitments he has to the nature of ethics. Both are oriented toward the idea that whatever ethics may be, it must leave an ethical subject with solely his own resources with which to face what is ethically demanded of him. He can respond neither in obedience to coercion or authority, nor with the aid of techniques borrowed from the storehouse of human technology, knowledge and reason. As it were, he must depend solely on his heart and soul; or what comes to the same thing, his will and his virtue.[39] In other words, in Wittgenstein's ethical outlook, an ethical subject's response must be wholly and solely personal.

(8) With this sketch of the roots of Wittgenstein's motive, his seemingly peremptory and dogmatic response toward the close of the lecture becomes intelligible as a principled response. He will not consider anything that purports to explain ethical experiences or their descriptions in language. It misunderstands their nature to suppose they can be explained. More fundamentally, Wittgenstein conceives of ethics as a personal challenge that must not be evaded. Anything but recourse to one's own will and virtue is an evasion

[39] Ethical failure or weakness is no error that might be corrected or overcome, *DB* 19.2.[37]. Earlier Wittgenstein had emphasized that the will alone is bearer of the ethical, of ethical predicates, *NB* 21.7.16.

of personal responsibility for one's own response.[40] This is a serious response insofar as Wittgenstein is moved by his convictions about the nature of the ethical situation of subjects. This is not tantamount to abandoning his argument. On the contrary, Wittgenstein's response is also a demonstration of his viewpoint. It is the natural conclusion of his argument. Once the argument has run its course, in the matter of the ethical, according to Wittgenstein, there is only the expression of personal conviction as a basis for speaking. There can be no further recourse to techniques of argument or analysis.

By rejecting any possible explanation or analysis of ethical experience or its description in language, Wittgenstein resolves the paradox that is the main point of the overt content of the lecture. He rejects the belief in experiences seeming to have absolute value, which was the source of the paradox. By rejecting this belief Wittgenstein accepts the ethical is beyond explanation or analysis. Effectively, he accepts we are on our own when each of us confronts our ethical situation in the world. Accepting this shows Wittgenstein's own commitment not to evade the ethical demand on him. His revealing his acceptance serves Wittgenstein's overarching motivation for giving the lecture. His motivation is to warn his audience about the false hope that describing and analyzing ethical experiences and expressions will help them to satisfy the ethical demand each subject must answer.

(9) Attributing this overarching motivation to Wittgenstein makes sense of three puzzles regarding Wittgenstein's lecture. These are his introductory remarks in the lecture; his respect for the urge to speak ethical nonsense; and his willingness to give the lecture when he thought talk of ethics was claptrap. Making sense of these will make sense of the lecture overall.

Wittgenstein begins the lecture by explaining his "reason for choosing the subject [he had] chosen."[41] He did not want to "misuse"

[40] An extended illustration of a struggle of this kind for Wittgenstein is noted in *DB* 19.2.[37].

[41] MS 139b1.

his opportunity to address his audience by giving a lecture on logic, but rather wished to speak about something he was "*keen*" on "communicating" to his audience.[42] In his first lecture draft, he wrote that he wished "to say something that comes from [his] heart [. . .]"[43] He would not gratify any interest in physics, psychology or logic. Rather, he wrote:

> [. . .] I should use this opportunity to speak to you not as a logician, still less as a cross between a scientist & a journalist but as a human being who tries to tell other human beings something which some of them might possibly find useful, I say useful not interesting.[44]

Contrary to this introduction, the lecture proceeds – overtly – as if it were a lecture on the logic of language, beginning with G.E. Moore's definition and explanation of ethics, further analyses of these and posited conclusions.[45] If Wittgenstein were true to his introductory remarks and was not giving a lecture on logic; were communicating something that he was keen to communicate; and had meant it to be one human being telling others something useful, then the content of the lecture must serve a purpose contrary to overt appearances. The overarching motivation attributed to Wittgenstein above – viz. to warn his fellows – is certainly consistent with his prefatory remarks. Indeed, covertly seeking to warn others of the false succor in explanations of ethics would be well served by an overt demonstration of the knots and confusions that result from attempting such explanations. It is just this demonstrative role that should be assigned to the content of the lecture from the point when Wittgenstein says he will "now begin"[46] the lecture until the point when he rejects any explanation just because it is an explanation.[47] If we give the bulk of the lecture the role of an exer-

[42] MS 139b2.
[43] MS 139aII. The first five pages of MS 139a were numbered by Wittgenstein using roman numerals.
[44] MS 139aII.
[45] MS 139b3.
[46] MS 139b3.
[47] MS 139b18.

cise in explanatory futility, we can be true to Wittgenstein's introductory remarks: He does not give a lecture on logic. Moreover, the futility, rather than the detail, is precisely what Wittgenstein is keen to communicate. That is his warning. Recognizing that explanation – and the techniques attendant on it – is futile is useful to anyone who hoped to evade personally facing the ethical demand in his situation in life.

(10) The second puzzle concerns the respect Wittgenstein maintained for people's tendency to produce nonsense. At the end of the lecture Wittgenstein states his belief that "the tendency of all men who ever tried to write or talk ethics or religion was to run against the boundaries of language."[48] That is, it is inevitable that people produce nonsense because language is unfitted to express something beyond fact, beyond the natural world in which we use language. However, Wittgenstein continues:

> Ethics, so far as it springs from the desire to say something about the ultimate meaning of life, the absolute good, the absolute valuable [. . .] is a document of a tendency in the human mind which I personally cannot help respecting deeply and I would not for my life ridicule it.[49]

If Wittgenstein were saying that he respects nonsense, this would be peculiar. Nonsense, by its nature, speaks of nothing. What would there be to respect? Wittgenstein's focus is not on the nonsense, but on the human "tendency" to produce it. The tendency indicates something that Wittgenstein deeply respects and would not ridicule.[50] It indicates generally that humans are capable of an awareness of their situations that is very different from what is usual. Usually, our perspective is shaped by the immediate, contingent situation in which we live, work and desire to achieve our goals. It is the perspective of the here and now, of the familiar, often habitual,

[48] MS 139b18.
[49] MS 139b19.
[50] Waismann, *Wittgenstein and the Vienna Circle*, p. 69.

goings-on in a life. By contrast, sometimes one's perspective or awareness can shift from the usual here and now into one encompassing *all* of existence: what is, what was, and what will be. Contemplated this way, the world seems very different. It seems perhaps timeless or immutable or singular, without relation to anything else, that is, absolute. Another possible manifestation of this perspective is the wonder seen in a miracle. This is also the perspective in which the ethical appears to us, in which we become aware of it. One might say this was awareness of the timeless, immutable, absolute realm of value or worth or good – though saying as much is strictly nonsense on Wittgenstein's view.

In a particular person, the tendency for someone to speak of the meaning of life or related ideas indicates that person's effort to attend to an awareness of existence as absolute, as described above. This tendency is important, for if someone did not have it, he would be ethically incapable or apathetic. Wittgenstein does not think that the ethical demand must be attended by actions – for these would have as their aims states of affairs. However, effort is required of someone as an ethical subject. The effort is directed to awareness and consideration of his situation, of what is ethically demanded of him. The tendency to desire to speak nonsense about the meaning of life is a symptom of the awareness essential to someone's being an ethical subject.

Vindicating Wittgenstein's respect for this human tendency to produce nonsense about the ethical makes clear how his response relates to his overarching motive for giving the lecture. The tendency is the source of the linguistic expressions of the experiences that gives rise to the paradox that is the main point in the lecture. In resolving the paradox, we must disregard these experiences, their putative expressions in language, and the tendency that is their origin. For so long as we attend to the experiences and their expressions in hope of an explanation, we will be attending the wrong thing. Our awareness will be oriented to these worldly experiences and worldly attempts to express or describe them. We will thereby be drawn away from an awareness oriented to the extraworldly that is the prerequisite for attending to what is demanded of us ethically.

Wittgenstein's goal therefore is to show the tendency for what it is: a hopeless "running against the walls of our cage."[51] The paradox must be resolved by rejecting our experiences and their expression as candidates for explanation. No amount of analysis or explanation will produce the slightest progress. There is no answer to be given in language to the riddle of life, to life's meaning. Our attention must be focused elsewhere if one is to confront the situation of an ethical subject.

Notwithstanding that it produces nonsense, the tendency indicates something.[52] It should not be suppressed, for example as an unhelpful reflex or pathology. What the tendency indicates is important because it is a manifestation of the capacity for ethical response. To suppress the tendency would be to cultivate ethical apathy. Wittgenstein dismisses any such suppression by avowing his deep respect for the tendency. This is wholly consistent with an overarching motive of warning his audience away from the false hope that explanation and analysis will help in meeting the ethical demand, yet it avoids advocating any ethical disinterest.

(11) Finally we can address the question that led us to consider Wittgenstein's ethical outlook and the main point of the lecture. If Wittgenstein thought that talk of ethics was claptrap, why is his own lecture not more of the same? Superficially it is more of the same, just as overtly it appears as the lecture on logic Wittgenstein said he would not give. Superficially it is a lecture in which definitions of absolute good and value are offered, analyses of the same are considered, and knowledge arising from these posited. If Wittgenstein had held that these analyses met with any success, then the content of the lecture too would have been more claptrap by his own lights. For it is precisely claims of this kind – claims to have defined the good or to have analyzed the nature of value – that Wittgenstein believes should not be made. Making such claims misdirects our attention and bolsters our hopes that the personal

[51] MS 139b18.

[52] Waismann, *Wittgenstein and the Vienna Circle*, p. 69.

challenge of ethics will be relieved by recourse to techniques and methods for answering ethical demands.

Wittgenstein's lecture does not end with even a qualified claim of success. On the contrary, it ends with a rejection of the very possibility of an explanation, definition or analysis. Immediately, one should doubt its superficial appearance or that Wittgenstein is offering more claptrap. Instead, we are better to suppose that Wittgenstein is using this apparent claptrap for a different purpose. Specifically, by demonstrating that it is an exercise in futility, he shows what comes of setting off on this path, viz. nothing but nonsense. The demonstration would thus urge abandoning further attempts. Notoriously, Wittgenstein had used a similar strategy in his book *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. After setting out an apparently cogent theory of logic, Wittgenstein declared that it was all strictly nonsense. If one understood him, understood the thoughts he communicated, one would jettison the theory.[53] Ten years later, he seems up to something similar. Wittgenstein again says he aims at "communicating" his thoughts, though he says it will be difficult to understand how he is doing so by his lecture.[54] Notwithstanding pessimism about the likelihood his strategy will succeed, it seems clear that Wittgenstein is not himself adding to the claptrap about ethics by giving his lecture. On the contrary, if the warning he aims to communicate were heeded by those who heard him, it would put an end to any more claptrap about ethics.

III

(1) The interpretation of the Lecture given above suggests that Wittgenstein had conceived the lecture to convey an aspect of his ethical outlook. Specifically, in his ethical outlook, an ethical challenge is personal such that no progress can be made with the challenge through analysis, explanation or theory. Nonetheless,

[53] See the Foreword of the *Tractatus* and §6.54.

[54] MS 139b1–3.

Wittgenstein agreed to give the lecture because he hoped to communicate something useful and valuable to those attending the lecture. Supposing this interpretation is correct, one might yet wish to ask why Wittgenstein did not make his point directly? Why give a lecture whose apparent subject is ethical *language* if his covert intent is to warn his audience about the proper focus for ethical attention?

One explanation for focusing on language is that Wittgenstein's ethical outlook was shaped by his view of language, so language should be focal. After all, Wittgenstein up to this point had spent the large majority of his adult life concerned with the logic of language. For Wittgenstein, the logic of language did not address solely language. The nature of logic had an expansive scope that included the nature of reality and the limits of science, experience and thought. Perhaps logic determined Wittgenstein's views on ethics too. With this explanation, if Wittgenstein's view of language were to change, so too could his ethical view. For example, if Wittgenstein were to accept that language could describe more than facts, he could also accept that language could describe value or the absolute. Interpretations of the Lecture with this implication have been advanced by some interpreters of Wittgenstein.[55] This interpretation is probably false, as will be argued below. If it is false, we should reject an explanation in which the lecture's focus on language proceeds from Wittgenstein's ethical view having been determined by his view of language.

(2) Though The Heretics had an academic aura from having been founded in Cambridge, his invitation to speak did not require explicitly or implicitly that Wittgenstein give an academic lecture on logic or language. Virginia Woolf – no academic, for example – had spoken five years earlier about modern fiction in a talk that was nearly half imagined narrative. Nothing about the occasion

[55] See, e.g., Redpath, "Wittgenstein and Ethics"; Klemke, "Wittgenstein's Lecture on Ethics"; H.-J. Glock, *A Wittgenstein Dictionary* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), pp. 107–111.

precluded Wittgenstein giving a lecture stating his views on ethics and why he thought his views correct. However, given his ethical outlook, there are three obstacles to his doing any such thing: it would be pointless; he had no authority from which to speak; and, even if he could speak with authority, anything he said would be too general to be useful.

What would be the point of setting out his ethical outlook? Suppose, setting aside the Lecture, that Wittgenstein had thought his ethical outlook could be described. What would be the point in describing it? By Wittgenstein's lights, grasp of his view of ethics and its basis would not of itself be an aid to anyone in the audience. He did not have a theory of ethics to offer, the use of which could decide someone what to do ethically. If he had an analysis of the nature of the ethical, it would be counterproductive to pay attention to it by wondering whether it was correct or what its implications were. Wittgenstein's goal is, by contrast, to subdue the allure or interest in a theory or analysis. Liberated from these, one could more readily attend to the perspective in which the ethical challenge of life appears, certain that there were no aids outside one's own resolve. Thus, for Wittgenstein simply to state his view of ethics would serve no purpose. If Wittgenstein were to communicate something useful to his audience, it could not be a view of ethics that was *itself* an object for attention; that would be just the distraction against which he sought to warn. Instead, he could communicate where we should *not* attend. That would be some use.

In any case, supposing Wittgenstein could describe his ethical outlook, from where would his authority come to speak about ethics? For by his own lights, ethics is radically personal. As he put it later, the most he could do was speak in the first person.[56] As he wrote in a draft of the Lecture, he will speak as one human to another human.[57] Plainly this is meant to disclaim authority. Neither could he speak with authority about what *we* do ethically, as if it were a matter of reporting patterns of behavior. Certainly Wittgenstein

[56] In 1930, Waismann, *Wittgenstein and the Vienna Circle*, p. 117.
[57] MS 139aII.

lacked the standing or authority to command obedience from the audience. Neither had he the authority to present a universal moral truth that fixed what anyone should do. (On any view of ethics, it would be puzzling if someone could be morally responsible for something decided for them.) Wittgenstein could not draw on the authority of any expertise he might possess. It was after all part of his moral outlook that there is no expertise or technique one can use to resolve what to do ethically. More, ethically there is nothing in which one can be expert. There is no domain of ethics with which – though difficult to describe – one nonetheless could become more familiar than others or more observant or more practiced. Ethical challenges are not challenges concerning ineffable entities *in* a supernatural realm about which we cannot speak. An ethical challenge relates a particular person's life to the world as it is now and as it is always: for example, revealed by a tension between momentary expedience and what is decent. We will return to this dynamic below. What is plain is that Wittgenstein both lacked and disclaimed the authority to state his moral outlook as if it were correct.

(3) Suppose – contrary to the lecture – that Wittgenstein had the authority to state his view of ethics and that it were possible to describe his outlook. What could he say? Since ethics is personal, anything he said would either be peculiar to his life or hopelessly general. Aiming for generality and based on the ethical outlook implicit in the lecture and Wittgenstein's other writings, we can make a conjecture at his view.

First, some lives are decent and of some worth, while others are indecent and wasted.[58] Second, the perspective in which a life has

[58] The word decent translates 'anständig' which has a broader, somewhat stronger meaning in German. It was a word to which Wittgenstein frequently turned when describing what made a life worthy or creditable, e.g. in *DB* 2.5.[30], 2.10.[30] and 12.3.[37]. Living a decent life was a preoccupation throughout Wittgenstein's life; see the discussion in the postscript to R. Rhees (ed.), *Ludwig Wittgenstein: Personal Recollections* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1981), pp. 212ff. In the footnotes that follow, indicative but not exhaustive references are given for written expressions of Wittgenstein's ideas.

worth is one outside of time, outside of how things are here and now. Worth, whatever it is, is not a hostage to chance.[59] What was worthy cannot become unworthy because of a change of circumstance. This atemporal view – atemporal because outside time and change – is central.

Third, each person alone can make their life worthy or a waste.[60] Someone's bearing in life makes his life worthy. It is by a person's will that he bears himself as he does. Our willing is our ethical center.[61] Fourth, a good will – or good willing – is so when it is lucid and pure, not a masquerade to dissemble one's self-serving interests.[62] These points collect and restate the radically personal nature of ethics, which is also central.

In sum, a worthy life is so regardless of how things turn out and the purity of resolve behind someone's bearing in life amounts to that person's life's worth. This summation is hardly a revealing insight. On the one hand, in an ordinary context, who would dispute that this, broadly, is ethics' basic idea? On the other hand, it is notably unlike much of the moral philosophy of the last 150 years. There are no definitions of good or right. There is no focus on actions and their assessment. There is no earnest attempt to unravel a postulated puzzle about what we are doing when we make an ethical statement or judgment, for example that one ought to strive to live a worthy life. Wittgenstein offers no foundation for ethics, nothing to block the doubts of a sceptic about ethics.

Of course, just this outcome is the point. Wittgenstein has nothing revisionary to offer about the basic ideas of ethics, viz. virtue, vice, temptation, cowardice, courage, good and evil, etc. The starting point for his outlook is the shared culture of the audience with its Judeo-Christian foundation – even if it was dubitable aspects of this that The Heretics meant to question. He is not trying to persuade

[59] §6.41.

[60] Wittgenstein moves back and forth explicitly over this idea over a few days. *DB* 18.2.[37], 19.2.[37], 20.2.[37].

[61] "I will call 'will' first and foremost the bearer of good and evil." *NB* 21.7.16.

[62] Wittgenstein called self-serving dissembling, evasion and self-deception, "antics." *DB* 19.2.[37].

his audience to be moral or convince them that there is a difference between a life of worth and life wasted. He presumes that these are standing convictions for his audience. Their (possible) mistake is to hope that an analysis of cowardice or an explanation of temptation will help to meet ethics' demands. Wittgenstein's warning is that this hope is in vain.

(4) Though Wittgenstein is conservative rather than revisionary, he is not urging passivity or apathy. It is difficult to adopt the atemporal perspective in which absolute worth appears to someone; sometimes the perspective must come unbidden. Equally difficult is for someone to know whether their motives are pure, as opposed to serving one's, for example, anger, vanity or cowardice. Ethics is a struggle against the relative and self-serving. The struggle admits little respite.[63] The activity of philosophy is an aid, insofar as it demands honesty in seeking elucidations and moments of clarity. Understanding the logic of thought, experience and language is a means to clarity. But clarity of itself is not an ethical demand, for there is no realm of the ethical – a supernatural or spiritual world – about whose structure, contents or nature we are struggling to become clear. The ethical realm is not unknown to us, it is the realm of decency, worth, virtue, good, and so on. The struggle is to attend solely to this realm by ignoring the distractions of demands to attend to the here and now presented with the urgency of the relative and self-serving. However much philosophy and the logic of language foster the honest pursuit of clarity, they do not constitute the activity of the struggle *to respond* to what is demanded of us ethically.

