



Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* at 100

Edited by
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Ethics in the *Tractatus*: A Condition of the Possibility of Meaning?

Benjamin De Mesel

My aim in this chapter is to explore an analogy between logic and ethics, as Wittgenstein understands them in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (Wittgenstein 1961, henceforth ‘TLP’).¹ In the first section, I argue that Wittgenstein regards logic as a condition of the possibility of meaning, in the sense that logic makes meaningful language and thought possible. In section two, I ask why Wittgenstein calls both logic (TLP 6.13) and ethics (TLP 6.421) ‘transcendental’. I suggest that, while logic is a condition of the possibility of *semantic* meaning, ethics is a condition of the possibility of *existential* meaning. Without ethics, life could not be meaningful. In section three, I show that harmony and agreement play a crucial role in Wittgenstein’s accounts of logic and ethics. A meaningful proposition can be true or false, a meaningful life can be happy or unhappy, and both truth and happiness consist in some kind of harmony or agreement with reality. In section four, I discuss a possible objection to my account of ethics in the *Tractatus*, which is mainly based on the 6.4s,

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where Wittgenstein explicitly mentions ethics. According to James Conant (2005), we will underestimate the scope of the ethical in Wittgenstein's thought if we focus on the 6.4s. I respond to Conant by distinguishing between the normative ethical point of the *Tractatus* (about which I remain silent) and its meta-ethical points.

1 Logic as a Condition of the Possibility of Meaning

It is impossible to understand Wittgenstein's remarks on ethics (6.4s and later) without having a grasp of what comes before. I cannot go into much detail here, but some context is necessary. In general, the *Tractatus* deals with the possibility of meaningful language and thought. How is it possible that the sounds we utter can *mean* anything? How is it possible that we can think and talk *about* reality, about the world?

Let us start with the world, and then see how we can think or talk about it. The world, Wittgenstein writes, is all that is the case (TLP 1); it is the totality of facts (TLP 1.1). Facts are existing situations, situations are conglomerates of states of affairs (TLP 2), and a state of affairs is a combination of objects (TLP 2.01). The ways in which objects can and cannot be combined with other objects is given with the objects themselves (TLP 2.0121). Wittgenstein writes: "If I know an object, then I also know all its possible occurrences in states of affairs" (TLP 2.0123). And further: "In a state of affairs objects fit into one another like the links of a chain" (TLP 2.03). The idea is that objects have a form, a logical form; their form is the totality of ways in which they can and cannot be combined with other objects. The form of objects makes some combinations with other objects possible and others impossible. If an object is combined with other objects in a particular way, we have a state of affairs. The state of affairs has a structure, the particular way in which the objects are fitted into one another, a way that must be allowed for by their form.

What do we do when we think or talk about the world? Wittgenstein's answer is: "We picture facts to ourselves" (TLP 2.1). "A picture is a model

of reality” (TLP 2.12) and “[...] the elements of the picture are the representatives of objects” (TLP 2.131). A proposition or thought is a picture or model of reality. Complex propositions depict situations, elementary propositions depict states of affairs. An elementary proposition is “a connexion, a concatenation, of names” (TLP 4.22), and names correspond to objects. These objects have a logical form, that is, there are ways in which they can and cannot be combined. The names or elements of the proposition only correspond to objects if the elements of the proposition have the same logical form as the objects, that is, if the elements can be combined in the ways in which the objects can be combined. In a proposition, the elements or names are combined in a specific way, and the way in which these elements or names are related in the proposition corresponds to the way in which the objects are related in the situation depicted by the proposition (TLP 2.15). So the picture and the situation depicted by the picture share something, in virtue of which the picture can depict the situation. If something “is to be a picture”, says Wittgenstein, “it must have something in common with what it depicts” (TLP 2.16). The proposition and the situation depicted by it have the same form.

I mentioned situations and propositions, but what about facts? According to Wittgenstein, a fact is the existence (we might also say obtainment) of a situation. Situations can obtain or fail to obtain. If the world is as the proposition says it is, if the situation depicted by a proposition obtains or exists, the proposition is true and it depicts a fact. “In order to tell whether a picture is true or false we must compare it with reality” (TLP 2.223). This is crucial: a proposition is something that can be true or false. A situation can obtain or not obtain, and if we want to know whether a proposition is true or false, whether the situation depicted by it obtains or does not obtain, we have to look at reality, at how the world is. In Wittgenstein’s words, a proposition *says* something, namely how things stand in the world (TLP 4.022), or that such and such is the case.

