



**THE ETHICAL VALUE JUDGEMENTS ARE NONSENSE: WITTGENSTEIN'S
APPROACH**

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to maintain the view through analysis that the ethical value judgments are nonsense. The paper is about what might be called the Philosophical tradition of ethics and Wittgenstein opposition to that tradition. My purpose is to elucidate how this conception of ethical judgments is in itself a sufficient reason for regarding them as nonsense. Wittgenstein claim in the 'Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus' that there can be no ethical propositions. Wittgenstein thought that ethical value judgments are absolute in the sense that their correctness. They does not depend at all on how things are in the world. Absolute judgment of value cannot be rational or irrational, reasonable or unreasonable. The argument behind this concept is that the value is not arbitrary or accidental. In order to support that interpretation, I consider passages from the 1929 lecture on ethics. This read us to a reappraisal of the relevance of the Tractarian project of showing that ethical sentences cannot make sense.

Key words: *Wittgenstein, Tractatus-Logico-Philosophicus, Ethics, Absolute value judgments, happy life.*

The sense of the world must lie outside the world. In the world everything is as it is and happens as it does happen. *In* it there is no value — and if there were, it would be of no value. If there is a value which is of value, it must lie outside all happening and being-so. For all Happening and being-so is accidental. What makes it non-accidental cannot lie *in* the world, for otherwise this would again be accidental. It must lie outside the world. Hence also there can be no ethical

propositions.

Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 6.41-22

In the opening remarks of his 'lecture on ethics' Wittgenstein claims that for him to talk about ethics would be to speak on something of much more important than the philosophy of language. Wittgenstein regards his early philosophical work, *Tractatus-Logico-Philosophicus* fundamentally a book on Ethics. In a letter to Ludwig Von Ficker, Wittgenstein explains that the key to understanding the *Tractatus* is to grasp that the overall sense of the book is an ethical one. The basic intention of Wittgenstein's notion of Ethics is to realize the meaning of life. Wittgenstein perceives the domain of the world as devoid of values. The Wittgensteinian distinction between ethical value and the world is extremely sharp. The world is nothing more than a series of the happenings of facts. In the world everything is as it is, and everything happens as it does happen. And the entire happening in the world is completely causal and logical in nature. Hence, no value exists in the world, and "if it did exist, it would have no value" (*TLP*6.41). If there is anything that does have value, it must lie outside the whole sphere of 'what happens and is the case'. For all that happens and is the case in the world is completely subject to accidental. So we can say that the events of the world do not have any logical relation to its ethical value. The internal problems like what is the meaning of life, how to have a good life etc., are concerned with the human eternal problems of life. So ethics is something which manifests through the practice of freewill. . His *Lecture on Ethics* reasserted this basic view that ethics is supernatural, that's why we cannot express this by our language. We can only think about the perceptible things of the world. Beyond perceptible world, we cannot think higher than facts. We don't have a thought which is inexpressible in language.

We thought that if we speak of ethical value (the meaning of life, happiness), our sentences cannot be anything but nonsense. In this paper I will examine this idea and the reasons we have for accepting it. In this paper I will attempt to flesh out what the ethical sense of the *Tractatus* might be. This paper brings out Wittgenstein's division between expressions and which have sense and which do not have sense.

One cannot understand Wittgenstein's idea that absolute judgments of value are nonsensical without prior understanding of the way he characterizes these judgments and their matter. Wittgenstein divides the sentences of natural language into three categories-sensible, senseless and no sensible. In order to explain what Wittgenstein's argument about ethical

proposition we must examine as to what Wittgenstein means by the words sense and nonsense. The sense and nonsense are not merely what we would understand by our usual usage of these terms. The sense and nonsense here are not grammatical nonsense, nor factual nonsense, they are rather logical.

Every ordinary language sentence that makes sense can necessarily be analyzed into propositional form. "A proposition is a description of a fact" (TLP 4.023). Linguistic expression has a sense when it represents the possible picture of reality. A proposition has sense if and only if it pictures a fact." A fact is fundamentally a configuration of objects " (TLP 2.0272). Only state of affairs which can be pictured can be represented by meaningful propositions. These propositions are within the limits of natural sciences. Otherwise it becomes senseless and nonsense. What makes only propositions have sense is that it is only propositions that picture a possible state of affairs and thus only propositions lie within logical space.

Propositions of logic and mathematics are senseless. These include the tautological and self-contradictory propositions of logic, the equations of mathematics and certain a-priori laws of science. Question is; why Wittgenstein regard logical truths are merely devoid of sense and not nonsensical? According to Wittgenstein logical truths are about norms and rules which govern the general facts of reality. There can be no representatives of the logic of facts. So they do not picture anything. These propositions all lack sense because they do not refer to a single possible state of affairs, as a propositions does, but rather they show something about all possible state of affairs.

Senseless and nonsensical proposition have nothing to do with reality. But they are different from each other. A sentence can be nonsense is if it contains meaningless signs. If a sign is useless then it is meaningless. Sentence can also be nonsense, not because it contains signs that are useless, but because it does not represents any possible facts. For example this sentence 'God is transcendental being 'does not contain any useless signs, but this sentence is still nonsense because it does not picture any possible state of affairs. Nonsensical propositions are something beyond the represented world. So that nonsensical propositions cannot be captured in language. Wittgenstein writes, "It will therefore only be in language that the limit can be drawn, and what lies on the other side of the limit will simply be non-sense" (TLP Preface). These propositions try to capture the world as a whole. So that nonsensical propositions are not

completely useless. As such nonsensical propositions do not belong to this logical space, so they cannot be put into words.