(5) For the above reasons, Wittgenstein could not just state his view. We can consider the alternative explanation for why Wittgenstein focuses on language in his lecture, even though within his ethical outlook there is nothing to gain from attending to

[63] Striving to live well is like saying it is a "battle through life toward death, like a fighting, a charging soldier. Everything else is wavering, cowardice, sloth, thus wretchedness." *DB* 20.2.[37].

language. The alternative explanation – which we will argue is doubtful – is that Wittgenstein's view on ethics was determined by his view on language. The guiding insight in this explanation is that Wittgenstein's account of language in the *Tractatus* committed him to the view that language could describe solely facts, not value. Therefore, Wittgenstein had to give an account of ethics in the Lecture that placed value outside the world of fact and beyond a language that describes facts.

One reason to doubt this explanation is that Wittgenstein acknowledged as influences on his ethical outlook several thinkers whose ethical views do not derive from considerations about language, viz. William James, Kierkegaard, Schopenhauer and Tolstoy among others.[64] Thus, at best, Wittgenstein's ethical outlook could have been part-determined by his view of language, since some part must have been determined by these other influences. This leaves open *which* parts of his ethics were determined by which influence. Even if the particular effects of Wittgenstein's influences remain indeterminate, it is possible that Wittgenstein's views on fact and value were determined by something other than his view of language.

However, the thesis that Wittgenstein's ethical outlook was determined by his view of language can be doubted directly. For it seems a corollary of this explanation that if views on language determine views on ethics, then some changes in a view on language should change a view on ethics. If *no* change in a view on language could change a view on ethics, then it would appear idle to claim that a view of language determines a view on ethics. Wittgenstein's view on language did change substantially, but his view on ethics did not change. Therefore it is improbable that Wittgenstein's view on language determined his view on ethics.

Highlighting the considerable continuity in Wittgenstein's ethical outlook from the notes he made in 1916 to the Lecture to the notes

[64] These and similar influences are recalled by those who knew him, see Rhees, *Ludwig Wittgenstein*, and in remarks scattered in his working papers, see Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*.

he made in 1937 will show that Wittgenstein's outlook did not change. It will also bring out the importance of the atemporal perspective essential to ethics. By contrast with this continuity, there can be little question that Wittgenstein's philosophical views on the logic of language changed from the *Tractatus* to the views developed in the 1930s and posthumously published in the *Philosophical Investigations*. Scholars can debate the extent of the change, but not that there was change. Without question, the change came in stages, but it is beyond doubt that Wittgenstein had accepted major change by 1936.[65] Wittgenstein returned to philosophy at Cambridge in early 1929 already alive with the need to revise his former philosophical views. Arguably, Wittgenstein had already given up the *Tractatus* account of language when he drafted the Lecture.[66] If true, this would urge the rejection of any link between the *Tractatus* view of language and the Lecture's view of ethics.

(6) To show the independence of Wittgenstein's view on ethics from his view on language, we can establish the former's unchanging continuity during the period of change for his view on language. The first written record of Wittgenstein's thoughts on ethics is in his notebooks from 1916 during his military service in the First World War. His thoughts had turned to the purpose of life.[67] They cover just eight months of short notes comprising around a dozen pages. In them Wittgenstein writes that ethics concerns the absolute and non-contingent[68] and that ethics is personal because bound up with one's willing.[69] He writes that ethical concerns appear in an

[65] Wittgenstein recorded that his thought was completely different from fifteen years earlier, *DB* 28.1.32. A semipublic precipitate of this change is in L. Wittgenstein, *Preliminary Studies for the "Philosophical Investigations," Generally Known as the Blue and Brown Books*, 2nd edn., ed. R. Rhees (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1960).

[66] J. Hintikka, "The Crash of the Philosophy of the *Tractatus*: The Testimony of Wittgenstein's Notebooks in October 1929," in Enzo De Pellegrin (ed.), *Interactive Wittgenstein: Essays in Memory of Georg Henrik von Wright* (London: Springer, 2011), pp. 153–169.

[67] *GT* 28.5.16.

[68] *NB* 24.7.16, 30.7.16, 2.8.16, 10.1.17.

[69] *NB* 1.8.16, 2.8.16, 5.8.16, 12.8.16, 2.9.16, 17.10.16.

atemporal perspective:[70] "the good life is the world seen *sub specie aeternitatis*. [. . .]"; "The usual way of looking at things sees objects as it were from the midst of them, the view *sub specie aeternitatis* from outside."[71] The phrase 'sub specie aeternitatis' is philosophically well known, meaning under an aspect of eternity or from the perspective of eternity, that is, an atemporal perspective. The commonality in ethical outlook between the 1916 notebooks and the Lecture is immediately apparent since both have the same points of reference as in the précis given above (§III.3), viz. the personal concern with a worthy life and the atemporal perspective. The 1916 notebooks contain additional themes that are not germane here, because they do not appear in the *Tractatus*.[72] Thus continuity is evident from 1916 to 1929. What about after the lecture, that is, after 1929?

(7) Wittgenstein's notebook entries on ethics in 1937 have similar points of reference to those in the Lecture and the 1916 notebooks. An extract from Wittgenstein's diary in 1937 will show this, as well as further defining the contours of Wittgenstein's ethical outlook. The extract was written when Wittgenstein was unhappy, in Norway with his philosophical work not going well.

> Do I find it right that a person suffers an entire life for the cause of justice, then dies perhaps a terrible death, – & now has no reward at all for this life? After all, I admire such a person, place him high above me & why don't I say, he was an ass that he used his life like that. *Why* is he not stupid? Or also: *why* is he not the "most miserable of human beings"? Isn't that what he should be, if now that is *all*, that he had a miserable life until the end? But consider now that I answer: "No he was *not* stupid since he is doing well now *after* his death." That is also not satisfying. He does *not* seem stupid to me, indeed,

[70] *NB* 6.7.16, 8.7.16, 7.10.16.

[71] *NB* 7.10.16, also used at §6.45 and MS 109, 28 (22.8.1930) in Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, p. 7.

[72] For detail see D.K. Levy, "Wittgenstein's Early Writings on Ethics," in Wittgenstein, *Lecture on Ethics*.

> on the contrary, seems to be doing what's *right*. Further I seem to be able to say: he does what's right for *he* receives the *just* reward and yet I can't think of the reward as an award after his death. Of such a person I want to say "*This human being must come home*."[73]

The passage is not a statement of fact nor an answer to the question with which Wittgenstein began. Instead, it ends with Wittgenstein exclaiming. The question was whether it is right that someone should live a miserable life in the cause of justice and have nothing to show for it?[74] We can imagine someone who has struggled against a cruel, unjust regime without living to see its fall or any significant effects of his struggle. Wittgenstein allows that a commonsense thought is that this man is a stupid ass, who has endured a misery that is now all there will have been in his life. He has squandered the chance of happiness during the time allowed to him.

This thought, though common sense, contrasts with Wittgenstein's esteem and admiration for such a man. He is inclined to reply by saying that the man was not stupid, because, after his life has ended, in death he is doing well. This does not quite satisfy Wittgenstein, as if the words do not quite make sense. Though it seems the man was not dumb, though it seems he did what was right, though it seems he received what was right, Wittgenstein cannot accept that the man has been rewarded for his life.[75] Wittgenstein is constrained by language, seeming to say something, but unable to mean it; to say it as if it were true, to believe what he says. Wittgenstein cannot confute the commonsense thought that the man has made a wrong choice in his life with nothing to show for it. He wants to do so. There is something also right about how the man lived, but

[73] *DB* 15.2.[37]. The final sentence quoted was originally "Dieser Mensch muß heimkommen," with a single underline under the whole sentence and a double underline under "muß."

[74] Wittgenstein discounts the possibility of reward or punishment in an afterlife at the outset of the same diary entry.

[75] Cp. §6.422.

Wittgenstein cannot say what. Instead, he is drawn to exclaim, almost cry out; not answer, not decide.

This example so far shows several things. Wittgenstein considers an ethical matter and is blocked by language, he struggles to make sense. On the one hand, there is considerable intuitive sense to what is commonly said about the man who dies justly but without reward or recognition – that he has lost in life. On the other, Wittgenstein cannot accept that the man has lost – on the contrary! – but neither can he express his resistance by saying what would contradict or confute the common assertion. Frustrated, instead he exclaims. The exclamation Wittgenstein makes – declaring that the man must be returned from life back whence he came – is borderline nonsense insofar as it is neither an order on which someone could act nor a description of how things are. It is at best personal, serving some purpose for Wittgenstein.

The Lecture unquestionably aimed to make clear that talk of ethics is nonsense in its very essence. Talking about ethics ends in a frustrated attempt to run against the boundaries of language.[76] The repeated attempts to do so are at best personal expressions or symptoms of a struggle. At this level of generality, the example above recapitulates the pattern described in the Lecture. Wittgenstein begins with ethics, gets tied up in language and winds up with frustrated nonsense. A year and a half after giving the lecture Wittgenstein addressed exclamations in ethics thus, "an ethical proposition is a personal act. Not a statement of fact. Like an exclamation of admiration."[77] Indeed, Wittgenstein ended the lecture with an exclamation, viz. expressing his admiration by exclaiming upon the tendency to produce nonsense while thinking of ethics.

(8) A commonality between Wittgenstein's view that talk of ethics is nonsense in the Lecture and the extract from 1937 is immediately evident. It shows that Wittgenstein was concerned with a worthy life. There are further points of commonality. Chief among these is

[76] MS 139b18.
[77] *DB* 6.5.[31].

the contrast between the temporal character of mundane life and the atemporal character of the ethical (itself an aspect of the absolute). Already we noted that Wittgenstein made an association between seeing things under the aspect of eternity and the ethical from his earliest philosophy. For Wittgenstein, understanding the ethical aspect required apprehending it outside time, outside the relative, like a miracle.

Consider again the example of the just man who has lived and died miserably. If it were possible to confute the commonsense view that he has wasted his life, it would have to be because his reward outside life was greater. To see it as greater, we could suppose his reward is eternal and therefore far greater than the misery of his, by contrast, brief life. This supposition implies covertly comparing the *relative* durations of life and eternity, that is, it makes a temporal comparison. Frustrating this supposition, however, is Wittgenstein's rejecting any temporal comparisons in the continuation of the same notebook entry: "One imagines eternity (of reward or of punishment) normally as an endless duration. But one could equally well imagine it as an instant. For in an instant one can experience *all terror* & all bliss."[78] Someone's reward or punishment can be had "in an instant" and in this sense does not occur as an event in time, with a beginning and an end. Therefore the kind of reward or punishment we can imagine for good or bad living should be understood as atemporal and not within life or after death, since temporal comparisons are of no import.

Wittgenstein continues by discussing the consequences of living badly as leading at its extreme to an abyss of hopelessness, but notes, "The *abyss of hopelessness* cannot show itself in life," by which he means the flow of time within a life.[79] Indeed, Wittgenstein continues that when someone is in a state of hopelessness "in a certain sense time does not pass at all in it." Wittgenstein's idea seems to be that when one is truly without hope one does not even hope that things will or could change. Hopelessness, when it is the real thing,

[78] *DB* 15.2.[37].
[79] *DB* 15.2.[37].

must be understood atemporally for the person who experiences it or contemplates it. This is in contrast to pain, where Wittgenstein notes that one can always ask when the pains will stop or wish that they could.[80] Unlike hopelessness, nothing about being in pain precludes thinking of one's pain as an event, with a duration in time, within one's life.

(9) Wittgenstein struggles as he continues to describe what happens to the just man on his death, struggling with the (temporal) idea that the the man's life will "come to a head." He tries various phrases for what must occur for the just man, such as his becoming immediately one with the "light." The struggle itself is not as important as Wittgenstein's recognition that the phrases for which he is groping are religious language. He concludes, "It therefore seems that I could use all those expressions which religion really uses here."[81] Immediately, though, he recoils from using them:

> These images thus impose themselves upon me. And yet I am reluctant to use these images & expressions. Above all these are not *similes*, of course. For what can be said by way of a simile, that can also be said without a simile. These images & expressions have a life rather only in a *high* sphere of life, they can be rightfully used only in this sphere. All *I* could really do is make a gesture which means something similar to "unsayable," & say nothing.[82]

Directly the parallel with the Lecture is apparent. In the lecture Wittgenstein describes how ethical and religious language draws us toward similes or allegories but he rejects them for the identical reason that a simile can always be re-expressed without a simile to describe a fact directly.[83] Second, Wittgenstein describes this language as having a use solely in some higher sphere, echoing the lecture's claim that using this language is trying to go "*beyond* the

[80] *DB* 15.2.[37]
[81] *DB* 15.2.[37]
[82] *DB* 15.2.[37]
[83] MS 139b14–16.

world."[84] Third, the explicit conclusion of the Lecture is that what we wish to express about experiences that arouse thoughts of ethics is unsayable. The passage above makes the same point, making vivid that we are left with solely a gesture that indicates nonsense.

The discussion of passages from one day in Wittgenstein's 1937 notebook shows the significant commonality between Wittgenstein's ethical outlook then and in the Lecture. More comparisons in the same vein are possible. However, one is sufficient to show the continuity in Wittgenstein's view on ethics from 1916 to 1937, during which his view on language changed considerably. This outcome is a strong reason to reject as improbable the claim that Wittgenstein's view on ethics in the Lecture was determined by his view on language – that the lecture's content was constrained by the *Tractatus* account of language.

(10) We noted that Wittgenstein's ethical outlook precluded describing his outlook directly. The lecture's explicit conclusion is that ethical language is nonsense. Taken together it seems that Wittgenstein thought that language is of no account and has no use for ethical subjects. Is Wittgenstein denying the obvious, that we do speak to each other using ethical language? If he thought that ethical language is nonsense, surely he contradicts himself when giving examples drawn from what we do say, for example when, in the lecture, he distinguishes between tennis and beastly behavior.[85] On the contrary, we will conclude that Wittgenstein thinks there is nothing wrong with our ethical language, except our understanding of it.

The question we had been considering was why give a lecture whose apparent subject is ethical language if the lecture's true purpose is to warn the audience about the right focus for ethical attention? An obvious answer is suggested by our earlier interpretation of the lecture. Wittgenstein thought that most of what was said

[84] MS 139b18.
[85] MS 139b5–6.

or written about ethics was pernicious claptrap that should stop. If one showed that the language used for this claptrap was nonsense, that would be a good start to shutting up the claptrap.[86] This claptrap – by moralists, churchmen, and intellectuals – is pernicious because it purports to be the real essence of ethics: a description of what is good, valuable, really important, or the meaning of life and the sources of its worth.[87] Wittgenstein wants to stop it because it misunderstands the limits in language. We want our language to encompass the essence of ethics because doing so gratifies the desire to evade the personal challenge of the ethical. It feeds the hope that ethics could be a science. Striving for a language that describes ethics in its essence is a persistent symptom of a craving for something to help make life easier where it is, and must be, hardest.

Wittgenstein's persistent claims about the impossibility of expressing anything about the essence of ethics by language are not concerns with language per se. The undoubted importance of language to Wittgenstein's philosophy has obscured this. The mistaken view that the Lecture is a consequence of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* account of language intensifies the obscurity. For Wittgenstein, the attack on language is a proxy for his conviction that the ethical challenges of life cannot be solved by science, by scientific method, nor indeed by anything plausibly conceived as a technique that could be learned, discovered or known.

Wittgenstein attacks the philosophical focus on moral language – perhaps initiated by Moore, now assuming the guise of meta-ethics – because it is another refuge for the idea that ethical problems might be described such that they had solutions or could be *solved* – for example, by realizing optimal states of affairs or assessing the warrants for the truth of propositions about ethics. So it is not language as such that is the target of Wittgenstein's animus. It is the misunderstanding that language can encompass the essence of ethics. In this misunderstanding is harbored the hope that ethics

[86] Perhaps Wittgenstein recalled the paper he had heard at The Heretics on March 2, 1913 by W.L. Scott in which he critiqued Moore's book on ethics, *Principia Ethica*.
[87] MS 139b4.

will yet be subdued into a domain of human technology, by breaking down the ethical using the prism of logical analysis. If ethics did yield to technique, the difficulty in living a decent or worthy life would have an altogether different character. A human subject's freedom, for example, would cease to be a source of ethical anxiety.

The misunderstanding of ethical language Wittgenstein perceives is not one that requires a new language to clarify. Our present language is fine as long as we accept it cannot do more than it can or all that we want – viz. describe the essence of ethics. Much of our ethical language *relates* to the ethical without describing it. The misunderstanding is in not seeing that some ethical language is relative instead of absolute or that some of it exclaims rather than describes. Much of what we call ethical judgment is tacitly relative, for example, relative to a political or social ideal or shared norms of prudence. In his later philosophy, on the few occasions when he speaks of 'good' in relation to ethics, he is careful to limit its use to calling attention to something. It is not used to settle an argument or provide justification for the application of a technique, such as a decision-making technique.[88] Indeed, use of religious or ethical language can even limit the possibility for people to contradict each other, thus making it of little use in argument or even assertion.[89] Language that relates to the ethical or language used in a relative sense is language with a meaningful use.

Therefore, it would be a mistake to suggest that Wittgenstein believes that all language that borders or relates to the ethical is nonsense, of no account or useless. This ethical language's use is not to describe the *absolute* good, absolute valuable and so on. It may be exclaiming, drawing attention, marveling, confessing and so on. Wittgenstein's specimen reproach, "You are behaving like a beast," relates to ethics in that it brings the dialogue to an absolute

[88] L. Wittgenstein, *Wittgenstein's Lectures, Cambridge, 1932–1935: From the Notes of Alice Ambrose and Margaret Macdonald*, ed. A. Ambrose (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1979), p. 36.

[89] L. Wittgenstein, *Lectures & Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*, ed. C. Barrett (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1978), pp. 53ff.

value judgment.[90] It is also obviously meaningful, not nonsense. Language that borders the ethical may also be used to show, among other things, fellowship, support or pity. As an example: one could say to a man who faced a difficult ethical situation, "Well, God help you."[91] Language is a part of how we constitute living together and relate to each other. It is integral to the human organism, so to speak.[92] Notwithstanding his views of language used with an absolute sense, Wittgenstein would not deny the use and meaning of language relating to the ethical – itself a kind of ethical language.

Wittgenstein's views on language throughout his work include the idea that we speak of a natural reality that is amenable to control, to techniques, analysis and so on. Facts and factuality are not his targets – nor therefore a fact–value divide – but rather whether of what we speak can be controlled. Some things, including facts, must be accepted as beyond control.[93] These are among the limits of a subject's will and very important to the character of the ethical demands someone will confront. Wittgenstein's conclusion in the lecture is that language cannot overcome or alter the limits that give the ethical demand its intrinsic character. He sought to preserve the personal, absolute and otherworldly character of this demand by securing it from the other ways we use language, from the perspective in which worldly descriptions make sense. What we can do with ethical language remains within similar limits, however much we might hopefully seek to overcome the limits. Limiting ethical language to speaking in the first person is one form of a limit on what can be done in language. It would not preclude confession of one's vices for example. However, neither does the language of confession confer control over anything but the confession, which in a simple sense cannot be contradicted by fact or authority or

[90] MS 139b6.