We can understand a proposition, know its meaning, without knowing whether it is true (TLP 4.024): “To understand a proposition means to know what is the case if it is true.” Understanding a proposition involves grasping its form (which is uniquely determined by the forms of

its elements) and what Wittgenstein calls the “pictorial relationship” (TLP 2.1514), that is, the relationship between the elements of the picture and the depicted objects. If we want to know whether a proposition is true, we have to look at how the world is.

This might seem to be a plausible account of how thoughts and propositions can relate to facts. If we want to know whether the proposition ‘The cat is on the mat’ is true, we have to look at the world, and depending on the world, the proposition can be either true or false. But let us take something different, for instance, ‘The cat is on the mat or it is not on the mat’. Is this a proposition? No, not in the strict sense, because it cannot be either true or false depending on how the world is: it is necessarily true. In Wittgenstein’s terminology, ‘The cat is on the mat or it is not on the mat’ *says* nothing (TLP 5.43), it does not inform us about anything that we could fail to know. Tautologies, writes Wittgenstein, are not pictures of reality. They do not represent states of affairs (TLP 4.462). They are senseless [*sinnlos*], because whether they are true does not depend on the world being a certain way (TLP 4.461).

Although tautologies are *senseless*, Wittgenstein emphasizes that they are not *nonsensical*. He writes that they are “part of the symbolism” (TLP 4.4611). They can be true in a sense, but we do not have to look at the world in order to determine whether they are true: “It is the peculiar mark of logical propositions that one can recognize that they are true from the symbol [the proposition] alone [...]” (TLP 6.113). Logical propositions *say* nothing (TLP 6.11), but they are not nonsensical because they *show* something, and what they show or present is what Wittgenstein calls “the scaffolding of the world” (TLP 6.124). “Logic is transcendental” (TLP 6.13), according to Wittgenstein, and for something to be transcendental is for it to be a condition of the possibility of something, for it to make something possible. Logic is a condition of the possibility of meaning: what we say or think will only make sense if it is structured according to the laws of logic. If it violates the laws of logic, we will fail to say something meaningful. We will then not really say anything at all, not really express a thought at all (TLP 3.03).

The difference between saying and showing, between meaningful propositions and logical propositions that say nothing, is crucial to the *Tractatus*. Logical propositions, such as ‘The cat is on the mat or it is not

on the mat', are necessarily true. Logic enables us to distinguish what makes sense from what does not make sense, and it shows the scaffolding or the limits of the world. By contrast, meaningful propositions are contingently or accidentally true or false. In order to tell whether a meaningful proposition is true or false, we must compare it with reality, with the world.

Logical 'propositions'	Meaningful propositions
Necessary (could not be otherwise)	Accidental/contingent (could be otherwise)
Sense vs. nonsense	True vs. false
Showing	Saying
Scaffolding (limit) of the world	World

2 Ethics as a Condition of the Possibility of Meaning?

Let us have a look now at what Wittgenstein writes about ethics in 6.4. We read that "all propositions are of equal value" (TLP 6.4). TLP 6.41:

The sense of the world must lie outside the world. In the world everything is as it is, and everything happens as it does happen: *in* it no value exists – and if it did exist, it would have no value. If there is any value that does have value, it must lie outside the whole sphere of what happens and is the case. For all that happens and is the case is accidental. What makes it non-accidental cannot lie *within* the world, since if it did it would itself be accidental. It must lie outside the world.

TLP 6.42 and 6.421:

So too it is impossible for there to be propositions of ethics. Propositions can express nothing that is higher. It is clear that ethics cannot be put into words. Ethics is transcendental. (Ethics and aesthetics are one and the same.)