The most important question is; how is it possible for Wittgenstein to express that ethical propositions are nonsensical? In his Lecture on Ethics Wittgenstein distinguishes between two kinds of value statements-relative or tribal and absolute or ethical. All ethical terms such as good, right and so on, when used in judgments of value have two senses; relative and absolute sense. For example judgments of value such as 'this is the right road' and 'this is good chair' are generally used, are relative judgments of value. They are relative judgments because the ethical term good, right is used in the sense of good or right for something. Similarly a work of art can be said to be valuable in the relative sense because it fulfills certain aesthetic principles and a road can be right in the relative sense because it will take us to a desired destination. All relative judgments of value are statements of fact. All relative judgments of value can be put into words. It follows that all relative judgments of value can be propositions.

Absolute judgments of value use ethical terms such as 'good' and 'evil' in an absolute sense. Although Wittgenstein does not explicitly define his concept of absolute value, it is not unbelievable to claim that if relative value is value in relation to some standard, absolute value is not value in relation to any standard. An absolute value is not a value for something, but is a value-in-itself. So they cannot be rational or irrational, reasonable or unreasonable. They are true or false regardless of the worldly facts. Wittgenstein then prepares to introduce an example of judgments of absolute value. Take for instance the sentence 'you ought to love your parents' which was for Wittgenstein the description of state of affairs that has absolute value. This statement goes beyond any facts. Similarly the sentence 'I am absolutely safe' is a description of state of affairs that has absolute value. To be absolutely safe is to be safe whatever happens, the truth or falsity of this sentence is unconditional.

Absolute judgments of value are similar to logical truths in the sense that their truth or falsity is not conditional just as tautologies are true independently of what happens. But there is a difference between absolute judgments and tautologies which concern the fact that the only possible truth value of tautologies is 'true' but absolute judgments can be either true or false depending on whether the transcendental subject wills good or evil. But Wittgenstein himself connects ethics with logic. He compares absolute goodness to an absolutely right road that everyone chooses with logical necessity after having become aware of it. Question is, how can

Wittgenstein compare absolute goodness to a road choose with logical necessity? Here we can say that Wittgenstein uses the word 'good' in its absolute or transcendental senses, not its psychological sense. One can choose absolute goodness independently of what one chooses empirically and its applicability to real world situations is not at all conditional on what happens. Absolute value judgments are necessarily arational.

Wittgenstein then makes the very crucial claim that all ethical propositions are absolute judgments of value because all ethical assertions employ ethical terms only in an absolute sense. If all ethical propositions are absolute judgment of value, then this implies that ethical judgments must refer to a possible state of affairs. If such ethical fact can possibly exist, then we have to say that ethical judgments have sense. But Wittgenstein strongly admits that no state of affair represents ethical proposition.

Wittgenstein strongly admits that absolute judgments of value are nonsensical because these judgments do not have truth values. According to him, a proposition has sense if and only if it pictures a fact. In other words the sense of a proposition is what it represents or pictures and what it represents is this configuration of the objects of facts. Wittgenstein claims that unless a sentence is a picture of some possible state of affairs, it cannot be true or false; and if a sentence cannot be true or false, it cannot have a sense. Thus it can be conclude that absolute value judgments are nonsensical. Beyond perceptible world we cannot think meaningfully in language. They are inexpressible because they have nothing to do with the existence and nonexistence of facts in reality. Absolute value judgments are nonsensical because it fails to conform to the rules of logical syntax of language. The logical form of language determines whether language represents the reality or not. An absolute value cannot be derived from factual statements. That is, no statements of fact can ever be statements of absolute value.

Consider for example the sentences "Life is happy" and "The world is good" and assume that these are intended as absolute judgments of value in Wittgenstein's sense. Their absoluteness implies that even if two possible worlds are exactly identical, these judgments can be true with respect to one while being false with respect to the other. Or suppose someone says that he is absolutely safe and intends the word 'safe' to be understood in Wittgenstein's absolute sense. This means that he is safe whatever happens to him — the safety is in this sense unconditional. So how does an absolutely good life (or world) differ from an absolutely evil one? There is necessarily no difference at all. Similarly, an absolutely safe condition does not necessarily differ

in any way from an absolutely vulnerable one, and an absolutely right road does not necessarily differ at all from an absolutely wrong one.

The reason for the nonsensicality of absolute judgments of value is that there cannot be any criteria for deciding whether a life is absolutely valuable or not. Wittgenstein says that judgments of relative value are actually mere statements of fact. If we understand 'my life is happy and meaningful' as a sentence that refers to something which is good in itself, we do not have to see it. However this happiness only be a result of the will's attitude towards the world. It cannot be anything in the world that makes the difference between a happy world and the unhappy one. But the whole world itself must be different.

Thus we can conclude that the happy world is ethically good and that it is brought about by the good exercise of the will. Here Wittgenstein emphasize is on inner activity of the willing subject that refers to moral and transcendental. Thus the happy life is good-in-itself. An unhappy world is the punishment of an unethical exercising of the will. The gratification of the ethically happy life is its own reward, just as the discontentment of the ethically evil unhappy life is its own punishment. Thus the moral values like good, truth, justice come through the attitude of the subject into the factual world. This lead us to the problem of defining what a 'harmonious' life is. A meaningful harmonious life is one which has some purpose but cannot be embodied with causal condition. It is how the world is that is independent of our will. The meaningfulness of life is to get into the essence of life which is considered as a happy life.

Wittgenstein's regarded the point of the *Tractatus* as ethical. His purpose was to show that there cannot be any meaningful ethical sentences. Ethics aims at bringing the moral values deeply into human consciousness as it concerns with the meaning of life. What is absolutely valuable and good cannot be disregarded. Therefore, ethical expressions do not assert anything empirically; rather they exhibit something deeper and higher that is neither true nor false. They have no sense and no theoretical contents according to the rules of language. But they are purely absolute and eternal, and hence, ineffable.

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