[91] R. Rhees, "Some Developments in Wittgenstein's View of Ethics," *Philosophical Review* 74.1 (1965): 23.

[92] §4.002.

[93] See Wittgenstein's talk of "rage against *facts*" in *DB* 19.2.[37].

another person.[94] What this example shows is that Wittgenstein's view of ethics in the lecture is serious and severe, but is contrary neither to common sense nor to the common idea of the character of ethics.

We can restate the closing of Wittgenstein's lecture as follows. Talking about the essence of ethics – the absolute good – is strictly nonsense but it indicates something in each of us to which, if one is an ethical being, Wittgenstein relates with, possibly silent, respect.

[94] Cf. §6.422 on the nature of punishment for wrongdoing.

2

Established Text of the Lecture

MS 139b Normalized

Ladies and Gentlemen.
Before I begin to speak about my subject proper let me make a few introductory remarks. I feel I shall have great difficulties in communicating my thoughts to you and I think some of them may be diminished by mentioning them to you beforehand. The first one, which almost I need not mention, is, that English is not my native tongue and my expression therefore often lacks that precision and subtlety which would be desirable if one talks about a difficult subject. All I can do is to ask you to make my task easier by trying to get at my meaning in spite of the faults which I will constantly be committing against the English grammar. The second difficulty I will mention is this, that probably many of you come up to this lecture of mine with slightly wrong expectations. And to set you right in this point I will say a few words about the reason for choosing the subject I have chosen: when your former secretary honoured me by asking me to read a paper to your society, my first thought was that I would certainly do it and my second [2][1] thought was that if I was to have the opportunity to speak you I should speak about something which I am *keen* on communicating to you and that I should not misuse this opportunity to give you a lecture about, say, logic. I call this a misuse for to explain a scientific matter to you it would need a course of lectures and not an hour's paper.

[1] Page turns in the original are marked in square brackets.

Lecture on Ethics: Ludwig Wittgenstein, First Edition. Edited by Edoardo Zamuner, Ermelinda Valentina Di Lascio and D. K. Levy.

Another alternative would have been to give you what is called a popular-scientific lecture, that is a lecture intended to make you believe that you understand a thing which actually you do not understand, and to gratify what I believe to be one of the lowest desires of modern people, namely the superficial curiosity about the latest discoveries of science. I rejected these alternatives and decided to talk to you about a subject which seems to me to be of general importance, hoping that it may help to clear up your thoughts about this subject (even if you should entirely disagree with what I will say about it). My third and last difficulty is one which, in fact, adheres to most lengthy philosophical lectures and it is this, that the hearer is incapable of seeing both the road he is lead and the [3] goal which it leads to. That is to say: he either thinks 'I understand all he says, but what on earth is he driving at' or else he thinks 'I see what he is driving at, but how on earth is he going to get there'. All I can do is, again, to ask you to be patient and to hope that in the end you may see both the way and where it leads to. – I will now begin. My subject, as you know, is ethics and I will adopt the explanation of that term which Prof. Moore has given in his book *Principia Ethica*. He says: 'Ethics is the general enquiry into what is good'. 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 to make you see as clearly as possible what I take to be the subject matter of ethics I will put before you a number of more or less synonymous expressions each of which could be substituted for the above definition, and by enumerating them I want to produce the same sort of effect which Galton produced when he took a number of photos of different [4] faces on the same photographic plate in order to get the picture of the typical features they all had in common. And as by showing to you such a collective photo I could make you see what is the typical – say – Chinese face so if you look through the row of synonyms which I will put before you, you will, I hope, be able to see the characteristic features they all have in common and these are the characteristic features of ethics. Now instead of saying 'Ethics is the enquiry into what is good' I could have said 'Ethics is

the enquiry into what is valuable, or, into what is really important', or I could have said 'Ethics is the enquiry into the meaning of life, or into what makes life worth living, or into the right way of living'. I believe if you look at all these phrases you will get a rough idea as to what it is that ethics is concerned with. Now the first thing that strikes one about all these expressions is that each of them is actually used in two very different senses. I will call them the trivial or relative sense on the one hand and the ethical or absolute sense on the other. If for instance [5] I say that this is a *good* chair this means that the chair serves a certain predetermined purpose and the word 'good' here has only meaning so far as this purpose has been previously fixed upon. In fact the word 'good' in the relative sense simply means coming up to a certain predetermined standard. Thus when we say that this man is a good pianist we mean that he can play pieces of a certain degree of difficulty with a certain degree of dexterity. And similarly if I say that it is *important* for me not to catch cold I mean that catching a cold produces certain describable disturbances in my life and if I say that this is the *right* road I mean that it is the right road relative to a certain goal. Used in this way these expressions do not present any difficult or deep problems. But this is not how ethics uses them. 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 am playing badly but I do not want to play any better' all, the other man could say would be 'Ah then that is all right'. But suppose I had told one of you [6] a preposterous lie and he came up to me and said 'You are behaving like a beast' and then I were to say 'I know I behave badly, but then I do not want to behave any better'. Would he then say 'Ah, then that is all right'? Certainly not; he would say 'Well, you *ought* to want to behave better'. Here you have an absolute judgement of value, whereas the first instance was one of a relative judgement. The essence of this difference seems to be obviously this: every judgement of relative value is a mere statement of facts and can therefore be put in such a form that it loses all the appearance of a judgement of value: instead of saying 'This is the right way to *Granchester*' I could equally well have said 'This is the way

you have to go if you want to get to Granchester in the shortest time'; 'This man is a good runner' simply means that he runs a certain number of miles in a certain number of minutes, and so forth. Now what I wish to contend is, that although all judgements of relative value can be shown to be mere statements of facts, no statement of fact can ever be, or imply, a judgement of *absolute* value. Let me explain this: [7] suppose one of you were an omniscient person and therefore knew all the movements of all the bodies in the world dead or alive and that he also knew all the states of mind of all human beings that ever lived. And suppose this man wrote all he knew in a big book. Then this book would contain the whole description of the world; and what I want to say is, that this book would contain nothing that we would call an *ethical* judgement or anything that would logically imply such a judgement. It would of course contain all relative judgements of value and *all* true scientific propositions and in fact all true propositions that can be made. But all the facts described would, as it were, stand on the same level and in the same way all propositions stand on the same level. There are no propositions which, in any absolute sense, are sublime, important, or trivial. Now perhaps some of you will agree to that and be reminded of Hamlet's words: 'Nothing is either good or bad, but thinking makes it so!' But this again could lead to a misunderstanding. What Hamlet says seems to imply that good [8] and bad, though not qualities of the world outside us, are attributes of our states of mind. But what I mean is that a state of mind, so far as we mean by that a fact which we can describe, is in no ethical sense good or bad. If for instance in our world-book we read the description of a murder with all its details physical and psychological the mere description of these facts will contain nothing which we could call an *ethical* proposition. The murder will be on exactly the same level as any other event, for instance the falling of a stone. Certainly the reading of this description might cause us pain or rage or any other emotion, or we might read about the pain or rage caused by this murder in other people when they heard of it, but there will simply be facts, facts, and facts but no ethics. – And now I must say that if I contemplate what ethics really would have to be

if there were such a science, this result seems to me quite obvious. It seems to me obvious that nothing we could ever think or say should be *the* thing. That we cannot write a scientific book, the subject matter of which could be intrinsically sublime, and above all other subject matters. [9] I can only describe my feeling by the metaphor, that, if a man could write a book on ethics which really was a book on ethics, this book would, with an explosion, destroy all the other books in the world. – Our words, used, as we use them in science, are vessels capable only of containing and conveying meaning and sense, *natural* meaning and sense. Ethics, if it is anything, is supernatural and our words will only express facts; as a teacup will only hold a teacup full of water and if I were to pour out a gallon over it. – I said that so far as facts and propositions are concerned there is only relative value and relative good, right etc. And let me, before I go on, illustrate this by a rather obvious example. The right road is the road which leads to an arbitrarily predetermined end and it is quite clear to us all that there is no sense in talking about the right road apart from such a predetermined goal. Now let us see what we could possibly mean by the expression '*The*, absolutely, right road'. I think it would be the road which *everybody* on seeing it would, *with logical necessity*, have to go, or be ashamed for not going. And similarly the *absolute good*, if it is a describable state of affairs would be one which everybody, [10] independent of his tastes and inclinations, would, *necessarily*, bring about or feel guilty for not bringing about. And I want to say that such a state of affairs is a chimera. No state of affairs has in itself, what I would like to call, the coercive power of an absolute judge. – Then what have all of us who, like myself, are still tempted to use such expressions as 'absolute good', 'absolute value' etc., what have we in mind and what do we try to express? Now whenever I try to make this clear to myself it is natural that I should recall cases in which I would certainly use these expressions and I am then in the situation and which you would be if, for instance, I were to give you a lecture on the psychology of pleasure. What you would do then would be to try and recall some typical situation in which you always felt pleasure. For, bearing this situation in mind, all I should

say to you would become concrete and, as it were, controllable. One man would perhaps choose as his stock example the sensation when taking a walk on a fine summer day. Now in this situation I am if I want to fix my mind on what I mean by absolute or ethical value. And there, in my case, it always happens that the idea of one particular [11] experience presents itself to me which therefore is, in a sense, my experience *par excellence* and this is the reason why, in talking to you now, I will use this experience as my first and foremost example. (As I have said before, this is an entirely personal matter and others would find other examples more striking) I will describe this experience in order, if possible, to make you recall the same or similar experiences, so that we may have a common ground for our investigation. I believe the best way of describing it is to say that when I have it *I wonder at the existence of the world*. And I am then inclined to use such phrases as 'How extraordinary that anything should exist' or 'How extraordinary that the world should exist'. I will mention another experience straightaway which I also know and which others of you might be acquainted with: it is, what one might call, the experience of feeling *absolutely* safe. I mean the state of mind in which one is inclined to say 'I am safe, nothing can injure me whatever happens'. Now let me consider these experiences, for, I believe, they exhibit the very characteristics we try to get clear about. And there the first thing I have to say is, that the verbal expression which we give to these experiences [12] is nonsense! If I say 'I wonder at the existence of the world' I am misusing language. Let me explain this: it has a perfectly good and clear sense to say that I wonder at something being the case, we all understand what it means to say that I wonder at the size of a dog which is bigger than anyone I have ever seen before, or at anything which, in the common sense of the word, is extraordinary. In every such case I wonder at something being the case which I *could* conceive *not* to be the case. I wonder at the size of this dog because I could conceive of a dog of another, namely the ordinary, size, at which I should not wonder. To say 'I wonder at such and such being the case' has only sense if I can imagine it not to be the case. In this sense one can wonder at the existence of, say, a house when one

sees it and has not visited it for a long time and has imagined that it had been pulled down in the meantime. But it is nonsense to say that I wonder at the existence of the world, because I cannot imagine it not existing. I could, of course, wonder at the world around me being as it is. If for instance I had this experience while looking into the blue sky, I could wonder at the sky being blue as opposed to the case when it is clouded. But [13] that is not what I mean. I am wondering at the sky being, *whatever it is*. One might be tempted to say that what I am wondering at is a tautology, namely at the sky being blue or not blue. But then it is just nonsense to say that one is wondering at a tautology. Now the same applies to the other experience which I have mentioned, the experience of absolute safety. We all know what it means in ordinary life to be safe. I am safe in my room, when I cannot be run over by an omnibus. I am safe if I have had whooping cough and cannot therefore get it again. 'To be safe' essentially means that it is physically impossible that certain things should happen to me, and therefore it is nonsense to say that I am safe *whatever* happens. Again this is a misuse of the word 'safe' as the other example was a misuse of the word 'existence' or 'wondering'. Now I want to impress on you that a certain characteristic misuse of our language runs through *all* ethical and religious expressions. All these expressions *seem*, prima facie, to be just *similes*. Thus it seems that when we are using the word *'right'* in an ethical sense, although, what we mean, is not 'right' in its trivial sense, it is something similar, and when [14] we say 'This is a good fellow', although the word 'good' here does not mean what it means in the sentence 'This is a good football player' there seems to be some similarity. And when we say 'This man's life was valuable' we do not mean it in the same sense in which we would speak of some valuable jewellery but there seems to be some sort of analogy. Now all religious terms seem in this sense to be used as similes, or allegorically. For when we speak of God and that he sees everything and when we kneel and pray to him all our terms and actions seem to be parts of a great and elaborate allegory which represents him as a human being of great power whose grace we try to win etc. etc. But this allegory also describes the experiences

which I have just referred to. For, the first of them is, I believe, exactly what people were referring to when they said that God had created the world; and the experience of absolute safety has been described by saying that we feel safe in the hands of God. A third experience of the same kind is that of feeling guilty and again this was described by the phrase that God disapproves of our conduct. Thus in ethical and religious language we seem [15] constantly to be using similes. But a simile must be the simile for *something*. And if I can describe a fact by means of a simile I must also be able to drop the simile and to describe the facts without it. Now in our case as soon as we try to drop the simile and simply to state the facts which stand behind it, we find that there are no such facts. And so, what at first appeared to be a simile, now seems to be mere nonsense. – Now the three experiences which I have mentioned to you (and I could have added others) seem to those who have experienced them, for instance to me, to have in some sense an intrinsic, absolute, value. But when I say they are experiences, surely, they are facts; they have taken place then and there, lasted a certain definite time and consequently are describable. And so from what I have said some minutes ago I must admit it is nonsense to say that they have absolute value. And here I have arrived at the main point of this paper: it is the paradox that an experience, a fact should seem to have absolute value. And I will make my point still more acute by saying 'it is the paradox that an experience, a fact, [16] should seem to have supernatural value'. Now there is a way in which I would be tempted to meet this paradox: let me first consider again our first experience of wondering at the existence of the world and let me describe it in a slightly different way: we all know, what in ordinary life would be called a miracle. It obviously is simply an event the like of which we have never yet seen. Now suppose such an event happened. Take the case that one of you suddenly grew a lion head and began to roar. Certainly that would be as extraordinary a thing as I can imagine. Now whenever we should have recovered from our surprise, what I would suggest would be to fetch a doctor and have the case scientifically investigated and if it were not for hurting him I would have him vivisected. And where

would the miracle have got to? For it is clear that when we look at it in this way everything miraculous has disappeared; unless what we mean by this term is merely that a fact has not yet been explained by science, which again means that we have hitherto failed to group this fact with others in a scientific system. This shows that it is absurd to say 'Science has proved that [17] there are no miracles'. The truth is that the scientific way of looking at a fact is not the way to look at it as a miracle. For, imagine whatever fact you may, it is not in itself miraculous in the absolute sense of that term. For we see now that we have been using the word 'miracle' in a relative and an absolute sense. And I will now describe the experience of wondering at the existence of the world by saying: it is the experience of seeing the world as a miracle. 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. But what then does it mean to be aware of this miracle at some times and not at other times. For all I have said by shifting the expression of the miraculous from an expression *by means of* language to the expression *by the existence* of language, all I have said is again that we cannot express what we want to express and that all we *say* about the absolute miraculous remains nonsense. – Now the answer to all this will seem perfectly clear to many of you. You will say: well, if certain experiences constantly tempt us to attribute a quality to them which we call absolute or ethical value and importance, this simply [18] shows that by these words we *do not* mean nonsense, that after all what we mean by saying that an experience has absolute value *is just a fact like other facts* and that all it comes to is, that we have not yet succeeded in finding the correct logical analysis of what we mean by our ethical and religious expressions. – Now when this is urged against me I at once see clearly, as it were in a flash of light, not only that no description that I can think of would do to describe what I mean by 'absolute value', but that I would reject every significant description that anybody could possibly suggest, *ab initio*, on the ground of its significance. That is to say: 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. My whole tendency and I believe the tendency of all men who ever tried to write or talk ethics or religion was to run against the boundaries of language. This running against the walls of our cage [19] is perfectly, absolutely, hopeless. – Ethics, so far as it springs from the desire to say something about the ultimate meaning of life, the absolute good, the absolute valuable can be no science. What it says does not add to our knowledge in any sense. But it is a document of a tendency in the human mind which I personally cannot help respecting deeply and I would not for my life ridicule it.

3

The Manuscripts of a Lecture on Ethics

(1) "A Lecture on Ethics" was first published in the *Philosophical Review* in 1965.[1] The text is based on a typescript version known as TS 207[2] of Wittgenstein's *Nachlass*.[3] Besides the typescript, two full, handwritten versions of the Lecture are known: the manuscripts MS 139a and MS 139b.[4] Although the two texts are similar in many

[1] L. Wittgenstein, "A Lecture on Ethics," *Philosophical Review* 74.1 (1965): 3–12.

[2] The numbering of the manuscripts that constitute Wittgenstein's *Nachlass* is owed to Georg Henrik von Wright who, with Elizabeth Anscombe and Rush Rhees, was one of Wittgenstein's literary executors. In his 1969 essay "The Wittgenstein Papers," von Wright provides a numbered catalogue of all manuscripts known at the time. He distinguishes three categories of texts: handwritten manuscripts, typescripts, and dictations. It is customary to use the symbols MS, TS, and D to refer to each category, as in MS 102, TS 202, and D 302, for example. See G.H. von Wright, "The Wittgenstein Papers," *Philosophical Review* 78.4 (1969): 483–503. Reprinted with corrections in G.H. von Wright, *Wittgenstein* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1982), pp. 34−62 and in L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Occasions: 1912–1951*, ed. A. Nordmann and J. Klagge (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993), pp. 480−510.

[3] L. Wittgenstein, *Wittgenstein's Nachlass*, Bergen Electronic Edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

[4] We use the word "Lecture," capitalized, to refer to any handwritten or typed version of the paper published in the *Philosophical Review* that has been included in Wittgenstein's *Nachlass*. The word "lecture," not capitalized, is used to refer to Wittgenstein's talk to The Heretics on Sunday, November 17, 1929.

Lecture on Ethics: Ludwig Wittgenstein, First Edition. Edited by Edoardo Zamuner, Ermelinda Valentina Di Lascio and D. K. Levy.

respects, MS 139a is of a more provisional and improvised nature than MS 139b. There are frequent corrections, alterations and marginal notes. MS 139a is generally regarded as the first draft of the Lecture because of its more tentative nature. We know from textual and anecdotal sources that, as part of the thinking and writing process, Wittgenstein often had some of his writings typed by others. The following picture therefore suggests itself. There seem to be three versions of the Lecture: two manuscripts and one typescript. Of these, MS 139a and TS 207 appear to be, respectively, the earliest and latest versions.

This edition of the Lecture questions the accuracy of this picture. We present what we believe to be a draft of the Lecture prior to MS 139a. This proto-draft consists of two pages of crossed-out notes written on the versos of MS 139a15–16,[5] which have generally been overlooked in other editions. We therefore present not three, but four versions of the Lecture in the following chronological order: proto-draft, MS 139a, MS 139b, and TS 207.

This way of ordering the four versions may tempt one into thinking that MS 139b is an intermediate version of the Lecture and TS 207 is the actual text of the lecture. We believe this picture is also incorrect and we present MS 139b as the text of the lecture.[6] We also argue that TS 207 was almost certainly realized after the delivery of the lecture. Finally, we consider evidence to the effect that the typist of TS 207 might have been a non-native English-speaker, probably

[5] For brevity, we adopt the following convention. When we refer to specific pages, the page number appears right after the manuscript's catalogue number, as in MS 139b1 or MS 139aIV. As we note in the main text, the first five pages of MS 139a are numbered with Roman numerals. The remaining pages of the same manuscript and all pages of MS 139b are numbered with Arabic numerals.