What can we make of this? Meta-ethically speaking, Wittgenstein is clearly a non-realist: there is and can be no value in the world; if there is any value, it must lie *outside* the world. Wittgenstein also seems to be a

non-cognitivist. According to the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, the non-cognitivist's central claim is that moral statements are "not in the business of ... making statements which could be true or false in any substantial sense" (van Roojen 2018), and this comes very close to saying, as Wittgenstein does, that there can be no ethical propositions, because a proposition is precisely that which could be true or false. Other passages in Wittgenstein's work support the view that his position was non-cognitivist and non-realist: "An ethical sentence ... is not a statement of fact. Like an exclamation of admiration" (Wittgenstein 2000: MS 183: 76, 5 June 1931, translation Christensen 2011: 810); "[...] good and evil [...] are not properties in the world" (Wittgenstein 1979: 79; henceforth 'NB'). In his 'Lecture on Ethics', held in 1929, he imagines that an omniscient person would write all he knew in a book. This book, Wittgenstein says, "would contain nothing that we would call an *ethical judgment*" (Wittgenstein 1993: 39; henceforth 'LE'). It would contain descriptions of facts but no ethical propositions: "facts, facts, and facts, but no Ethics" (LE 40).

So far, ethical 'propositions' seem to be very similar to logical ones. (I put 'proposition' in scare quotes because, strictly speaking, there are no ethical or logical propositions.) Like logical propositions, ethical propositions say nothing about how the world happens to be. They are non-accidental: if lying is wrong, it will not be accidentally, but necessarily wrong. This means, among other things, that whether an action is right or wrong cannot depend on the consequences it happens to have, as consequentialists maintain (TLP 6.422). There is only logical necessity, according to Wittgenstein, and "a necessity for one thing to happen because another has happened does not exist" (TLP 6.37). Thus, even if there are law-like causal connections between actions and consequences, these connections remain contingent and lack the necessity that is characteristic of ethical propositions.

There is another important similarity between Wittgenstein's accounts of logic and ethics: both logic (TLP 6.13) and ethics (TLP 6.421) are called 'transcendental'. With respect to logic, this means that logic is a condition of the possibility of meaning. Without logic, it would be impossible to say or think anything meaningful; without logic, there could be no meaningful propositions. What then could it mean to say

that ethics is transcendental? My suggestion is that ethics is, like logic, a condition of the possibility of meaning. But the kind of meaning that we are talking about here is not what is sometimes called ‘semantic’ meaning (as in ‘the meaning of a proposition’), but rather ‘existential’ meaning (as in ‘the meaning of life’). It has often been noticed that, in many languages, the word ‘meaning’ is used in these seemingly different ways, and although some think that this is a coincidence (Kauppinen 2012; Martela 2017), many believe that it is not (Balaska 2019; Goldman 2018; Prinzing 2021; Thomas 2019), because there are more similarities between semantic and existential meaning than one might suppose at first sight. A very important similarity emphasized by these authors is that, for something to have meaning, semantic or existential, it must have a place within a meaningful structure or whole or it must itself be a structured whole.

I already mentioned the connection of logic to ideas of form and structure (see also TLP 6.12, TLP 6.1224). The logical form of an object or a name is the totality of ways in which they can and cannot be combined with other objects or names. Logic makes it possible to combine objects with other objects and names with other names, and without the possibility of being combined with other objects or names there could not *be* objects or names. Wittgenstein emphasizes that “Only propositions have sense; only in the nexus of a proposition does a name have meaning” (TLP 3.3). Logic is a precondition of semantic meaning because it provides the formal aspect without which propositions could not be structured wholes, without which propositions could not be meaningful.

I believe that something parallel holds for ethics in the *Tractatus*. By analogy to Wittgenstein’s remark that names only have meaning in the nexus of a proposition, we might say that actions only have meaning in the nexus of a life.² This idea is present in recent debates about the meaning of actions and lives (although the *Tractatus* is not mentioned in these debates):

One can’t even assess the meaning of a part without knowing how it fits into the larger picture of one’s life. One doesn’t know, for instance, how meaningful a relationship is without at least knowing how it ends. The meaning of each part of a life depends ... on what came before and what comes afterwards, on how all the parts hang together. (Prinzing 2021: 6)

A life is a structured whole, in which actions are arranged in a certain way. I quote Prinzing again:

The meaning of a sentence is determined partly by the meanings of the words that constitute it and how those words are arranged. ... Similarly, the meanings of Mandela's life depend on ... the meanings of the events in it and how these parts are arranged. (Prinzing 2021: 5)

Ethics is a precondition of existential meaning because it enables us to see lives as structured wholes, which is a necessary condition for seeing them as meaningful.