[6] Brian McGuinness makes a similar suggestion. He notes, "This [i.e. MS 139b] was evidently the manuscript promised to Mrs Stonborough in 1931. It is a duplicate of 139a, containing fewer corrections and second thoughts, so perhaps is the final version used for the delivery of the lecture." B. McGuinness, *Approaches to Wittgenstein: Collected Papers* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 275.

without philosophical training, who typed TS 207 by directly looking at MS 139b.

In what follows, we discuss evidence for the claim that the proto-draft was written prior to MS 139a and that MS 139b is the text that Wittgenstein read when he gave his talk. We begin with some introductory remarks about the transcriptions of the four versions. Next, we discuss the time relation between versions and present textual evidence that the proto-draft was written prior to MS 139a. We conclude with a discussion of the claim that MS 139b is the text of Wittgenstein's lecture.

(2) The present edition provides entirely new diplomatic transcriptions of the four versions of the Lecture. Since we believe MS 139b to be the text of Wittgenstein's lecture to The Heretics, we present this manuscript in both diplomatic and normalized transcriptions. The diplomatic transcriptions are representations of the visual appearance of the texts. They record deleted words and letters, orthographic mistakes, rejected formulations, marginal comments, underlinings, deletion marks and page numbers, as they appear in the originals. A system of symbols is used to represent these features of the texts. A description of the manuscripts and an explanation of the symbols are given in chapters 4 and 5.

A reminder to the reader: The first five pages of MS 139a are numbered with Roman numerals. The remaining pages of the same manuscript and all pages of MS 139b are numbered with Arabic numerals. In what follows, we refer to the first five pages of MS 139a with Roman numerals and to the other pages with Arabic numerals. Since the two pages of the proto-draft bear no numbers, we refer to them as the versos, respectively, of pages 15 and 16 of MS 139a. For reasons that will become clear in the discussion, we believe that the text written on the verso of page 16 precedes that on the verso of page 15. We therefore give the diplomatic transcription of the text on the verso of page 16 first, and that of the text on the verso of page 15 next.

The diplomatic transcriptions of the four versions of the Lecture were realized in several stages. First, MS 139a, MS 139b and TS 207

were transcribed from the digital facsimiles of the Bergen Electronic Edition and edited in a diplomatic version. These transcriptions were then checked against the high-definition facsimiles available at the Wittgenstein Archives of the University of Bergen. Finally, direct examination of the originals held at the Wren Library of Trinity College, Cambridge, allowed us to improve the transcriptions of the proto-draft, MS 139a and TS 207.

The normalized transcription of MS 139b is also entirely new and provides the text of Wittgenstein's talk in a readable form. Although the original contains some incorrect and non-idiomatic expressions, we decided to leave the English unmodified, with corrected orthography the only exception. The reason for this editorial decision lies in Wittgenstein's somewhat apologetic remarks in the opening of the Lecture:

> [. . .] I feel I shall have
> great difficulties in communicating
> my thoughts to you & I think
> some of them may be deminished
> by mentioning them to you beforehand.
> The first one, which al~~l~~most I needn't
> mention, is, that English is not my
> native tongue & my expression
> therefore often lacks that precision
> & subtelty which would be desirable
> if one talks about a difficult
> subject. All I can do is to ask
> you to make my task ~~to~~ easier
> by [**–**| trying to get at my meaning
> ~~can~~ inspite of the faults which
> I will constantly be commiting
> against the English grammar.][7]

[7] MS 139b1. Passages from the manuscripts and typescript are quoted in diplomatic transcription.

If Wittgenstein's grammar and syntax were corrected, these remarks would become unintelligible and Wittgenstein's own struggle for precision and subtlety would no longer be apparent.

Quotation marks and capital letters were added when necessary. The existing German-style quotation marks were changed to single quotation marks. Wittgenstein's own underlinings were rendered in italicized type. Punctuation, dashes, indentations and paragraphs were retained without additions. The diplomatic transcriptions of the proto-draft and the three full versions of the Lecture (i.e. MS 139a, MS 139b and TS 207) are given in chapters 6–9. A table explaining the symbols used in the diplomatic transcriptions is found in chapter 5.

(3) The chronological order of the three full versions was established on the following textual ground. The final draft of MS 139b (i.e. the text considered with Wittgenstein's own corrections and changes as seen in the diplomatic transcription) is almost identical to that of TS 207. The same similarity exists between the first draft of MS 139b (i.e. the text considered without Wittgenstein's own corrections and changes) and the final draft of MS 139a. On this basis, it seems safe to conclude that the first draft of MS 139b originates directly from the final draft of MS 139a and TS 207 originates directly from the final draft of MS 139b. The close similarity between the three full versions of the Lecture suggests that no intermediate versions are missing.

With this picture in mind, we now examine the main evidence for the claim that the proto-draft was written prior to MS 139a. As noted above, the proto-draft consists of two pages of crossed-out notes written on the versos of MS 139a15–16. The verso of page 15 contains a fairly continuous text in which Wittgenstein discusses different uses of the verb "to wonder." The same discussion occurs on MS 139a12–13, with one notable exception: the examples of wondering at an unusually dressed man and a strange sound, in the proto-draft, are substituted by the example of wondering at the unusually big size of a dog, in MS 139a.

The text on the verso of page 16 is more fragmentary and contains a sketch of a large part of MS 139a. At the top of the page,

Wittgenstein writes down a list of definitions of ethics: "Ethic is the inquiry into what / is good / Ethic is the enquiry into what / is valuable. / Ethic is if anything the natural / science of value." The first two definitions appear on MS 139aIII.

On the upper left margin of the verso of page 16, Wittgenstein jots down some notes in small handwriting: "Galstonsche Photogr. / Sense of Life / What makes life worth living / Worth. value importance[.]" The notes are extended into MS 139aIV.

The next point written down on the verso of page 16 reads: "Distinction between relative & abso- / lute value. Examples." Wittgenstein discusses the distinction and provides examples on MS 139aIV–7.

In the second half of the verso of page 16, Wittgenstein writes, "No Statement of fact is or implies / an absolute judgment / Science & the whole realm of / propositions contains no absolute / no ethical judgment." These remarks are expounded on MS 139a7–9.

The last eleven lines of the verso of page 16 introduce the thought that the expression "I wonder at the existence of the world" is nonsense. Wittgenstein expands on the same thought on MS 139a10–12.

Textual evidence therefore indicates that the content of the proto-draft agrees with the content of roughly the first thirteen pages of MS 139a.

As noted above, the verso of page 16 is of a more fragmentary and tentative nature than the verso of page 15. In spite of this stylistic difference, textual evidence suggests that the two pages are, in fact, consecutive. At the end of the verso of page 16, Wittgenstein notes: "The experience of w[a|o]n- / dering at the Existence of the World. / Let us analyse this verbal expres- / sion of my experience. It is nonsense. / Expression of existence & possibility [.]" At the top of the verso of page 15, we read the following sentence fragment: "of scientific expression they are a / misuse of language in fackt they are / nonsense." If we collate the two texts and convert them into a normalized version, we obtain the following text:

> The experience of wondering at the existence of the world. Let us analyse this verbal expression of my experience. It is nonsense.

> Expression of existence and possibility of scientific expression they are a misuse of language in fact they are nonsense.

The sentence "Expression of existence and possibility of scientific expression they are a misuse of language in fact they are nonsense" is ill-formed. This is not surprising given that the two pages contain schematic and quickly written notes. In spite of this linguistic anomaly, the two texts are thematically continuous, for they both allude to the thought that certain linguistic expressions are nonsense. The supposition that the two pages are continuous explains the thematic continuity between pages 16 and 15 of the proto-draft. In addition, it explains the thematic and structural continuity between the proto-draft and the two handwritten versions, where the structure of the argument follows the content and order of the notes in the proto-draft.

There is reason to believe that the proto-draft was revised prior to being crossed out. This might show that Wittgenstein reviewed the draft and then decided to start afresh. We suggest that the following writing process took place. Wittgenstein first jotted some notes on unnumbered paper sheets. These are the notes we read in the proto-draft, with the notes on the verso of page 16 preceding those on the verso of page 15. Wittgenstein then crossed out the notes and started afresh with MS 139a. From this draft he wrote MS 139b. This is a much clearer text, in which he decided between the alternatives he had left undecided in MS 139a. He improved the style and chose better examples. He also abridged the text by removing some sentences. At some stage between the delivery of the lecture and its publication in the *Philosophical Review*, TS 207 was typed.

(4) The editorial decision to present MS 139b as the text of Wittgenstein's talk is based on the following considerations. We know from textual and anecdotal sources that Wittgenstein was often dissatisfied with his written expression, even when he wrote in German, and in several instances he made alterations to typed

versions of his writings.[8] The opening lines of the Lecture suggest that he was equally dissatisfied with his written English: "English is not my / native tongue & my expression / therefore often lacks that precision / & subtelty which would be desirable / if one talks about a difficult / subject."[9] It therefore seems plausible to expect that he would make at least some alterations to a typed version of the Lecture, but he did not. The few changes present are corrections of typing errors and nothing more, printed in a careful hand that is certainly not Wittgenstein's.[10] This seems at odds not only with his working habits but also with the opening lines of the Lecture.

By contrast, MS 139b contains several alterations, some of which were probably made at a later time when Wittgenstein revised his text. Of these alterations, many are meant to improve the style and grammar, as if Wittgenstein were trying to achieve the precision and subtlety to which he refers in the opening of the Lecture. Despite the alterations, MS 139b contains a fairly legible text that Wittgenstein could have easily read to his audience.

An objection to the claim that MS 139b is the text of Wittgenstein's talk can be raised on the basis of textual evidence other than the Lecture. In a letter to Wittgenstein, Margaret (Gretl) Stonborough, Wittgenstein's sister, briefly refers to a lecture (*Vortrag*) – presumably the one Wittgenstein gave to The Heretics.[11] She writes:

[8] See, e.g., TS 201a.

[9] MS 139b1.

[10] Joachim Schulte (personal communication) brought to our attention that the amendment of "Gallstone" with the correct "Galton" is not a correction of a typing error but a correction of Wittgenstein's mistaken spelling, copied from the manuscript. This seems to be a typical English correction. Even if we have reason to believe that a non-English typist without philosophical training typed TS 207, an English-speaker probably made this correction.

[11] L. Wittgenstein, *Briefwechsel*, ed. M. Seekircher, B. McGuinness, and A. Unterkircher, Innsbruck Electronic Edition (Innsbruck, 2004).

Dear Luki,

Of course, just when my letter had left my mouth! . . . But it's always like that. – Your letter made me very happy.[12] And I'm even more looking forward to the lecture. Something to look forward to. A great joy. I'm doing just fine. Shot through the mouth yesterday,[13] riding on a high horse today going to Kobenzl in the car with Marguerite![14] By the way I don't really want to be nursed by Marguerite. Your feelings towards her make her presence so refreshing to you. I'm well acquainted with this from another case! When I'm ill I would need a servant who calmly and skillfully performs the necessary tasks for me & and then somebody whom I love & who loves me, and where the latter should come to light in an extraordinary fashion. This reminds me of a joke in the Rire, where in a gramophone shop the commis says to the lady: "C'est convenue Madame, "Un baiser voluptueux" "Une nuit d'amour" vous aurez tout cela ce soir." I'm noticing I'm getting obscene, and I shall give my letter a different direction. – Jerome is leaving New York on Saturday & is coming straight here. I'm telling you, I'm shitting myself.[15] – And I thank you very much

[12] The editors of Wittgenstein's letters note that the letter is now lost.

[13] Joachim Schulte (personal communication) notes that the phrase "Gestern durch den Mund geschossen" ("Shot through the mouth yesterday") derives from Wilhelm Hauff's poem *Reiters Morgenlied* (*A Cavalry Man's Morning Song*): "Gestern noch auf stolzen Rossen, / Heute durch die Brust geschossen, / Morgen in das kühle Grab." ("Yesterday still on proud horses, / Today shot through the chest, / Tomorrow in the cold grave."), which was well known and much parodied at the time. Schulte suggests that the opening lines indicate that Gretl's letter was dictated. This would explain the use of the expression "kaum war mein Brief dem Mund entflohn!" ("just when my letter had left my mouth!") in the first line. He also points out that there seems to be a back-reference between the phrase "Gestern durch den Mund geschossen" ("Shot through the mouth yesterday") and the opening phrase "kaum war mein Brief dem Mund entflohn!" ("just when my letter had left my mouth!").

[14] Marguerite Respinger, with whom Wittgenstein had a romantic relationship.

[15] The original German expression "ich habe einen Schiss, der in kein Haus geht" has a more complex and vivid meaning than the English "I'm shitting myself."

for the manuscript, I could not easily imagine a greater joy. Hugging you

Yours,

Gretl[16]

Although the letter bears no date, the editors of Wittgenstein's letters speculate it was written after November 17, 1929, the date of Wittgenstein's talk, probably because of the reference to a *Vortrag* in the opening lines. The last sentence of the letter suggests that Wittgenstein had previously sent a manuscript to Margaret, for which she thanks him. Since we know from von Wright's catalogue of Wittgenstein's papers that MS 139b was seen in Margaret's house

[16] The German text of the letter reads as follows:

Lieber Luki

Natürlich, kaum war mein Brief dem Mund entflohn! . . . Aber das ist ja immer so. – Dein Brief hat mich sehr gefreut. Und auf den Vortrag freu ich mich erst recht. Something to look forward to. Eine große Freude. Es geht mir schon sehr anständig. Gestern durch den Mund geschossen, heute schon auf stolzen Rossen mit der Marguerite per Auto am Kobenzl gewesen! Übrigens möchte ich mich gar nicht von der Marguerite pflegen lassen. Dein Gefühl ihr gegenüber macht Dir Ihre Anwesenheit so erquickend. Ich kenne das von einem anderen Fall her so gut! Ich brauchte, wenn ich krank bin einen Diener der mir ruhig & geschickt die notwendigen Handgriffe leistete & dann jemanden den ich liebe & der mich liebt, wobei das Letztere in aussergewöhnlicher Weise zu Tage kommen sollte. Das erinnert mich an einen Witz im Rire, wo im Gramophon-Geschäft der Commis zur Dame sagt: "C'est convenue Madame, "Un baiser voluptueux" "Une nuit d'amour" vous aurez tout cela ce soir." Ich merke dass ich obszön werde und gebe meinem Brief eine andere Wendung. – Jerome fährt Samstag von New York weg & fährt direkt hierher. Ich sag Dir, ich habe einen Schiss, der in kein Haus geht. – Und ich danke Dir sehr für das Manuskript, eine grössere Freude konnte ich mir nicht leicht vorstellen. Es umarmt Dich

Deine

Gretl

in Gmunden in 1952,[17] it is tempting to think that both the *Vortrag* to which Margaret refers in the opening lines and the manuscript she mentions in the last sentence of her letter are MS 139b. Since the date of the letter is merely speculative, one could suppose that Wittgenstein had sent MS 139b to Margaret before delivering his lecture, and therefore he could not have read MS 139b to The Heretics.

This argument is problematic, as it rests on the assumption that the manuscript mentioned in the last sentence of the letter is a version of the Lecture. It is, however, far from obvious that the words "manuscript" and "lecture" (*Vortrag*) refer to the same text. For it would seem odd that at one point Margaret says that she looks forward to Wittgenstein's *Vortrag* and at another she thanks Wittgenstein for sending the manuscript. While the remark about the *Vortrag* occurs in the beginning of the letter, the sentence about the manuscript occurs in the end, after a long diversion, and it begins with "and" as if to introduce a new topic. These aspects of the text suggest that the manuscript that Margaret thanks Wittgenstein for sending may not be the *Vortrag* to which she looks forward.

In her remark about the *Vortrag*, Margaret refers to a previous letter by Wittgenstein, now lost. She writes, "Your letter made me very happy. And I'm even more looking forward to the lecture." One may suppose that, in his letter, Wittgenstein had promised that he would send or bring the Lecture to Margaret next time he went to Vienna. The supposition assumes more value, given that Wittgenstein was indeed in Vienna in December 1929.[18] The remark about the *Vortrag* could therefore mean that Margaret was looking

[17] Von Wright, "The Wittgenstein Papers." The manuscript was subsequently lost until 1993, when it was found in the literary estate of Rudolf Koder. In a note dating from March 1, 1972, Elisabeth Koder writes that she and her husband had received MS 139b, a typescript of the *Tractatus*, a manuscript of the *Philosophical Investigations*, and one of Wittgenstein's diaries from the 1930s as a keepsake from Margaret after Wittgenstein's death. J. Koder, "Verzeichnis der Schriften Ludwig Wittgensteins im Nachlaß Rudolf und Elisabeth Koder," *Mitteilungen aus dem Brenner-Archiv* (1993), pp. 52–54.

[18] F. Waismann, *Wittgenstein and the Vienna Circle*, ed. B. McGuinness, trans. J. Schulte and B. McGuinness (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1979), pp. 19 and 115–137.

forward to receiving or reading the Lecture that Wittgenstein had supposedly promised he would send or bring to her. It is important to note that the supposition accommodates von Wright's record that MS 139b was seen in Margaret's house in 1952.

As it stands, the letter does not prove that Wittgenstein sent MS 139b to Margaret before giving his lecture. This conclusion provides only partial support to the claim that MS 139b is the text of Wittgenstein's talk, as he could have read another version. Since there is no textual evidence that intermediate versions are missing, MS 139a and TS 207 are the only other texts that Wittgenstein could have used. MS 139a is, however, too tentative for public reading. It seems implausible that if he had to choose between two handwritten versions, Wittgenstein would have chosen MS 139a over MS 139b to give his talk. MS 139b is of a less provisional and improvised nature than MS 139a. There are fewer corrections, changes and cancellations. This is clearly because MS 139b is a later and stylistically more polished version of the Lecture. As such, it would be more suitable for public reading.

By the same token, however, TS 207 would be even more suitable, since it is a clean typed text, and very easy to read. The problem is that TS 207 seems far too clean for Wittgenstein's working habits. As we know, Wittgenstein used to make corrections and alterations to typescript versions of his work. It therefore seems odd he did not make any alterations to TS 207 before giving his lecture. Although TS 207 does contain some handwritten orthographic corrections, they are printed in a careful hand that is certainly not Wittgenstein's. Moreover, we know that Wittgenstein gave other public lectures during his philosophical career.[19] Unlike the Lecture, they were

[19] In November 1912, Wittgenstein read a paper to the Moral Sciences Club. This was probably the first of several short communications that he gave to this and other societies. In 1929, Wittgenstein wrote "Some Remarks on Logical Form," which was supposed to be read at the Joint Session of the Mind Association and the Aristotelian Society, held in Nottingham on July 13, 1929. Wittgenstein read a completely different paper instead, on the notion of the infinite in mathematics. In April 1941, he was invited to deliver a lecture at the British Academy. Although he wrote notes for a draft of the lecture, known as the "Philosophical Lecture," the talk was never delivered.

mostly directed at philosophers. There is no record that any of these had been typed for delivery. It would therefore be very uncharacteristic of him to use a typed script to give a talk.