In his *Notebooks*, Wittgenstein writes that "Ethics does not treat of the world. Ethics must be a condition of the world, like logic" (NB 77). That logic is a condition of the world can be understood in a strong and in a weaker sense. In the strong sense, it means that, without logic, there would be no cats or mats. I will not pronounce on this strong claim here and only commit myself to a weaker one. In the weaker sense, that logic is a condition of the world means that, without logic, it would be impossible to *think or talk about* cats and mats. That logic is a condition of the world means that it is a condition of the possibility of meaningful language and thought. That *ethics* is a condition of the world means, in my view, that without ethics life could not be meaningful. Immediately preceding the remark that ethics must be a condition of the world, Wittgenstein writes: "The World and Life are one" (see also TLP 5.621), and he adds: "Physiological life is of course not 'Life'. And neither is psychological life. Life is the world" (NB 77). Ethics, like logic, is a condition of the world. It is not, though, a condition of the world as an object of meaningful talk or thought, but of the world as life in the non-physiological sense. Ethics is clearly not a condition of physiological or psychological life, life in the sense in which animals or plants have a life. Rather, as logic makes semantic meaning possible, makes meaningful propositions possible, ethics makes existential meaning possible, makes it possible for life to have meaning.

So I believe that there are clear parallels between logic and ethics as the early Wittgenstein understands them. But there are also differences. It has been argued that logical propositions are *sinnlos*, that is, they say nothing

or are without sense, while ethical propositions are thought by Wittgenstein to be *unsinnig*, that is, they are nonsensical (Conant 2005: 87).³ A reason for thinking this is that, according to Wittgenstein, the sense of the world must lie *outside* the world (TLP 6.41). The idea here could be that ethics lies outside the world while logic, as a condition of the world, is more like a limit of the world. But if ethics lies outside the world, then it will be more accurate to say that ethics is *transcendent* (i.e., it lies outside the world) and not just *transcendental* (it is a condition of the world) (Glock 2015: 108). On the other hand, some have *denied* that ethics is transcendent according to Wittgenstein: Anne-Marie Christensen (2011: 802) writes that “ethics is not described as *transcendent*, that is, as being beyond the realm of the real, but as *transcendental*, that is, as a part of what conditions our experience of the real” (see also Appelqvist 2013; Appelqvist and Pöykkö 2020).

So what is it? Is ethics transcendent or transcendental? Jordi Fairhurst (2021) suggests that it might be both, and I agree, although my proposal is somewhat different from his. *My* proposal would be to distinguish between ethics as a condition of meaningful life, on the one hand (and this is the sense in which ethics is transcendental and analogous to logic), and ethical ‘propositions’ as expressions or manifestations of a particular attitude to the world, on the other (and this is the sense in which ethics is transcendent and disanalogous to logic). Ethics as a condition of meaningful life is analogous to logic as a condition of meaningful thought and language; both are transcendental. Ethics in the first sense makes particular ethical ‘propositions’ possible, like logic makes meaningful thoughts possible. But these particular ethical ‘propositions’ are unlike meaningful propositions in that they do not refer to anything *and* unlike logical propositions in that they do not show the scaffolding of the world.⁴ This is the sense in which ethics is transcendent.

3 Goodness, Happiness, Harmony

I propose to have a look now at some of Wittgenstein’s remarks that follow the remarks discussed in the previous section (TLP 6.4 – TLP 6.421). Wittgenstein writes: “It is impossible to speak about the will in so far as

it is the subject of ethical attributes. And the will as a phenomenon is of interest only to psychology” (TLP 6.423). He continues:

If the good or bad exercise of the will does alter the world, it can alter only the limits of the world, not the facts – not what can be expressed by means of language. In short, the effect must be that it [the world] becomes an altogether different world. It must, so to speak, wax and wane as a whole. The world of the happy man is a different one from that of the unhappy man. (TLP 6.43)

The first of these remarks is about the will as the ‘subject’ of ethical attributes.

Wittgenstein says that the will as a phenomenon is only of interest to psychology, and this is reminiscent of his remark that he is not interested in psychological life. So the will here is not about what people or animals actually want, which is a psychological phenomenon. The will, he explains in the *Notebooks*, is “an attitude of the subject to the world” (NB 87), and we cannot speak about the will because it is not something *in* the world. Good and evil only enter through the willing subject (NB 79). They are not in the world: it is not the world, but the subject that can be good or evil (NB 80). “Things acquire ‘significance’ [*Bedeutung*] only through their relation to my will” (NB 84). Good willing makes a subject good, bad willing makes it evil.

Wittgenstein emphasizes in the *Tractatus*, right before he starts discussing ethics, that what happens in the world is independent of our will (TLP 6.373). “Even if all that we wish for were to happen, still this would only be a favour granted by fate, so to speak; for there is no *logical* [read: no necessary] connexion between the will and the world, which would guarantee it [...] (TLP 6.374).” We find similar remarks in the *Notebooks*: “I cannot bend the happenings of the world to my will: I am completely powerless” (NB 73).

What is good or evil is not the world or anything in the world, but the willing subject. Wittgenstein writes that “One cannot will without acting” (NB 87), but the exact nature of the relation between willing and acting in early Wittgenstein is controversial (for different views, see Christensen 2011: 804 and Fairhurst 2019: 89–90). The willing subject

is good if it has a good will, which means a good attitude to the world, and it is evil if it has a bad will, which means a bad attitude to the world. Wittgenstein's emphasis on quality of will, rather than on the consequences of our actions, sounds Kantian. But unlike Kant he seems to identify being good, having a good attitude, with being happy, and being bad, having a bad attitude, with being unhappy. He writes in the *Notebooks*:

I keep on coming back to this! Simply the happy life is good, the unhappy bad. And if I *now* ask myself: But why should I live *happily*, then this of itself seems to me to be a tautological question; the happy life seems to be justified, of itself, it seems that it *is* the only right life. (NB 78)⁵

Can we say something more about the happy or the good life than that it consists in having a good will or a good attitude? I believe that we can, mainly on the basis of the *Notebooks*, where Wittgenstein writes: "In order to live happily I must be in agreement with the world. And that is what 'being happy' *means*" (NB 75). Another way of expressing what I take to be the same idea is that "the happy life seems to be in some sense more *harmonious* than the unhappy" (NB 78).

It is interesting that the word Wittgenstein uses for 'agreement' is *Übereinstimmung*, a word which plays a crucial role in the *Tractatus* as a whole. He writes that "a picture agrees with reality or fails to agree; it is correct or incorrect, true or false" (TLP 2.21). And further: "The agreement or disagreement of its sense [the sense of a picture] with reality constitutes its truth or falsity" (TLP 2.222); "The sense of a proposition is its agreement and disagreement with possibilities of existence and non-existence of states of affairs" (TLP 4.2). The general idea is, as we have seen in section one, that logic is a condition of the possibility of semantic meaning: it is in virtue of their sharing a logical form with a situation that propositions can be meaningful. If the situation depicted by the proposition obtains, if there is agreement between the world and the proposition, the proposition is true; if the proposition is meaningful but disagrees with reality, then the proposition is false.

The analogy I want to propose, although it certainly has its limits, is that, in the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein thinks of ethics as a condition of the possibility of existential meaning. Logic and ethics are both transcendental,

conditions of the world and of the possibility of meaning. Propositions are the primary units of semantic meaning, lives are the primary units of existential meaning. Propositions and lives have meaning in virtue of their form. Names only have meaning in the context of a proposition, actions or willings only have meaning in the context of a life. And just like propositions can be true or false, meaningful lives (so not physiological lives, but lives that are ethically structured, in which the subject takes up an attitude to the world) can be happy or unhappy, where happiness, like truth, lies in agreement with the world, and unhappiness, like falsity, lies in disagreement with the world.

Logic	Ethics
Condition of the world (Language, Thought)	Condition of the world (Life)
Transcendental	Transcendental
Condition of the possibility of meaning	Condition of the possibility of meaning
Proposition as unit of semantic meaning	Life as unit of existential meaning
Meaning in virtue of logical form	Meaning in virtue of ethical form
Names only have meaning in context of a proposition	Actions/willings only have meaning in context of a life
Meaningful proposition = true or false	Meaningful life = happy or unhappy
True if agreement/fit with reality	Happy if agreement/fit with reality

In *Culture and Value*, Wittgenstein makes the following remark: “The fact that life is problematic means that your life does not fit life’s shape. So you must change your life, & once it fits the shape, what is problematic will disappear” (Wittgenstein 1998: 31; henceforth ‘CV’). This is a remark from 1937. If our life is problematic, that is, unhappy, we must change it in such a way that it ‘fits’, or comes to agree with, the world, and we will become happy. Again, Wittgenstein suggests that the fact that life is problematic lies in its lacking a certain structure. Once it is structured in a particular way, the problem will disappear. Just like a true proposition is a proposition that fits reality, a happy life is a life that

somehow fits reality. But the fit does not consist in the obtaining of a depicted situation; rather, Wittgenstein suggests that it consists in the acceptance of reality as it is.