In addition, there is something notable about TS 207. On the upper margin of the first page, we read two handwritten notes: "Manuscript von Dr. Ludwig Wittgenstein" on the left side, and "Anscombe / 1+3 / no hurry" on the right side. The hands are different but neither is Wittgenstein's.[20] The first note does not seem to be an inventory label as TS 207 is, in fact, a typescript. This could be an indication that the typescript is a record of MS 139b realized to preserve the manuscript. Given that TS 207 retains some of the orthographic mistakes present in MS 139b, we should think of the typescript not as a careful transcription of MS 139b, but rather as a record of its content and nothing more. In other words, we should not regard TS 207 as a low quality normalized transcription of MS 139b or as an even lower quality diplomatic transcription of MS 139b. Rather, we should regard it as a tentative or provisional record of the content of MS 139b. As we will see later in the discussion, it is possible that the tentative nature of TS 207 relates to the typist being a non-native English-speaker without philosophical training.

The supposition that TS 207 might be a record of MS 139b gains more credence given the presence, at the Wren Library of Trinity College, Cambridge, of a further typescript, which is a transcription of MS 139a. We refer to this as the "MS 139a typescript." This could also be a record realized to preserve MS 139a, with the difference that the MS 139a typescript is closer than TS 207 to being a normalized transcription of the original. The supposition, however, should not tempt one into thinking that the two typescripts (i.e. TS 207 and the MS 139a typescript) were realized by the same person or at the same time. For they could serve the same recording purpose and still be totally unrelated, as several aspects of the typescripts seem to suggest; for example, they were not typed on the same type of

[20] Joachim Schulte (personal communication) notes that the inscription "Manuscript von Dr. Ludwig Wittgenstein" is written in a German hand.

paper. Secondly, while the person who realized the MS 139a typescript did not copy any of the orthographic mistakes present in MS 139a, the person who typed TS 207 copied some of the mistakes present in MS 139b. This suggests that the two typists took a different approach to the typing of the originals. In the case of TS 207, the different approach might be the result of the typist being a non-native English-speaker with no philosophical training. Thirdly, unlike TS 207, the MS 139a typescript is not listed as an item of Wittgenstein's *Nachlass*. Finally, one should resist the temptation to assimilate the manuscripts of the Lecture with other manuscripts by Wittgenstein, which were in fact typed or dictated for typing. While the Lecture was very close to Wittgenstein's heart, it was not part of his research, for he did not write anything extensive on ethics after his 1929 lecture.

There is reason to believe that Wittgenstein did not type or dictate TS 207. Whoever typed it consistently misreads the word "tautology" and mistypes it as "tontology." Wittgenstein would not misread his own handwriting and he would not misread or mistype, twice on the same page, a word so important to his philosophy. The same word is spelt correctly in the manuscripts. The typist also omits the sentence "And here I have arrived at / the main point of this paper [. |:] it is / the paradox that an experience, / a fact should ↓seem to↓ have absolute / value," which appears in both manuscripts and concerns the central point of the Lecture. This could, however, be a clerical error owing to the curiosity of the second omitted sentence beginning with the same words and at the same point on the line as the preceding sentence. There are a few typing errors, some of which have been corrected by hand after typing. Only some of Wittgenstein's orthographic mistakes in MS 139b were corrected during typing; for example, "omnibus," which Wittgenstein capitalizes in MS 139b, is correctly changed to lower case; "immagine" is changed to "imagine" and "vesels" to "vessels." The evidence therefore suggests that the typist might have been a non-native English-speaker, probably without philosophical training, who typed TS 207 by directly looking at MS 139b.

4

Description of the Manuscripts

MS 139a

The manuscript of MS 139a is held at the Wren Library of Trinity College, Cambridge. The text bears neither title nor date. It comprises 12 loose sheets written in pencil, both in recto and in verso, with many corrections and marks. The sheets measure 204 × 330 mm. The text is continuous, with no indentations or paragraphs (except at lines 1−2 of page 1). The pages are numbered in the upper right corner, with Roman numerals until the fifth page, and with Arabic numerals from the sixth page on. The versos of pages 15−16 bear no page numbers. The sheets are ruled and cut out from a notebook, as their jagged margin suggests.

The 21 written pages have 34 lines each. Exceptions are page 21, with 7 lines; pages 2, 10 and 14, with a line of text written in the lower margin; page 13, with two lines of text also in the lower margin; and page 17, with 32 lines, two of which are written in square brackets in the middle of the page. These lines are written in a lighter and more hurried hand. The text between brackets is a quotation from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* that fills the gap Wittgenstein left on page 8 at line 19, probably because he could not recall the exact wording of the text when he wrote the first draft of the manuscript.

The verso of page 15 contains 26 lines; the verso of page 16 contains 30 lines. The text is crossed out on both pages. This is the

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proto-draft of the Lecture. Traces of erased diagrams or drawings are visible under the written text on both pages, which indicates that the sheets were reused. Both pages contain corrections.

The verso of page 17 presents a diagram or drawing in landscape position. The page contains dozens of lines, most of which are straight and positioned parallel to the edges of the page. There are many recognizable shapes, including cross-hatched grids, squares, rectangles, circles, pairs of parallel lines and bracket marks that seem to indicate groups. The content is oriented in landscape position with the original binding edge at the bottom. The phrase "The order of events" is written in the upper left margin; the word "hill" is written in the lower part of the left half of the page. Another word fragment – "Fr." – is written in the lower part of the right half of the page. Although it is unclear whether the drawing relates to the content of the Lecture, it seems unlikely, given that the sheets were reused. The drawing could be a squiggle unrelated to the Lecture that Wittgenstein did not care to erase before he started jotting down his notes.

The manuscript is accompanied by a typescript version of the same text that is not listed in von Wright's catalogue of Wittgenstein's papers. The text bears the inscription "L. Wittgenstein. / Lecture on Ethics / According to the manuscript which Wittgenstein gave to R. G. Townsend." The typescript appears to be a carbon copy; it comprises 9 loose sheets, numbered with typed Roman numerals. The paper type differs from the one used for TS 207. The text is a polished transcription of MS 139a. Wittgenstein's own corrections, changes and overwritten words have been transcribed. The quotation from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* has been inserted in the right place. Both punctuation and orthography have been corrected.

MS 139b

The manuscript of MS 139b is held at the Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Vienna. The text bears neither title nor date. The manuscript comprises 10 loose sheets written in pencil, both in recto and in verso, except for the last page, which is written solely in

recto. There are several corrections and marks. The sheets are ruled and probably cut out from a notebook. The manuscript comprises 19 pages numbered with Arabic numerals in the upper right corner. Each page contains 34 fully written lines, except pages 6, 8–12, 14 and 17, where a line is added in the lower margin and for page 19, which contains only 12 lines. There are no indentations or paragraphs, except at lines 1–2 of page 1.

TS 207

The typescript TS 207 is held at the Wren Library of Trinity College, Cambridge. The text bears neither title nor date. It comprises 10 sheets typed in recto, with few typed corrections and some corrections printed in pencil in a hand that is not Wittgenstein's. The sheets measure 224 × 285 mm. They are numbered with Arabic numerals typed in the upper left corner and handwritten in the upper right corner. Some (pages 1–4, 9–10) contain 29 lines; others (pages 5–8) contain 30 lines. There are two indentations (on pages 1 and 2). Dashes (— and —) are typed at eight different points in the text. On the upper margin of the first page the note "Manuscript von Dr. Ludwig Wittgenstein" is written on the left side; the note "Anscombe / 1+3 / no hurry" is written on the right side. The hands are different, but neither is Wittgenstein's. Of the two, the first note appears to be written in a German hand.[1]

[1] We owe this suggestion to Joachim Schulte (personal communication).

5

Symbols Used in the Diplomatic Transcriptions

Corrections

[so | it]	"it" is written or typed over "so"
[: | .]	"." is written over ":"
[= | ow]	"ow" is written over something which is not readable
W‹h›en	"‹h›" is an added letter
subject ↓ proper ↓	Insertion with a caret mark
subject proper	Insertion without a caret mark
phrases \ Expressions	"Expressions" is a word inserted as a possible alternative to "phrases"
do | not	A space must be inserted
will ↓ hold ← only	The words must be transposed
pour	Text overwritten by hand on an erased typed text

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Deletion marks

~~There~~	Single deletion mark
~~They~~	Double or multiple deletion mark. The same symbol has been used to indicate the overtyped deletion marks "XXX" which occur in *TS* 207. The multiple deletion mark has once also been reproduced as \\.
[═]	Text deleted, but not readable
[═══]	Text deleted but not readable, consisting of one word
[▫]	Text deleted but not readable, consisting of one single letter
[*able*]	Readable part of a text which has been erased and overwritten
	Mark used for crossing out the entire page

Underlinings

Absolute	Dash underline
above all other	Single underline
sublime	Double underline
apart	Wavy underline
acute	Double wavy underline

Other symbols

*	Indicates that the line is written in the margin of the page

6

Proto-Draft

Diplomatic Transcription

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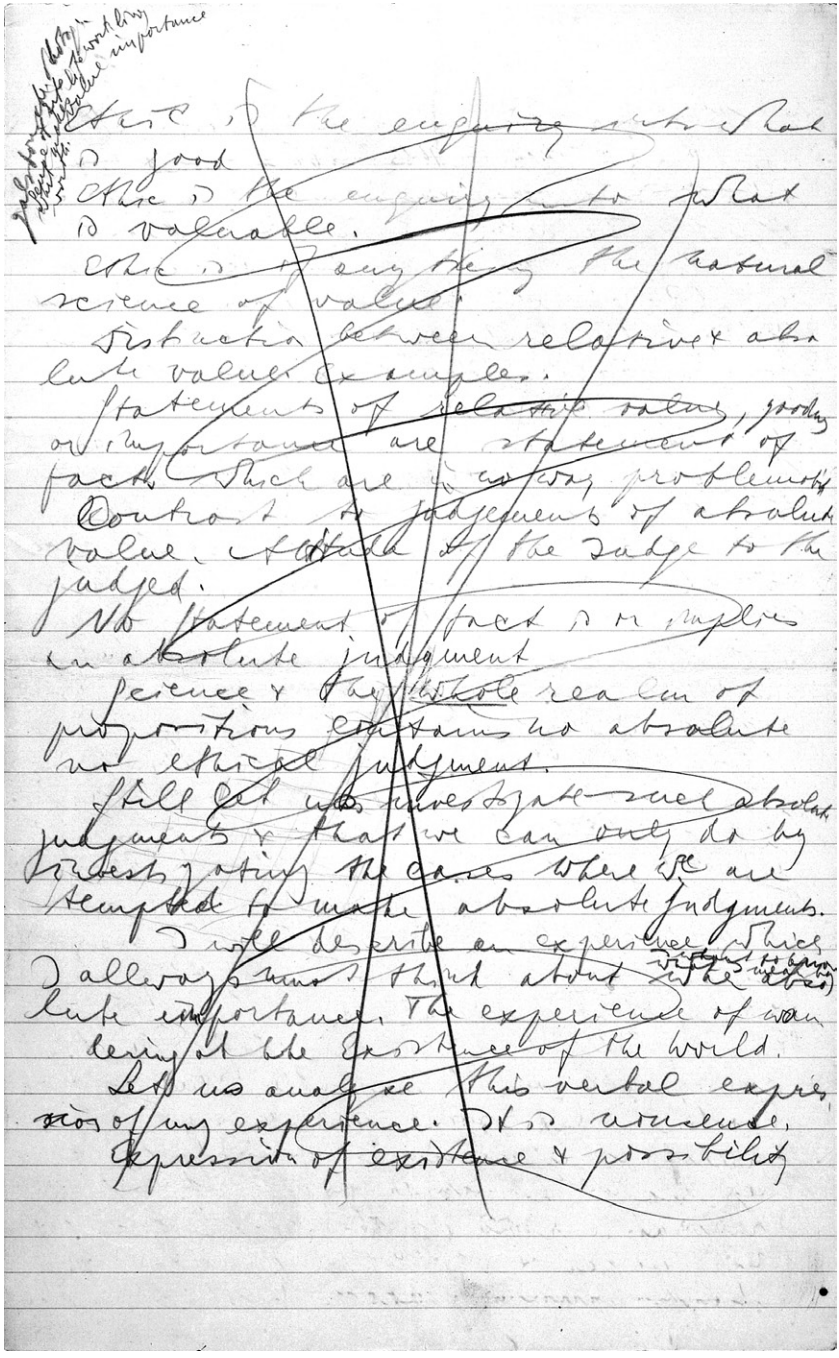

Facsimile of MS 139a page 16 verso

* Galstonsche Photogr.
* Sense of Life
* What makes life worth living
* Worth. value importance

Ethic is the enquiry into what
is good
Ethic is the enquiry into what
is valuable.
Ethic is if anything the natural
science of value.
Distinction between relative & abso-
lute value. Examples.
Statements of relat‹i›ve value, goodnes
or importance are statement of
facts which are in no way problematik
[K|C]ontrast to judgements of absolute
value. Att‹i›tude of the Judge to the
judged.
No Statement of fact is or implies
an absolute judgment
Science & the whole realm of
propositions contains no absolute
no ethical judgment.
Still let u[us|s] investigate such absolute
judgments & that we can only do by
investigating the cases where we are
tempted to make absolute judgments.
I will describe an experience which
I allways must think about when I whant to know what I mean by abso
lute importance. The experience of w[a|o]n-
dering at the Existence of the World.
Let us analyse this verbal expres-
sion of my experience. It is nonsense.
Expression of existence & possibility

of scientific expression they are a misuse of language in fact they are nonsense. The word to wonder has of course a good sense which we all understand it means to wonder at a certain state of things to wonder that such & such is the case. It has a good & clear sense to say that I wonder at some unusually dressed man (as I have never seen before) at some strange sound etc etc. It is also clear that it means to wonder at the existence of say a building which for ~~and~~ thought had been pulled down long ago for here it has a meaning to say I do not think that this building still exists or to say that it does exist. On the other hand to wonder at ~~not~~ to say that colour & sound exists & for this reason it is nonsense to say that I wonder at their existence. Now the correct expression of what we mean when we say that colour & sound etc exist is not a proposition at all but really the vocabulary

of scientific expression they are a
misuse of language in fackt they are
nonsense. The word to wonder has
of course a good sense which we all
understand if it means to wonder at
a certain state of things to wonder
that such & such is the case. It
has a good & cl‹e›ar sense to say
that I w[a | o]nder at some un[s | u]sually
dressed man as I have never seen
before o[n | r] at some strainge sound etc etc
It is also clear what it means to
w[a | o]nder at the existence of say a
building which you ~~had~~ thought
had been pulled down long ago
for here it has a meaning to say
I did not think that this building
still existed or to say that it does
exist. ~~On~~ On the other hand its nonsense
↓ & not a prop at all ↓ to say that colour & sound
exists & for this reason its nonsense
to say that I wonder at their
existence. Now the correct \ wright expression
of what we mean when we say that
colour & sound etc exist is not a
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vocabulary

7

MS 139a
Diplomatic Transcription

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139 A

I

Mr Chairman Ladies & Gentlemen.

Before I begin to speak about my subject, let me say a few introductory words. I feel there will be great difficulties in communicating the thoughts which I want to communicate, to you & I want to mention some of these difficulties because I think that this may possibly help me to overcome them. The first I will mention - but by no means the greatest - is that, as you know, I am not my native language & my expression will therefore not be as clear & precise as it would be desirable when one has something very difficult to communicate. Please help me in my trying of making myself understood by overlooking as much as possible the faults against English grammar which will constantly occur in my speech. The second difficulty which I will mention & it seems to me to be by far more serious to explain it I must tell you why I have chosen the subject which I have chosen. When your former secretary honoured me by asking me to read a paper to your society, the first thought that came into my head was that I would certainly do it & the second was this: I said to myself that if I had the opportunity of talking to a room full of

Facsimile of MS 139a page 1

I

[Ge|Mr] Chairman Ladies & Gentlemen!
Before I begin to speak about
my subject proper let me say a few intro-
ductory words. I feel ↓~~that~~ I↓ ~~there~~ will ~~be~~ have ~~very~~ great
difficulties in communicating the thoughts
which I want to communicate, to you
& I want to mention some of these
difficulties bec[o|a]use I think that ‹this›
~~they~~ ~~can~~ may possibly ~~thereby be~~ diminish~~ed~~ ↓them↓. The
first I will mention – but ~~which is~~ ~~I believe,~~
~~is~~ by no means the greatest - is that‹,› as
you‹,› know English~~e~~ is not my native
language & my expression will therefore
not be as clear & precise as it would
be desirable when one has something
very difficult to communicate. Please
help me in my task of making myself
understood by ~~abstracting~~ overlooking as much
as possible ~~from~~ the faults against ~~the~~
English grammar which will constantly
occur in my speech. The second difficul-
ty which I will mention ~~is~~ ~~t~~ seams to
me to be by far more serious & to ex-
plane it I must tell you why I have
chosen the subject ~~which~~ I have
chosen. W‹h›en your former secretary
honourd me by asking me to read
a paper to your society the first
thought that [k|c]ame in‹to› my head was
that I would certainly do it
& the second was this: I said to
myself that [I|i]f I ha[ve|d] the opportu-
nity of talking to a room full of

II

people that I would use this oppor-
tunity to say something that comes
from my heart & not to [ill | mis]use
the time that I was given ~~to speak~~
~~to you~~ [to | by] ~~either~~ explan[s | ing] some
scientific matter to you which to
be propperly explained wou‹l›d ~~needs~~ a
course of lectures or an audience
specialy trained in one particular line of
thought. & that I would still less
[ill | mis]use this opportunity of spe<a>king to you by giving you
a popular lecture, say on logic,
which would serve to make you
believe that you understand a
thing w‹h›ich as a matter of fact
you dont [a | u]nderstand (& which it is
not a bit neceessary that you
should) & to gratifie the very lovest
of modern desires viz. the superficial
curiosity about the latest discoveries
of ~~physicists, psychologists & logicians~~ scientists
I decided — I say — that I should
use this opportunity to speak to
you ~~about~~ not as a logician, still
less as a cross between a scientist
& a journalist but as a human
being ~~to human beings~~ who tries to
tell ~~his fellow~~ other human beings something
~~they~~ which [m | so]me of them might possibly find
usefull, I say usefull not interesting.
The third and last difficulty I will
mention is one that ~~applies to~~ adheres
to m[u | o]st philosophical ~~subjects~~
↓explanations↓ & it is this that it ~~is~~ sometimes
* ‹is› almost impossible to explain a

matter in such a way that the hearer at
once sees the ~~way~~ ro<a> [o|d]~~e~~ he is lead & the
[E|e]nd goal to which it leads. That is to say
it so very often happens that
the hearer thinks ‹"›I understand
perfectly what he ~~is saying~~ sa[i|y]s but
what on earth is he driving at‹"› or
else that he sees what one is
dr‹i›ving at & thinks ‹"›that‹'›s all very well
by how is he going to get there‹"›.
This perhaps is the gratest diffi
cultie & all I [k|c]an do is to ↓ask you to↓ be
patient & to hope [=|t]hat in the end we
will see both the [R|r]o[d|a]‹d›e & where
it leeds to. — Now let me begin.
My subject is Ethics & I will
adopt the definition or explanation
which Prof. Moore has given in his
Pricipia Ethica. ~~He says there~~ which is: Ethics
is the General Enquiry into what
is good. I will just modifie this
s[t|l]ightly & say Ethics is the general
enquiry into what is valuable. I do
this bec[o|a]use I want to include in my
Notion of Ethics~~s~~ also what is common-
ly understood to belong to the sub-
ject matter of [Ae|E]sthetics. The reason
for this will perhaps get cl‹e›ar
later on. Now let me point [a|o]ut first
of all that in our Definition of Ethics
I might have substitutet many
other words for the word valuable.
And I will enumerate some of
them which seem to me to be

IV

synonyms so far ↓at any rate↓ as their meaning is
important to us and by enumerating
them I want to produce the same
sort of effect that Gallstone pro-
duced when he copied a n[o|u]mber of
different faces on the same photo-
graphic plate in order to get the
picture of the typical features
they all have in comon. And
as by looking at \shewing to you such a photo
you can \I could make you see what is the typical,
say, chinese face so if you look
as it where through all the
synonyms w‹h›ich I will place
one behind the other ~~before~~ in front of you
you will see which feature common
to them all I want you to look
at in each of them. ~~Now there is the word~~
~~valuable or value or the word good~~
~~taken in a slightly wider sense perhaps~~
Now instead of saying Ethics is the
Enquiry into what is valuable I
might have said it is the Enquiry into
what is of absolute importance or into
what is the meaning of life or ~~into~~ what
makes life worth living. ~~And now you~~
And if you hold all th[os|es]e Expressions
together ~~is~~ value, good, great, ↓Right,↓ [m|se]nse of
life, that what makes life worth living,
worth etc. you will I believe see
what it is [i|I] am concerned with.
Now the first thing I want you to
notice about all these expressions
is that they can all be used in two

V.