That a good life is a happy life, a life in agreement or harmony with the world, may sound good, but can we say something more substantial? Wittgenstein asks:

What is the objective mark of the happy, harmonious life? Here it is again clear that there cannot be any such mark that can be *described*. This mark cannot be a physical one but only a metaphysical one, a transcendental one. (NB 78)

We cannot point to a particular situation and say: if this situation obtains, if this and this happens, your life will be happy. And the reason why we cannot say anything substantial, why we cannot say what a good life consists in or how the world must be in order for a life to be good, or what effects a good life must have in the world, is that we are asking the wrong kind of question and expecting the wrong kind of answer here. The mark of a happy life is not a physical but a transcendental one, and this means: not a matter of a specific physical or otherwise substantial content that happy lives must have, but a structural matter. Similarly, the mark of a true proposition is not physical or otherwise substantial: being true is not a property that something can have or fail to have, it is a structural matter. A proposition is true if the situation depicted by the proposition obtains, if the proposition *fits*, or is in agreement with, reality. Truth is a matter of the relation between a proposition and reality; similarly, the relation between your life and reality determines whether your life is good or bad, happy or unhappy.

I believe that this way of understanding things throws light on Wittgenstein's remarks on suicide in the *Notebooks*. Wittgenstein writes:

If suicide is allowed then everything is allowed. If anything is not allowed then suicide is not allowed. This throws light on the nature of ethics, for suicide is, so to speak, the elementary sin. ... or is even suicide in itself neither good nor evil? (NB 91)

Suicide is neither good nor evil because good and bad (or evil) lives are both meaningful: the good life is a meaningful life in harmony with reality, the bad life is a meaningful life that fails to agree with reality. In both cases, one's life bears some kind of relationship to reality; in both cases, one's life is meaningful in the sense that it agrees or fails to agree with reality, analogous to a proposition's being meaningful if it is either true or false. The idea that suicide is evil is not to be situated at the level of ethical 'propositions', at the transcendent level of expressions of a particular attitude to the world. Suicide is not evil, I suggest, in the sense that it manifests a bad attitude. Rather, it is to be situated at the transcendental level: it precludes the *possibility* of being good or evil, it symbolizes a refusal to take up *any kind of attitude* towards the world. If ethics, in the transcendental sense, is about the relation between your life and the world, then suicide throws light on the nature of ethics because it makes any such relation impossible. If suicide is allowed, then it is allowed not to take up any attitude towards the world at all. If no such attitude is taken up, there is no ethics and no value. We are left with a valueless world in which everything is as it is and happens as it does happen, a world in which nothing and everything is allowed. That might be why Wittgenstein says that if suicide is allowed, then everything is allowed.

I suggested that suicide can be connected to the refusal to take up any kind of attitude towards the world. It is worth emphasizing, though, that the attempt not to take up any attitude towards the world is an attempt to do something that is impossible. It is simply not an option, for those who are capable of taking up an attitude towards the world, not to take up any attitude. Taking up an ethical attitude is not something that we can either do or not do. We cannot choose or decide to live outside of ethics, just as we cannot choose or decide to talk or think outside of logic.

4 Does the Tractatus Have an Ethical Point?

I have been focusing on passages in the *Tractatus* where Wittgenstein explicitly mentions ethics (6.4s). According to James Conant (2005: 61), however, if we want to know what ethics in the *Tractatus* is, this is the

wrong thing to do. The reason is that ethical vocabulary is dispensable: whatever we express using ethical words such as ‘good’ or ‘evil’ can also be expressed in other words, without the explicit use of ethical vocabulary, and so the parts of the *Tractatus* that do not contain any specifically ethical vocabulary could still have an ethical point. We will underestimate the scope of the ethical in Wittgenstein’s thinking if we focus on the 6.4s (Conant 2005: 66).