~~very~~ different senses. I will call them
the relat‹i›ve & the absolute ↓[or ethical]↓ ~~meaning~~. [use]
The relative use of these words is their
use relative to some predetermined
end. When I say this is a good piano
I mean it comes up to a certain
standart ↓[of tone etc]↓ which I have fixed & which
I conceive as its purpose. It has
only sense to say that a piano
is good if you have previously
fixed what sort of qualities a
piano must have to deserve that
name. And the same a‹p›plies when
I say that a man is a good
piano player or a good golf player
or that a r[oode|oad] is good etc. In[=] all such
[C|c]ases good simply means: coming
up to a certain standard which
I have previously fixed. The same
applies to the word important in ~~the~~
~~ordinary~~ ~~relative~~ ~~sense which is~~
the relative sense. In this sense
we say something is important for
a certain purpose. The same ap‹p›lies
to ~~w~~right. The right r[ode|oad] is that
which leeds to the place I want
to go to it is right relativly
to the desired End. In this relative
sense the words value, good,
importance etc. are easily understood
& present no great problems. Now in Ethics
these same words are used aparently
in a~~n entirely~~ different sense. S[up|upp]osing
I could play the piano & one of you

a great conn[e|a]isseur of pianoplaying
heard me & said: Well your playing
pretty badly & s[o|u]ppose I answerd
him: I know I'm playing badly
but I dont want to play any
better. All the connaisseur could
say would be well then thats all
right. & there would be an end [of|to]
the discussion. The connaisseur would
have judged me by certain stan-
darts which he could ↓[if neccessary]↓ explain & I
would aggree that he had ranked
me ~~w~~rightly. Now take another case
sup‹p›ose I had told one of you a
p[er|re]posterous ly & this man came to
me & said look here you have
behaved like a beast. & now I
were to answer [I|Y]es I know [~~i~~|I be]haved
badly but then I d[ont|idnt] want
to behave ↓[any]↓ better. [C|W]ould he then say
~~th~~ then thats all right? ~~Obviously~~
~~not~~. He would say well you ought
to want to behave better. The
difference was that this man was making
an ~~absolute~~ [ethical] judgment whereas the
~~other~~ connaisseur made a relative
judgment. Now the essence of this
difference seems to me to be obviously
this: Every [st|jud]gment of relative value,
goodnes, importance etc. ~~can be~~ is a
simple statement of facts & can be
put in such a form that it looses all
appearance of a judgment of value.
Instead of saying this is the right

[R|r]o[o|a]d I can say [a|e]qualy well this is
the rood that leeds me to where
I want to go. this is a good piano-
player simly means that he can
play peaces of a certain degree of
complicatedness in a certain definable
way. T[w|o] say the [V|v]iolin has a good
voice means it has a tone agreable
to the ear & so on. Now what I
wish to contend is this that although
all relative judgments can be shewn
to be statements of facts [N|n]o
statement of fact can ever be or
imply what we call an absolute
that is ethical judgment. Let
me explain this ~~like this~~: Su‹p›pose
that one of you or I was an omnicient
person who therefore knew all the
movements of all the bodies in the Wo‹r›ld,
dead or alive, who further knew & could describe all
the states of minds of all human
beings that ever were & suppose that
this omnicient person wrote all
he knew‹,› that is everything that
is to be known‹,› in a big book. Then
this book would contain the whole
description of the world. And what
I want to say is that this book
would ↓~~then~~↓ not contain anything that
we [c|w]ould call an ~~absolute~~ ethical
judgment ~~of a value.~~ or anything that
would ↓directly↓ imply such a judgment. It
would of course contain all
relat‹i›ve judgments of value as for

instance that so & so is a good ↓[or a bad]↓ runner
for it would contain the fact
that he ran ~~so many yards~~ [the distance of 1 mile]
in so many ~~seconds~~ minutes & seconds.
The book would ↓[of course]↓ contain all ~~possible~~
true scientific propositions & in fac[k|t]~~t~~
all [t] significant ↓[& true]↓ propositions that
can be made. Now what I wish to
say is that all facts are as it
where on the same level that there
is no such thing as absolute impor
tance or unimportance in them & that
~~therefore~~ in the same way all propositions
are on the same level that there
are no propositions which are in any
absolute sense sublime, important or ↓[on the other hand]↓
trivial. Now perhaps some of you will
agree to that & be reminded of
Hamlets words..... But this again
could lead to a misunderstanding. What
Hamlet says seems to imply that good
& bad are not qualities of the world
[a|o]utside us but a‹t›tributes of our states
of mind. But what I mean is that
the state of mind ~~to~~ so far as we mean
by that a fact which we can~~n~~ describe
is in no ethical sense good or bad.
If for instance in our world book ↓[we read the description of]↓ an
apalling murder ~~is described~~ in all the
details physical & ~~psychological~~ [psychical] that is
with all the pains & anguish the victim
had to endure with all the studied cruelty
of the murderer the ↓[mere]↓ description of
facts ↓[physical & psychical]↓ will contain nothing of

~~what~~ which we [w|c]ould say that it is an
ethical proposition. The ~~event~~ murder
will be on exactly the same level
as any other event for instance the
falling of a stone. Certainly the
reading of this description might
cause us pain~~s~~ or rage or any other
emotions or we mig[t|ht] read about
the pain or rage c[o|a]used by this
murder in other people when they
got to know it but there will simply
be facts facts & fa‹c›ts but no
Ethics. — And now I must say
that if I contemplate what
Ethics realy would have to be if
there were such a science ↓this↓ seems to
me quite obvious. It seems to me
quite obvious that nothing we c[an|ould]
ever think or~~s~~ say should be the
thing. That we can‹n›‹'›t write a ↓scientific↓ book
the subject matter of which ~~was~~ ‹is›
intrinsically sublime, above all other
suj[ec|iec]t‹s› matte‹r›s. I can only describe
my feeling by the metaphor that
if a man [w|c]ould write a book about
Ethics which realy was a book
on Ethics this would with an
explosion destroy all the other
books in the world. Our words used
as we use them in science are vesels
capable only to contain & convey
meaning & sense, natural meaning
& sense, Ethics if it is anything
~~must be~~ is supernatural & our words

will only express facts as a teacup
will only hold a teacup full
of water & if I was to ~~empty~~ pour out a gallon
over it. I said that so far as
facts & propositions are concerned
there is only relative value &
relative good, right etc. And let
me, before I go on, illustrate this
by a rather obvious example: The
right r[oo|oa]d is the r[oo|oa]d which leads
to an ↓abitrarily↓ predetermined end & it is
quite clear to us all that ~~a ro[o|a]d~~
~~apart from such a predetermined~~
~~goal~~ it has no sense in ordinary
life to talk about the \a right
r[oo|oa]d apart from such a predetermined
end, that there is no such thing as the
right ~~wr~~[ood|oad]. Now let us see what
we could possibly mean by ~~such~~ the
~~an~~ expres‹s›ion the ↓absolutely↓ wright r[ood|oad]. I think
it would be the ro[od|ad] which everybody
if he sees it would with logical
necessity have to go or be ashamed
~~for~~ of not going. Generaly speaking‹,› the
Absolute good‹,› if it is a describable
state of affairs‹,› would be one that
everybody irrespective \independent of his tasts
and inclinations would necessarily
~~go or feel guilty for not~~ bring about
or feel guilty for not bringing about.
And I want to say that such a state
of afairs is a Chimera. — Then what do
all of us who are‹,› like myself‹,› still
tempted to use such phrases \Expressions as

* No state of affairs contains \has the coercive power in itself

11

absolute good, absolute value etc what
have they in mind & what do we try
to express? Now whenever I try
to make this clear to m[e|y][self] it is
natural that I should try to
recall ~~what use I~~ in which cases
I would ~~particularly~~ certainly use
these expressions & I am then in
the situation in which you would
be if for instance I were to
give you a lecture‹,› say‹,› on the psyco-
logy of pleasure. What you would
do then [c|w]ould be to try and recall
some typical situation in which you
al~~l~~ways felt pleasure‹,› for‹,› bearing
this situation in mind‹,› ~~you~~ all which
I would have to say to you about
pleasure would become concrete &‹,›
as it w~~h~~ere‹,› controlab[le|el]. [A|O]ne man
would for instance ch[═|use] as his stock
example of pleasure the sensation which
he has when taking a walk on a fine
summers morning & on ~~any~~ ↓[some such]↓ occasion. N[a|o]w
in this situation I am if I want to
fix my mind on what I mean by absolute
or ethical value. And there in my case
it al~~l~~ways happens that the idea of one
particular experience presents itself
to m[e|y] ↓[mind]↓ which therefore is for me in a
sense the experience par excelence &
this is the reason why in talking to you [now]
{ ~~I (will always) referr to this experience~~
~~particulary~~ I am using ~~this~~ [it] as my first
& foremost example (As I have said this

is realy a personal matter & others
would find other examples more
striking) ~~The experience then which
I'm talking about~~ I will describe
this experience in order if possible
to make you recall to your minds
the same or similar experiences
so that we may have a common
ground for our investigation. Now the
best way of describing ~~this~~ my experience
is to say that when I have it I
wonder at the existence of the
world. And I am then inclined to use
such a phrase ~~like~~ as "how extraordinary
that anything should exist", or, "how extra-
ordinary that the world should exist".
I will mention an other experience strait
away which I also know & which others
of you might be aquainted with & this
is what one might call the experience
of feeling absolutely safe. I mean
the state in which one says to onesself
I am safe nothing can ~~happen to~~ injure me
whatever happens. Now let me consider
these experiences becouse they exhibit
I believe the very characteristics we
want to get clear about. Now there the
first thing I have to say is that the
verbal expression which we give to
these experiences is nonsense! If
I say I wonder at the existence of
the world I am misusing language.
Let me explain this: It has a perfectly
good and and inteligible sense to say

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that I wonder at something being the
case. ~~I~~We all understand what
it means when I say that I wonder
at a dog which is bigger than any dog ~~one~~
I have ever seen before or at any
other thing which in the common sense
of the word is „extraordinary." In every
such case I wonder at something being
the case which I could conceive not
to be the case. I wonder at the size
of t‹h›is dog because I could conceive
of a dog of another namely the ordinary
size at which I would not wonder.
To [I | say] I wonder at such & such
being the case has only sense if
I can immagine it not to be the case.
In this sense one can wonder at the
existence of say a house when one sees it &
hasnt ~~seen~~ visited it for many years & has
immagined that it had been pulled down
in the meantime. But it is nonsense
to say that I wonder at the exis-
tence of the world because I cannot
immagine it not existing. I could
of course wonder at the world round me
being as it is. For instance if I
had th[i | e]s experience ↓of wonder↓ while looking
into the blue sky I could wonder
at the sky being blue as opposed
to the case where its clouded. Bat
that's not what I mean. I [w | am] wonde-
ring at the sky being whatever it
is. One might be tempted to say
that what I am wondering at is a
* tautologie namely at the sky being blue
* or [ot | not] being blue. Bat then its just

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that its nonsense to say that one
wonders at a tautolog[ie|y]. The verbal
expression, do with it what I may,
remains nonsense & I think it
is essential that it should do
so. Now the same applies to that
other experience which I have mentioned
the experience of ~~being safe~~ absolute
safety. We all know what it means
in ordinary life to be safe. I am
sa~~i~~fe in my rooms when I cannt be
run over by an Omnibus. I am safe
if I have had whooping cough once
& [k|c]annt therefore have it again. That is to be
safe essentialy means that it is
physically impossible \ improbable that certain
things should happen to me, & therefore
its nonsense to say that I am safe
whatever happens. Again it is a
misuse of the wor~~l~~d safe as the other ↓example↓
was a misuse of the word existence.
Now I want to impress on you that
a certain characteristic misuse
of language runs through <u>all</u>
ethical & religious expressions. I can
perhaps best describe it in this way:
When it has become clear to one that
there is amongst significant propositions
no such thing as a judgment of
absolute value the first thought I
believe is that all ethical & religious
propositions are realy [si|on]ly similes &
that['s|is] what they ~~realy~~ seem to be. It
seems that when we are using the
* word right in an ethical sense although

what we mean is not what we mean ↓by right↓ when
we say this is the right road to
Granchester its something <u>similar</u> &
when we say this is a good fellow
we dont mean it in the same sense
as when we say he is a good football-
player but there is some similar‹ity›
And when we say th[is|e] life of this
man was valuable we dont mean
it in the same sense as when we say
this p[ei|ie]ce of ju[w|v]el[r|er]y is valuable but
there se[a|e]ms to be some sort of
connection. Now all religious terms ~~& notions~~
seem in this sense to be used as
simil[ies|es] or alegorical. For when we
speak of God & that he sees & hears
everything & when we ~~pra~~ kneel & pray to
him it is \seems ob[w|v]ious that all our terms
& actions are part of a <u>big</u> great & elaborate alegory
which represents him as a human being
of great power whose grace we try to
win etc etc. Now this simile also
extends over the two experiences which
I have described abo[w|v]e in fa[ckt|ct] the
first of them wondering at the existence
of the world is I believe exactly what
~~we are ref~~ people were referring to when
they s[~~ei~~|aid] that God had created the
world & the ~~the~~ experience of absolute
safety is described by saying that
we are safe under Gods protektion.
A third experience which belongs
to this realm is the experience of
feeling guilty & again that was described

by the phrase that God disaprooves of our
conduct. ~~Now the three experiences~~
~~which I have mentioned~~ I have said
that whenever we describe ethical
or religious experiences we seem to
use language only to make up similes.
~~N~~ But a simile must be the simile
for something & if I can express a
fact by means of a simile I must
also be able to drop the simile and
to explain the facts without it. Now
what happens to us in this case is
that as soon as we try to drop the
simile & try to state simply the facts
that stand behind them we find
that there are no such facts. And so
what at first appeard to be similes
now seems to be mere nonsense.
Now the three experiences which I
mentioned before (and I could have
added ~~many~~ some more) seem to those
who have experienced them ↓for instance to me↓ to
have ~~some~~ in some sense an intrinsic
‹an› absolute value. But when I say
they are experiences surely they are
facts, they have taken place then &
there, lasted a certain definit[ie|e] time
& consequently are describable. And so, from
what I said some minutes ago I must
admit it is nonsense to say that
they have absolute value. And here
I [am| ha]ve ~~at~~ arrived at the main point of
this paper & it is the paradox ~~for~~
~~I know not how to call it~~ that an experience

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a fact should have an absolute value.
And I will make the point still more
acute by saying " that ↓[an experience]↓ a fact ~~s~~hould
have a supernatural [w|v]alue. Now the
way I would be tempted at first
to meet this paradox is this. Let
me consider again the Experience of
wondering at existence & let me des-
cribe it in a slighly different way: We all
know what in ordinary life would
be called a mira[kel|cle]: It obviously is
simply an event ~~which~~ the like of which
we have never yet seen. Now suppose
such an event happened. Take the case
that one of you suddenly grew a lions
head & began [to] roar~~ing~~ certainly thats
as extraordinary a thing as I can

[There is nothing either good or bad but
thinking makes it so]

immagine. Now whenever we would have
recovered from our surprise what
I would suggest is to fech a physiolo-
gist & have the case scienti[c|f]ically
investigated & if it were not for being afraid
of h[a|u]rting him I'ld have him vivisected.
And where would the miracle have
gone to, for it is clear that looking
at it in this way everything miraculous
has disappeared unless what we
mean by miraculous is merely that
a fac[kt|t] has not jet been explained
by science wh‹i›ch again means [merely] th[t|a]t

we have [t|h]itherto failed to group this
fact with others in a scientific
system. ~~But~~ [t|T]his means that it
has no sense to say „scien[s|c]e has
prooved that there are no mira[k|c]les".
No: the scientific way of looking
at a fact is not the way to look at
it as a miracle. For immagine whatever
fact you may, it is not in itself a
miracle in the absolute sense & ~~there~~
[a|o]ne is in itself not ~~not~~ more or less
mira[k|c]uleus than the other. I ↓heard← once
[in|a] preacher in a Cambridge Church say
that of course there were still mira[kles|cles]
happening only look at the tiny little
seed from which a tree~~s~~ grows. But
~~is~~ this ~~more~~ is wrong for is this more
mira[k|c]ul[e|o]us than that a stone falls
or in fact any thing which happens
<u>whatever happens!</u> Again we see that
we have used the term miracle in
a relative & an absolute sense. In
the relative sense it simply meant
a hitherto unknown kind of event.
Well that's a trivial meaning. But
when we are tempted to use it in
what I would like to [k|c]all a deep
~~meaning~~ sense then ~~it means~~ we want it to mean
that we wonder at it not bec[o|a]use of
~~its~~ the rarity of what has happened \ the event but
because what has happened has happened
whatever has happened. And here we have
the misuse of the word „ to wonder" which
we talked about previously. — In fact

what I then called to wonder at
the existence of the world I
might have equaly well described
~~by saying~~ ~~to regard~~ ~~to~~ as the experience of look‹ing› ~~ing~~ at
existens as a mira[k|c]le. Now I am
tempted to say that the ↓right↓ expres-
sion in language for the miracle
of the existence of the world is the
miracle of the existence of language
~~but this would not account for~~
~~a fact being important the absolute~~
~~importance of~~ but what ~~then~~
does it mean to notice ~~that~~ this
miracle some times & not at other times?
~~For of course the expression „miracle~~
~~of the~~ For all I have said by
shifting the expression of the miraculous
from an expression [=|by] means of
language to the expression by
the existence of language, all
I have said is again that we
can not express what we want to
express & that all we say about it
is \remaines nonsense. Now the answer
to all this will seam ↓perfectly↓ cl[er|ear] to
many of you. You will say: Well if certain
experiences constantly tempt us to
attribute a quality to them which we
call absolute or~~t~~ ethical value &
imp[t|or]tance this simply shows that
by these words we do|n‹o›t mean nonsense
~~& &~~ that after all what we mean by
saying that an experience has absolute
value is just a fact [&|l]ike other facts

& that is to say that my contention
in the beginning of this paper [t|w]hen I
said that no describable fact
could ↓ever↓ be or imply an abs[u|o]lute judgment
was wrong. Now when this is urged
against me I ~~sa[i|y]~~ (immediately) see ~~perfetly~~
~~clearly~~ as it where in a flash of light,
not only that no description that
~~could~~ I can think of would do
to describe significantly these
experiences, but that I would
reject every explaination that
anybody could possibly suggest ↓ab initio↓
on the ground of its significance.
That is to say: I see now that
these nonsensical expressions were
not nonsensical bec[o|a]use I had not
jet found the significant explana- \expression
tion but that there nonsensi-
cality was there very essence
for all I wanted to do with them was just
to go beyond the world & that
is to say beyond language. Bat
this is just impossible. My ‹w›hole
tendency & as I believe the tendency of all those who have tried to talk or write about ethics & religion was to run against the
boundar[y|ie]s of language. This running
against the walls of our cage is
perfectly, absolutely, hopeless. ~~& still~~
~~I feel respect for it & would not~~ ↓~~for my life~~↓
~~ridicul it~~. ~~I will sum up~~: I therefore believe
that so far as Ethics springs from the
desire to ~~m~~ [~~s~~|ex]press \say something about the ~~ultimat~~
ultimate meaning of life, the absolute good,
the absolute important it can be no

science. ~~that is to say~~ What it
sa[i|y]s does not add to our [c|k]nowledge
in any sense. But it is a document
~~which I~~ of [t|a] tendency in the human
mind which I person‹a›ly can not help
respecting deeply & I would not
for my life ridicul it.

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MS 139b

Diplomatic Transcription

Lecture on Ethics: Ludwig Wittgenstein, First Edition. Edited by Edoardo Zamuner, Ermelinda Valentina Di Lascio and D. K. Levy.

Ladies & Gentlemen.

Before I begin to speak about my subject ~~proper~~ let me make a few introductory remarks. I feel I shall have great difficulties in communicating my thoughts to you & I think some of them may be diminished by mentioning them to you beforehand. The first one, which almost I needn't mention, is, that English is not my native tongue & my expression therefore often lacks that precision & subtlety which would be desirable if one talks about a difficult subject. All I can do is to ask you to make my task ~~as~~ easier by ~~trying to get at~~ reading ~~my meaning~~ ~~in spite~~ despite of the faults which I will constantly be committing against the English grammer. ~~The~~ The second difficulty ~~which~~ I will mention is this, that probably many of you come up to this lecture ~~of mine~~ with slightly wrong expectations, and to set you right in this point I will say a few words about the reason for choosing the subject ~~which~~ I have chosen; When your former secretary honoured me by asking me to read a paper to your society, my first thought was that I would certainly do it & my second

Facsimile of MS 139b page 1

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subject ↓proper↓ let me make a few intro-
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subject. All I can do is to ask
you to make my task ~~to~~ easier
by [=|trying to get at my meaning
~~can~~ inspite of the faults which
I will constantly be commiting
against the English grammar.]
The second difficulty ~~which~~ I
will mention is this, that probably
many of you come up to this lecture
of [=|mine] with slighly wrong expecta-
tions. And to set you right
in this po‹i›nt I will say a few
words about [=|the reason for choosing the]
subject ~~which~~ I have chosen: When
your former secretary honoured
me by asking me to read a
paper to your society, my first
thought was that I would
certainly do [so|it] & ~~the~~ my second

thought was that if I ~~should~~ was to 2
have ~~an~~ the opportunity to speak
~~to a room full of~~ you I should
speak about something ↓which↓ I am keen
on communicating [f|t]o you & that I
should not misuse th‹i›s opportunity
to give you a lecture about, say, logic.
~~I say~~ I call this a misuse ~~you think~~ for to
explain a scientific matter to you ~~I~~ it
would ~~want~~ need a course of lectures &
not an hour's paper. ~~Of course~~ [–|An] other
alternative would have been to give
you what's called a popular-
scientific lecture, that is a lecture
intended to make you believe that
you understand a thing which
actually you don't understand, &
to gratify ↓what I believe to be↓ one of the lowest desires
of modern people, namely the ~~cur~~
superficial curiosity about the
latest discover[y|ie]s [in|of] science. I
rejected these alternatives & decided
to talk to you about a subject
which seems to me to be of general
importance, hoping that ~~this~~ it may
help to clear up your thoughts
about this subject (even if you
should ent[y|i]rely disagree with what
I will say about it). My third &
last difficulty is one which, in fact,
adheres to most lengthy philosophi-
cal lectures & it is this, that
the hearer is uncapable of seeing
both the ~~way~~ road he is lead & the

goal which it leeds to. That's to 3
say: he either thinks "I understand
all he says, but what on earth
is he dr[y|i]ving at" or else he ~~sees~~
~~what~~ thinks " I see what he's
driving at, but how on earth is
he going to get there". All I can
do is, again, to ask you to be
patient & to hope that in the
end you may see both the ~~road~~ way
& where it le[e|a]ds to. — I will now
begin. My subject, as you know, is
Ethics & I will adopt the expla-
nation of that term which Prof. Moore
has given in his ↓book↓ Principia Ethica.
He says : "Ethics is the general
~~E~~ enquiry into what is good".
Now I'm going to use the term ‹Ethics›
in a slightly wider sense, in a
sense ↓in fact↓ ~~in~~ which includes what I
believe to be the most essential
part of what is generally called
Aesthetics. And to make you
see as clearly as possible what
I take to be the subject matter
of Ethics I will put before you
a number of more or less syno-
nymous ~~terms~~ ↓expressions↓ each of which could
be substituted for ~~Prof Moores~~ the above
definition, & by enumerating them
I want to produce the same sort
of effect ~~t~~ which Gallstone produced
when he ~~p~~ ~~copied a number of~~ took
a number of photos of different

faces on the same photographic plate /4
in order to get the picture of the
typical features they all ha[ve | d] in comon.
And as by shewing to you such
a collective photo I could make
you see what is the typical — say —
chinese face so if you look through
the row of synonyms which I will
~~place~~ put before you, you will, I hope,
be able to see the characterictic
feature‹s› they all have in com~~m~~on
& th[is | ese] are the characteristic features
of Ethics[~~:~~ | .] Now instead of saying
Ethics is the enquiry into what is
~~of~~ good I could have said ~~it is~~ Ethics
is the enquiry into what is
valuable, or, into what is
realy important, or I could have
said Ethics is the enquiry into
the meaning of life, or into what
makes life worth living, or
into ~~the r~~ ~~what is~~ the right ‹way›
‹of› li[fe | ving]. ~~And~~ I believe ~~I~~ if you look
at all these p‹h›rases you will get
a rough idea as to what it is
that Ethics is concerned with.
Now the first thing that strikes
one about all these expressions
is that each of them is actually
used in two very different senses.
I will call them the trivial or
relative sense on the one
hand & the ~~a~~ ethical or absolute
sense on the other. If for instance

I say that this is a <u>good</u> chair 5
this means that the chair
serves a certain predetermined pur-
pose & the word good here has only
meaning so far as this purpose
has been previously fixed [=|upon]. In fact
the word good in the ↓[relative]↓ sense simply
me[=|a]ns coming up to a certain
predetermined standard. ~~So~~ ↓[Thus]↓ when
we say that this man is a good
pianist we mean that he [=|can]
~~can~~ play p[e|i]eces of a certain degree
of difficulty [in|with] a certain [=|degree] [-*able*]
[=|of dexterity]. And similarly if I say
that it's <u>important</u> for me not
to cach cold I mean that caching
a cold produces certain describable
disturbances in my life & if I
say that this is the <u>right</u>
road I mean that it's the
right road relative to a certain
goal. Used in this way these ex-
pressions dont present any ~~very~~
difficult or deep problems. [b|B]ut
this is not how Ethics uses them.
Sup[o|p]osing that I could play Te‹n›nis
& one of you saw me playing &
said „well you play pretty badly"
& suppose I answered „I know,
~~know~~ I'm playing badly but I
don't want to play any better"
All, the other man could say [is|would be]
„Ah then that's all right". But
suppose I had told one of you

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a preposterous lie & he came up to
me & said "You're behaving like
a beast" & then I were to say
"I kn[=|ow] I behave badly, but then
I don't want to behave any better".
Would ~~then the man~~ he then say "Ah, then
That's all right"? Certainly not;
he would say "well, you o[=|u]ght
to want to behave better". Here
you have an absolute judgement of
value, whereas the first instance was
one of a relative judgment. The essence
of this difference seems ~~to me~~ to
be obviously this: [-] Every judgment
of relative value ~~can~~ is a mere
statement of facts & can therefore
be put in such a form that it
looses all the appearance of a
judgment of value: Instead of saying
"this is the right way to Granchester
I could equaly well have said
"this is the way you have to go~~t~~
if you want to get to Granchester
in the shortest time"; this man
is a good runner simply means
that he runs [-] a certain number
of miles in a certain number of
minutes, & so forth. Now what
I wish to contend is, that
although all judgments of
relative value can be shewn to
be ~~st~~ mere statements of facts,
no statement of fact can ever
be, or imply, a judgment of absolute
* value. Let me explain this:

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Suppose one of you w[as|ere] an omniciant
person & therefore knew all the
movements of all the bodies in
the world dead or alive & that
he also knew all the states of
mind of all human beings that
ever lived. And suppose th‹i›s man
wrote all he knew ~~& that is all
that can be known~~ in~~t~~ a big book.
Then th‹i›s book would contain the
whole description of the wo‹r›ld; and
what I want to say is, that this
book would contain nothing that
we would call an <u>ethical</u> judgment
or anything that would logicaly
imply such a judgment. It would
of course contain all relative judg-
ments of value & <u>all</u> true scientific
propositions & in fact all true
propositions that can be made‹.› [═]
But all the facts described ~~in
this book~~ would, as it were, stand
on the same level & in the same
way all propositions sta[oo|nd] on the
same level. There are no propositions
which, in any absolute sense, are
sublime, important, or trivial.
Now perhaps some of you will agree
to that & be reminded of Hamlets
words: nothing is either good or
bad, but thinking makes it so!
But this again could lead to a
misunderstanding. What Hamlet
says seems to imply that good

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& bad, [are|though] not qualities of the
world outside us, are atributes of
our states of mind. But what I
~~w~~ mean is that a state of mind, so
far as we mean by that a fact which
we can~~n~~ describe, is in no ethical sense
good or bad. If for instance in our
world-book we read[-] the description
of a murder with all its detai[=|ls]
physical & psychological the mere
descr[e|i]ption of these facts will contain
nothing which we could call an
ethical ~~judgment~~ proposition. The
murder will be on exactly the
same level as any other event, for
instance the falling of a stone. Certain-
ly the reading of this description
might cause us pain or rage or
any other emotion, or we might read
about the pain or rage caused by
this murder in other people when
they heard of it, but there
will simply be facts, facts,
& facts but no Ethics. — And now
I must say that if I contemplate
what Ethics realy would have
to be if there were such a science,
this ↓result↓ seems to me quite obvious.
It seems to~~o~~ me obvious that
nothing we could ever think or
say should be the thing. That
we cannot write a scientific
book, the subject matter of which
~~was~~ could be intrinsically sublime,
* & above all other subject matters.

I can only describe my feeling 9
by the metaphor, that, if a man
could write a book on Ethics which
realy was a book on Ethics, this
book would‹,› with an explosion,
destroy all the other books in the
world. — Our words, used, as we use them
in science, are vesels capable only of
containing and conveying meaning
& sense, natural meaning & sense.
~~And~~ Ethics, if it is a‹n›ything, is super-
natural [.|&] [O|o]ur words will only express
facts; as a teacup will ↓ hold ← only
a teacup full of water & if I were
to pour out a gallon over it. — I said
that so far as facts & propositions
are concerned there is only relative
value & relative good, right etc. And
let me, before I go on, illustrate
this by a rather obvious example.
The right road is the road which leads
to an arbitrarily prede[d|t]ermined end
& it is quite clear to us all that there
is no sense in talking about the
right ro[o|a]d apart from such a
predetermined goal. Now let us
see what we could possibly
mean by the expression „the, absolu-
tely, right road" [~~?~~|.] I think it would
be the r[=|o]ad which everybody on
seeing it would, with logical necessity,
have to go, or be ashamed for ~~of~~ not
going. And similarly the absolute
good, if it is a describable state of
* affa‹i›rs would be one which everybody,

independent of his ta[-|s]te[-|s] and inclinations, would, necessarily, bring about or ~~be ashamed~~ feel guilty for not bringing about. And I want to say that such a state of affai[=|rs] is a chimera.~~\\~~ No state of affai[=|rs] has ↓in itself↓ ~~the~~, what I would like to call, the coercive power of an absolute judge. — Then what ~~do~~ have all of us who, like myself, are still tempted to use such expressions as „absolute good", „absolute value" etc, ↓[=]↓ what have we ~~then~~ in mind & what do we try to express? Now whenever I try to make this clear to myself it is natural that I should recall ↓[===]↓ cases in which I would certainly use these expressions & I am then in the situation & which you would be if, for instance, I were to give you a lecture on the psycholo gy of pleasure. W[-|h]at you would do then would be to try and recall some typical situation in which you allways felt pleasure. For, bearing this situation in mind, all I should say to you ~~about pleasure~~ would become concrete &, as it w[-|h]ere, controlable. One man would perhaps ch[=|oo]se as his stock example the sensation when ~~walking~~ taking a walk on a fine summers day. Now in this situation I am if I want to fix my mind on what I mean by absolute or ethical value. And there, in my case, it allways

* happens that the idea of one particular

experience presents itself to me 11
which therefore is, in a~~n~~ sense, my
experience par excelence & this is
the reason why, in talking to you
now, I will use this experience as
my first & foremost example. (As
I have said before, this is an enti-
rely personal matter & others would
find other examples more s‹t›riking)
I will describe this experience in
order, if possible, to make you re-
call ~~to your minds~~ the same or similar
experiences, so that we may have
a comon ground for our investigation.
↓I believe↓ [T|t]he best way of describing ~~this experience~~ ~~it~~ ‹it› is to
say that when I have it I wonder
at the existence of the world. And
I am then inclined to use such
phrases as „how extraordinary that
anything should exist" or „how extra-
ordinary that the world should
exist". I will mention an other
experience strait away which I also
know & which others of you might be
aquainted with: it is, what one might
call, the experience of feeling absolutely
safe. I mean the state of mind in
which one is inclined to say „I am safe,
nothing can injure me whatever
happens". Now let [us |me] [=] consider these
experiences, [because|for, I believe,] they exhibit~~, I believe,~~
the ve‹r›y characteristics we try to get
clear about. And there the first thing
I have to say is, that the verbal
* expression which we give to these experiences

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is nonsense! If I say „I wonder at the
existence of the world I am misusing
language. Let me explain this: It has
a perfectly good & clear sense to
~~sa~~ say that I wonder at some-
thing being the case, we all under-
stand what it means to say that
I wonder at the size of a dog which
is bigger than anyone I have ever seen
before, or at any thing which, in the
~~ordinary~~ comon sense of the word, is extraor-
dinary. In every such case I wonder
at something being the case which I
could conceive not to be the case. I
wonder at the size of this dog bec[=|aus]e
I could conceive of a dog of another,
namely the ordinary, size, at which
I should not wonder. To say „I
wonder at such & such being the case
has only sense if I can immagine it
not to be the case. In this sense one
can wonder at the existence of, say, a
house when one sees it & hasnt visited
it for a long time & has immagined
that it had been pulled down
in the meantime. But it is nonsense
to say that I wonder at the existence
of the world, because I cannot
immagine it not existing. I could,
of course, wonder at the world round
me being as it is. If for instance
I had this experience while looking
~~up~~ into the blue sky, I could wonder
at the sky being blue as opposed
* to the case when it's clouded. But

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that's not what I mean. I am wondering at the sky being, <u>whatever it is</u>. One might be tempted to say that what I am wondering at is a tautology, namely at the sky being blue or not blue. But then it's just nonsense to say that one is wondering at a tautology. Now the same applies to the other experience which I have mentioned, the experience of absolute safety. We all know what ~~it~~ it means in ordinary life to be safe. I am safe in my room, when I cann't be run over by an Omnibus. I am safe if I have had whooping cough & cann't therefore get it again. To be safe essentially means that it is physically impossible that certain things should happen to me, & therefore it's nonsense to say that I am safe <u>whatever</u> happens. Again this is a misuse of the word "safe" as the other example was a misuse of the word "existence" or "wondering". Now I want to impress on you that a certain characteristic misuse of our language runs through <u>all</u> ethical & religious expressions. All these expressions <u>seem</u>, prima facie, to be ↓<u>just</u>↓ <u>similes</u>. ↓<u>Thus</u>↓ [I|i] t seems that when we are using the word <u>right</u> in an ethical sense, although, what we mean, is not ~~what we mean~~ right in its trivial sense, it's something similar, and [if| when]

we say „this is a good fellow", although
the word good ~~here is not~~ here does‹n't›
mean what it means in the sentence
„this is a good football player" there ~~is~~
a ~~seems to be~~ seems to be some ~~analogy~~ similarity. And when
we say „this man's life was valuable"
we dont mean it in the same sense
in which we would speak of some
valuable ~~ju[|ve]llr~~ juvelry but there
seems to be some sort of ~~connection~~ analogy.
Now all religious terms seem in
this sense to be used as similes,
or alegoricaly. For when we speak of
God & that he sees everything & when
we ~~p~~ kneel & pray to him all our
terms & actions seem to be parts
of a great & elaborate alegory
which represents him as a human
being of great power whose grace we
try to win etc‹.› etc‹.› But this ~~simile~~ alegory
also ~~extends to~~ ~~over~~ ~~the descriptions of~~ describes
the experiences which I have just
referred to. For, the first of them is,
I believe, exactly what people were
referring to when they said that
God had created the world; & the
experience of absolute safety has
~~de~~ been described by saying that
we feel safe in the hands of God.
A third experience of the same
kind is that of feeling guilty
& again this was described by
the phrase that God disaprooves
of our conduct. Thus in ethical
* & religious language we seem ~~to~~

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constantly to be using similes. But
a simil[y|e] must be the simile for
something. And if I can ~~express~~ describe a
fact by means of a simile I must
also be able to drop the simile &
to ~~express~~ describe the facts without it.
Now in ~~this~~ our case as soon as we
try to drop the simil[y|e] & ↓simply to↓ state
the facts ~~behind it~~ which stand
behind it, we find that there
are no such facts. And so, what
‹at› first appeared to be ↓a↓ simile, now
seams to be mere nonsense. — Now
the three experiences which I have
mentioned to you (and I could have
added ~~some more~~ others) seem to those
who have experienced them, for
instance to me, to have in some
sense an intrinsic, absolute, value.
But when I say they are experiences,
surely, they are facts; the‹y› have taken
place then & there, lasted a certain
definite time & consequently are
describable. And so from what
I have said some minutes ago
I must admit it is nonsense to
say that they have absolute
value. And here I have arrived at
the main point of this paper [. |:] it is
the paradox that an experience,
a fact should ↓seem to↓ have absolute
value. And I will make my point
still more acute by saying „it is
the paradox that an experience, a fact,