I would like to respond to Conant by making a distinction (as Conant himself also does, albeit in a somewhat different way, see Conant 2005: 71–72). When Conant discusses ethics in the *Tractatus*, his question is basically what the *ethical point* of the *Tractatus* is, and the phrase ‘ethical point’ is a direct reference to a famous letter Wittgenstein wrote to Ludwig von Ficker. In that letter, Wittgenstein writes that the point of the *Tractatus* is ethical, and that the Preface and the conclusion of the *Tractatus* express this point most directly (Monk 1991: 178). In line with Wittgenstein’s suggestion, Conant’s (2005) and Diamond’s (2000) accounts of ethics in the *Tractatus* focus on ‘the frame’ of the book, that is, the Preface and the closing remarks rather than the 6.4s, and they both refer to Wittgenstein’s remark in the Preface of the *Tractatus* that his book is not a textbook (*Lehrbuch*). This has implications for how we have to engage with the book, how we have to do philosophy. In other words, there is some normative point to be drawn from it, a point about what we have to do. But I have not been concerned with normative points such as this one in my discussion. It is quite true that the 6.4s do not contain any clear normative lessons, and the ethical point of the *Tractatus* has to be sought elsewhere.

But apart from looking for normative ethical points, points about what one ought to do, one might also look for what can be called meta-ethical points, points about the status of ethics and of ethical propositions. If we say that Wittgenstein has a non-cognitivist and non-realist conception of ethics, we are talking about his meta-ethics.⁶ And these meta-ethical points *are* made primarily in the 6.4s, even though it is true that they can only be understood in the context of the work as a whole.⁷ Because I am not concerned with the normative ethical point of the *Tractatus*, with ethics in the *Tractatus* as Conant characterizes it, I believe that my focus on the 6.4s is justified.

5 Conclusion

I have offered a reading of some of Wittgenstein's remarks on ethics in the 6.4s. I have not commented on all of these remarks. I have said nothing, for instance, about Wittgenstein's references to the mystical (TLP 6.44, TLP 6.522). I have been focusing on the *Tractatus* and the *Notebooks*, with some occasional references to the 'Lecture on Ethics', but there is much to say about the relation of Wittgenstein's thought about ethics in the early work and subsequent developments in his later work (see De Mesel 2014; De Mesel 2018; De Mesel and Kuusela 2019), or about the influence of Wittgenstein's early meta-ethics on developments in meta-ethics in the first half of the twentieth century (Glock 2015). I have not *evaluated* Wittgenstein's early thought about ethics: is he presenting a philosophically defensible conception of ethics, a fruitful one perhaps, that has been unfairly disregarded by contemporary meta-ethicists? Although I have been referring to some recent literature on the meaning of life, I have left open the question whether Wittgenstein's ideas about the meaning of life could be developed in such a way as to constitute a worthwhile addition to that literature.

The main idea of this chapter has been that ethics, for Wittgenstein, is, like logic, a condition of the possibility of meaning. The primary unit of semantic meaning is a proposition, and only in the context of a proposition do names have meaning. Similarly, the primary unit of existential meaning is a life, and only in the context of a life do actions or willings have meaning. A proposition is meaningful if it fits the world, and the same can be said about a life. Fit is a structural criterion, rather than a substantial one. Wittgenstein does not specify what has to be the case in the world for a proposition to be true or a life to be happy; rather, he specifies in what kind of relation a proposition or a life must stand to the world in order to be true or happy. A meaningful proposition can be true or false, a meaningful life can be good or evil, happy or unhappy.⁸