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should ↓seem to↓ have supernatural value.
Now there is a way in which I would be
tempted to meet this paradox: Let
me first consider again our first expe-
rience of wondering at the existence
of the world & let me describe it in a
slightly different way: We all know, what
in ordinary life would be called a
miracle. It obviously is simply an
event the like of which we have never
yet seen. Now suppose such an
event happened. Take the case that
one of you suddenly gre[=|w] a lions head
& began ↓to↓ roar~~ing~~. Certainly that would
be as extraordinary a thing as I
can~~n~~ immagine. Now whenever we ~~would~~
should have recovered from our
surprise, what I would suggest
would be to fech a Doctor & have the
case scientifically investigated & if
it were not for h[a|u]rting him I would
have him vivisected. And where would
the miracle have got to [, |?] for it is
clear that when we look at it in
this way everything miracul[us|ous] ‹has›
~~would have~~ disappeared; unless
what we mean by this term
is merely that a fact has not
yet been explained by science,
which ↓again↓ means that we have hitherto
failed to group this fact[=] with
others in a scientific system.
This shews that it is absurd to
say ~~then~~ „science has proved~~d~~ that

there are no miracles". [No, |↓The truth is that↓] the scientific
way of looking at a fact is not the
way to look at it as a miracle.
For, immagine whatever fact you may,
it is not in itself miracul[us|ous] in the
the absolute sense of that term. For we
see now that ~~again~~ we have been using
the word „miracle" in a relative & an
absolute sense. And I will now describe
the experience of wondering at the existence
of the world by saying‹:› it is the experience
of seeing the world as a miracle. 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 <u>in</u> language,
is the existence of language itself.
But what then d‹o›es it mean to [═] be
aware of this mira[k|c]le at some times
& not at other times. For all I have
said by shifting the expression of
the miraculous from an expression
<u>by means of</u> language to the expression
<u>by the ex‹i›stence</u> of language, all
I have said is again that we
cannot express what we want
to express & that all we <u>say</u> about
the ↓absolute↓ miraculous remains nonsense. —
Now the answer to all this will
seem perfectly clear to many of
you. You will say: Well, if certain
experiences constantly tempt us
to atribute a quality to them
which we call absolute or ethical
* value & importance, this simply

shews that ~~after all~~ by these 18
words we don't mean nonsense,
that after all what we mean by
saying that an experience has
absolute value is just a fact like
other facts & that all ~~our difficulties~~
‹it› comes to is, that we have not yet succee-
ded in finding the correct logical analy
sis of what we mean by our ethical
& religious expressions. — Now when
this is urged against me I at once
see clearly, as it were in a flash of
light, not only that no description
that I can~~n~~ think of would do
to describe what I mean by absolute
value, but that I would reject every
significant description ~~or explanation~~
that anybody could possibly
suggest, ab initio, on the ground
of its significance. That is to say:
I see now that these nonsensical
expressions were not nonsensical
because I had not jet found the
correct expression‹s›, but that there
nonsensicality was their very essence.
For all I wanted to do with them
was just to go beyond the world
& that is to say beyond significant
language. My whole tendency & I
believe the tendency of all men
who ever tried to write or talk
Ethics or Religion was to run[=] against
the boundaries of language. This
running against the walls of our cage

is perfectly, absolutely, hopeless. —
Ethics, so far as it springs from the
desire to say something about the
ultimate meaning of life, the absolute
good, the absolute valuable can be no
science. What it says does not add
to our knowledge in any sense.
But it is a document of a tendency
in the human mind which I perso-
naly cannot [p | h]elp respecting
deeply & I would not for my life
ridicule it.

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TS 207
Diplomatic Transcription

Lecture on Ethics: Ludwig Wittgenstein, First Edition. Edited by Edoardo Zamuner, Ermelinda Valentina Di Lascio and D. K. Levy.

Manuscript from the Ludwig Wittgenstein

Anscombe 1
1 + 3
no hurry

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Before I begin to speak about my subject proper let me make a few introductory remarks. I feel I shall have great difficulties in communicating my thoughts to you and I think some of them may be diminished by mentioning them to you beforehand. The first one, which almost I need not mention, is, that English is not my native tongue and my expression therefore often lacks that precision and subtilty which would be desirable if one talks about a difficult subject. All I can do is to ask you to make my task easier by trying to get at my meaning inspite of the faults which I will constantly be committing against the English grammar. The second difficulty I will mention is this, that probably many of you come up to this lecture of mine with slightly wrong expectations. And to set you right in this point I will say a few words about the reason for choosing the subject I have chosen: When your former secretary honoured me by asking me to read a paper to your society, my first thought was that I would certainly do it and my second thought was that if I was to have the opportunity to speak to you I should speak about something which I am keen on communicating to you and that I should not misuse this opportunity to give you a lecture about, say, logic. I call this a misuse for to explain a scientific matter to you it would need a course of lectures and not an hour's paper. An other alternative would have been to give you what's called a popular-scientific lecture, that is a lecture intended to make you believe that you understand a thing which actually you don't understand, and to gratify what I believe to be one of the lowest desires of modern people, namely the superficial curiosity about the latest discoveries of science. I rejected these alternatives and decided to talk to you about a subject which seems to me to be of general importance, hoping that it may help to clear up your thoughts about this subject (even if you should

Facsimile of TS 207 page 1

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entirely disagree with what I will say about it). My third and last difficulty is one which, in fact, adheres to most lengthy philosophical lectures and it is this, that the hearer is uncapable of seeing both the road he is lead and the goal which it leads to. That is to say: he either thinks:"I understand all he says, but what on earth is he driving at" or else he thinks "I see what he's driving at, but how on earth is he going to get there". All I can do is again to ask you to be patient and to hope that in the end you may see both the way and where it leads to. ---

I will now begin. My subject, as you know, is Ethics and I will adopt the explanation of that term which Prof.Moore has given in his book "Principia Ethica". He says:"Ethics is the general enquiry into what is good". 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 to make you see as clearly as possible what I take to be the subject matter of Ethics I will put before you a number of more or less synonymous expressions each of which could be substituted for the above definition, and by enumerating them I want to produce the same sort of effect which Gal~~l~~s[d]ton[e d] produced when he took a number of photos of different faces on the same photographic plate in order to get the p[e | i]cture of the typical features they all had in common. And as by showing to you such a collective photo I could make you see what is the typical – s[y | a]y – chinese face; so if you look through the row of synonyms which I will put bef[r | o]re you, you will, I hope, be able to see the characteristic features they all have in common and these are the characteristic features of Ethics. Now instead of saying "E~~s~~thics is the enquiry into what is good" I could have said Ethics is the enquiry into what is valuable, or, into what is really important, or I could have said Ethics is

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the enquiry into the meaning of life, or into what makes life worth living‹,› or into the right way of living. I believe if you look at all these phrases you will get a rough idea as to what it is that Ethics is concerned with. Now the first thing that strikes one about all these expressions is that each of them is actually used in two very different senses. I will call them the trivial or relative sense on the one hand and the ethical or absolute sense on the other. If for instance I say that this is a <u>good</u> chair this means that the chair serves a certain predetermined purpose and the word good here has only meaning so far as this purpose has been previously fixed upon. In fact the word good in the relative sense simply means coming up to a certain predetermined standard. Thus when we say that this man is a good pianist we mean that he can play pie[e|c]es of a certain degree of difficulty with a certain degree of dexterity. And similarly if I say that is ↓it ←<u>important</u> for me not to catch cold I mean that catching a cold produces certain describable disturbances in my life and if I say that this is the <u>right</u> road ~~that it~~ I mean that it's the right road relative to a certain goal. Used in this way these expressions don't present any difficult or deep problems. But this is not how Ethics uses them. Supposing that I could play tennis and one of you saw me playing and said "well you play pretty badly" and suppose I answered "I know, I'm playing badly but I don't want to play any better", all the other man could say would be "Ah then that's all right". But suppose I had told one of you a preposterous lie and he came up to me and said "You're behaving like a beast" and then I were to say "I know I behave badly, but then I don't want to behave any better", could he then say "Ah, then that's all right"? Certainly not; he would say "Well, you <u>ought</u> to want to behave better". Here you have an absolute judgment of value, whereas the first instance was one of a relative judgment. The essence of this difference seems to be obviously this: Every judgment of relative value is a mere statement of

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facts and can therefore be put in such a form that it looses all the appearance of a judgment of value: Instead of saying "this is the right way to Granchester I could equally well have said "this is the right way you have to go if you want to get to Granchester in the shortest time", this man is a good runner simply means that he runs a certain number of miles in a certain number of minutes, a.s.f. Now what I wish to contend is, that although all judgments of relative value can be shown to be mere statements of facts, no statement of fact can ever be, or imply, a judgment of absolute value. Let me explain this: Suppose one of you were an omniscient person and therefore knew all the movements of all the bodies in the world dead or alive and that he also knew all the states of mind of all human beings that ever lived, and suppose this man wrote all he knew in a big book, then this book would contain the whole description of the world; and what I want to say is, that this book would contain nothing that we would call an ethical judgment or anything that would logically imply such a judgment. It would of course contain all relative judgments of value and all true scientific propositions and in fact all true propositions that can be made. But all the facts described would, as it were, stand on the same level and in the same way all propositions stand on the same level. There are no propositions which, in any absolute sense, are sublime, important, or trivial. Now perhaps some of you will agree to that and be reminded of Hamlet's words: Nothing is either good or bad, but thinking makes it so". But this again could lead to a misunderstanding. What Hamlet says seems to imply that good and bad, though not qualities of the world outside us, are attributes of our states of mind. But what I mean is that a state of mind, so far as we mean by that a fact which we can describe, is in no ethical sense good or bad. If for instance in our world-book we read the description of a murder with all its details physical and psychological the mere description of these facts will contain nothing which we could call an

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ethical proposition. The murder will be on exactly the same level as any other event, for instance the falling of a stone. Certainly the reading of this description might cause us pain or rage or any other emotion, or we might read about the pain or rage caused by th[e|i]smurder in other people when they heard of it, but there will simply be facts, facts and facts but no Ethics. – And now I must say that if I contemplate what Ethics really would have to be if there were such a science, this result seems to me quite obvious. It seems to me obvious that nothing we could ever think or say should be the thing. That we cannot write a scientific book, the subject matter of which could be intrinsically sublime and above all other subject matters. I can only describe my feeling by the metaphor, that, if a man could write a book on Ethics which really was a book on Ethics, this book would, with an explosion, destroy all the other books in the world. – Our words used as we use the[j|m] in science, are vessels capable only of containing and conveying meaning and sense, natural meaning an[s|**d**] sense. Ethics, if it is anything, is supernatural and our words will only express facts; as a teacup will only hold a teacup full of water and if I were to ~~put~~ pour out a gallon over it. --- I said that so far~~s~~ as facts and prop‹**o**›sitions are concerned there is only relative value and relative good, right etc. And let me, before I go [a|**o**]n, illustrate this by a rather obvious example. The right road is the road which leads to an arbitrarily predetermined end and it is quite clear to us all that there is no sense in talking about the right road apart from such a predetermined goal. Now let us see what we could possibly mean by the expression "the absolutely right road". I think it would be the road which everybody on seeing it would, with logical necessity have to go, or be ashamed for not going. And similarly the absolute good, if it is a describable state of affairs would be one which everybody, independent of his tastes and inclinations, would, necessarily bring about or feel guilty for not bringing about. And I want to say that such a state of affairs is a chimera. No state of affairs has in itself,

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what I would like to call, the coercive power of an absolute judge. –
Then what have all of us who, like myself, are still tempted to use such expressions as "absolute good", "absolute value" etc, what have we in mind and what do we try to express ? Now whenever I try to make this clear to myself it is natural that I should recall cases in which I would certainly use these expressions and I am then in the situation and in which you would be if, for instance, I were to give you a lecture on the psychology of pleasure. What you would do then would be to try and recall some typical situation in which you always felt pleasure. For, bearing this situation in mind, all I should say to you would become concrete and, as it were, controlable. One man would perhaps choose as his stock example the sensation when taking a walk on a fine summer's day. Now in this situation I am if I want to fix my mind on what I mean by absolute or ethical value.
And there, in my case, it always happens that the idea of one particular experience presents itself to me which therefore is, in a sense, my experience for excellence and this is the reason why, in talking to you now, I will use this experience as my first and foremost example. (As I have said before, this is an entirely personal matter and others would find other examples more striking) I will describe this experience in order, if possible, to make you recall the same or similar experiences, so that we may have a common ground for our investigation. I believe the best way of describing it is to say that when I have it <u>I wonder at the existence of the world</u>. And I am then inclined to use such phrases as "how extraordinary that anything should exist" or "how extraordinary that the world should exist". I will mention another experience [d|s]traight away which I also know and which others of you might be acquainted with: it is, what one might call, the experience of feeling <u>absolutely</u> safe. I mean the state of mind in which one is inclined to say "I am safe, nothing can injure me whatever happens". Now let me consider these experiences, for, I believe, they exhibit the very characteristics we try to get clear about. And there

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the first thing I have [z | t]o say is, that the verbal expression which we give to these experiences is nonsense ! If I say "I wonder at the existence of the world‹"› I am misusing language. Let me explain this: It has a perfectly good and clear sense to say that I wonder at something being the case, we all understand what it means to say that I wonder at the size of a dog which is bigger than anyone I have ever seen before or at any thing which, in the common sense of the word, is extraordinary. In every such case I wonder at something being the case which I could conceive not to be the case. I wonder at the size of this dog because I could conceive of a dog of another, namely the ordinary size, at which I should not wonder. To say "I wonder at such and such being the case‹"› has only sense if I can imagine it not to be the case. In this sense one can wonder at the existence of, say, a house when one sees it and has not visited it for a long time and has imagined that it had been pulled down in the meantime. But it is nonsense to say that I wonder at the existence of the world, because I cannot imagine it not existing. I could of course wonder at the world round me being as it is. If for instance I had this experience while looking into the blue sky, I could wonder at the sky being blue as opposed to the case when it's clouded. But that's not what I mean. I am wondering at the sky being whatever it is. One might be tempted to say that what I am wondering at is a t~~on~~^{au}tology, namely at the sky being blue or not blue. But then it's just nonsense to say that one is wondering at a t~~on~~tology. Now the same applies to the other experience which I have mentioned, the experience of absolute safety. We all know what it means in ordinary life to be safe. I am safe in my ro[m | o]m, when I cannot be run over by an omnibus. I am safe ~~when I~~ if I have had whooping cough and cannot therefore get it again. To be ↓^{safe}↓ essentially means that it is physically impossible that certain things should happen to me and therefore it's nonsense to say that I am safe whatever happens. Again this is a misuse of the word "safe" as the other example was a misuse of the word "existence" or "wondering". Now I want to impress on you that a certain characteristic misuse of our language runs

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through all ethical and religious expressions. All these expressions seem , prima facie, to be just similes. Thus it seems that when we are using the word right in an ethical sense, although, what we mean, is not right in its trivial sense, it's something similar, and when we say "this is a good fellow", although the word good here doesn't mean what it means in the sentence "this is a good football player" there seems to be some similarity. And when we say "this man's life was valuable" we don't mean it in the same sense in which we would speak of some valuable jewelry but there seems to be some sort of analogy. Now all religious terms seem in this sense to be used as similes or allegorically. For when we speak of God and that he sees everything and when we kneel and pray to him all our terms and actions seem to be parts of a great and elaborate allegory which represents him as a human being of great power whose grace we try to win etc. etc. But this allegory also describes the experience which I have just referred to. For, the first of them is, I believe, exactly what people were referring to when they said that God had created the world; and the experience of absolute safety has been described by saying that we feel safe in the hands of God. A third experience of the same kind is that of feeling guilty and again this was described by the phrase that God disapproves of our conduct. Thus in ethical and religious language we seem constantly to be using similes. But a simile must be the simile for something. And if I can describe a fact by means of a simile I must also be able to drop the simile and to describe the facts without it. Now in our case as soon as we try to drop the simile and simply to state the facts which stand behind it, we find, that there are no such facts. And so, what at first appeared to be a ~~a~~ simile, now seems to be mere nonsense . – Now the three experiences which I have mentioned to you (and I could have added others) seem to those who have experienced them, for instance to me, to have in some sense an intrinsic, absolute value. But when I say they are experiences, surely, they are facts; they have taken place then and there, lasted a certain

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definite time and consequently are describable. And so from what I have said some minutes ago I must admit it is nonsense to say that they have absolute value. And I will make my point still more acute by saying "it is the paradox that an experience, a fact, should seem to have supernatural value. Now there is a way in which I would be tempted to meet this paradox. Let me first consider, again, our first experience of wondering at the existence of the world and let me describe it in a slightly different way; : We all know what in ordinary life would be called a miracle. It obviously is simply an event the like of which we ~~never have seen~~ yet[3] never[2] have[1] seen. Now suppose such an event happened. Take the case that one of you suddenly grew a lions head and began to roar. Certainly that would be as extraordinary a thing as I can imagine. Now whenever we should have recovered from our surprise, what I would suggest would be to fetch a doctor and have the case scientifically investigated and if it were not for hurting him I would have him vivisected. And where would the miracle have got to? For it is clear that when we look at it in this way everything miraculous has disappeared; unless what we mean by this term is merely that a fact has not yet been explained by science which again means that we have hitherto failed to group this fact with others in a scientific system. This shows that it is absurd to say "science has proved that there a[t|r]e no miracles". The truth is that the scientific way of looking at a fact is not the way to look at it as a miracle. For imagine whatever fact you may, it is not in itself miraculous in the absolute sense of that term. For we see now that we have been using the word "miracle" in a relative and an absolute sense. And I will now describe the experience of wondering at the existence of the world by saying: it is the experience of seeing the world as a miracle. 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 <u>in</u> language, is the existence of language itself. But what then does it mean

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to be aware of this miracle at some times and not at other times[.|**?**] For all I have said by shifting the expression of the miraculous from an expression by means of language to the expression by the existence of language, all I have said is again that we cannot express what we want to express and that all we say about the absolute miraculous remains nonsense. – Now the answer to all this will seem perfectly clear to many of you. You will say: Well, if certain experiences constantly tempt us to attribute a quality to them which we call absolute or ethical value and importance, this simply shows that by these words we don't mean nonsense, that after all what we mean by saying that an experience has absolute value is just a fact like other facts and that all it comes to is that we have not yet succeeded in finding the correct logical analysis of what we mean by our ethical and religious expressions. – Now when this is urged against me I at once see clearly, as it were in a flash of light, not only that no description that I can think of would do to describe what I mean by absolute value, but that I would reject every significant description that anybody could possibly suggest, ab initio, on the ground of its significance. That is to say: 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. My whole tendency and I believe the tendency of all men who ever tried to write or talk Ethics or Religion was to run against the boundaries of language. This running against the walls of our cage is perfectly, absolutely hopeless. – Ethics so far as it springs from the desire to say something about the ultimate meaning of life, the absolute good, the absolute valuable, can be no science. What it says does not add to our knowledge in any sense. But it is a document of a tendency in the human mind which I personally cannot help respecting deeply and I would not f[r|o]r my life ridicule it.

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