Notes

1. I do not want to exclude that there is *more* than an analogy between logic and ethics as the early Wittgenstein understands them. Ray Monk opens his biography of Wittgenstein with a quotation from Otto Weininger's *Sex and Character*: "Logic and ethics are fundamentally the same, they are no more than duty to oneself" (Monk 1991: ii). Perhaps logic and ethics are one, or logic is somehow a part of ethics or the other way round, or they are inseparable in some other way (see, in this regard, also Wittgenstein's letter to von Ficker referred to in Sect. 4). I will not be concerned with these questions in this chapter.
2. I am grateful to Martin Stokhof for two interesting comments here. First, Wittgenstein writes: „Nur der Satz hat Sinn; nur im Zusammenhange des Satzes hat ein Name Bedeutung“ (TLP 3.3). Both Ogden (Wittgenstein 2005) and Pears/McGuinness (Wittgenstein 1961) translate 'Bedeutung' to 'meaning' here, but 'reference' might be more apt. If so, then the analogy between (1) names only have meaning in the nexus of a proposition and (2) actions only have meaning in the nexus of a life becomes less strong, for one cannot say that actions only have *reference* in the nexus of a life. Still, my main point remains: both semantic and existential meaning are thoroughly contextual. Second, there is another way of making the analogy, which I will not explore in this chapter. Instead of taking propositions to be analogous to lives, one might suggest that lives are more analogous to texts consisting of propositions, and that propositions are more like actions than like lives. I focus on the parallel proposition-life rather than on proposition-action for several reasons. First, if propositions are analogous to actions, then what are the elements of a proposition analogous to? It has been suggested to me that 'movements' might play the required role here (actions are structured wholes consisting of movements, analogous to the way in which propositions are structured wholes consisting of names), but I have doubts about this proposal. Second, and more importantly, the analogy between propositions and lives makes it possible to connect Wittgenstein's remarks on the (un)happy life and its (dis)agreement with reality to his views on logic (see section three). Meaningful lives can be happy or unhappy, analogous to the way in which meaningful propositions can be true or false. It is not clear how actions could be analogous to propositions in this way.

3. My attribution of this claim to Conant is based on the following passage: “There are such things for the *Tractatus* as distinctively ‘logical propositions’, but these are only *sinnlos* ... whereas the only candidates for distinctively ‘ethical propositions’ that figure in the book are strings of signs that are *unsinnig*” (Conant 2005: 87). Yet Conant also writes: “There are no ethical propositions, for the *Tractatus*, which thus parallel the propositions of logic, in standing apart from the body of propositions that can be true or false and yet themselves are part of the symbolism” (Conant 2005: 87). The first sentence suggests that ethical propositions are *unsinnig*, the second may be taken to suggest that they are *sinnlos*. Whatever Conant’s considered view is, the first sentence suggests that ethical propositions may be *unsinnig* rather than *sinnlos*, and this possibility is worth taking seriously.
4. Do they then show something else? I wrote that they express or manifest a particular attitude to the world. One might say that they *show* this attitude, but showing an attitude *to* the world (ethical propositions) is different from showing the structure *of* the world (logical propositions).
5. The difference with Kant may not be very substantial, though, because Wittgenstein’s conception of happiness is different from Kant’s (see Appelqvist and Pöykkö 2020: 73, 86). Neither Wittgenstein nor Kant thinks that ethics is a matter of feeling happy in the empirical sense of the term.
6. Some readers of Wittgenstein, such as Diamond (2000: 169) and Mulhall (2002: 303), think that there can be no such thing as meta-ethics. See De Mesel (2015) for my response to them. On the relation between Wittgensteinian meta-ethics and meta-ethics as traditionally conceived, see Akhlaghi (2022).
7. The meta-ethical points are made *primarily* in the 6.4s, but not *exclusively* there. Apart from having normative implications, Wittgenstein’s remark that his book is not a textbook may be thought to contain a meta-ethical point. With respect to language and thought, the idea of its not being a *Lehrbuch* is that the *Tractatus* cannot be used to *inform* people about meaningful language and thought, but presupposes that people are *already* language-users. It makes implicit what people already know, it teaches nothing new. Analogously, the remarks about ethics cannot be used to inform people about meaningful lives, or to tell them what a meaningful life consists in. Rather, they presuppose that people are *already* ethical beings.

8. Versions of this chapter have been presented at the *Tractatus* Centennial Lectures Series at the universities of Amsterdam and Tsinghua, organized by Martin Stokhof and Hao Tang, and at a workshop on the *Tractatus* at Ghent University, organized by Wim Vanrie. Many thanks to the organizers for the invitation to present, and to the participants for helpful comments and suggestions. In particular, I thank Kevin Cahill, Eli Friedlander, Oskari Kuusela, Jaap van der Does, Wim Vanrie, and the editors of this volume, Martin Stokhof and Hao Tang.

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