Lecture on Ethics
Lecture on Ethics

Ludwig Wittgenstein

Edited with commentary by

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# Contents

Acknowledgments vii  

1 Introduction: The Content of a Lecture on Ethics 1  
2 Established Text of the Lecture: MS 139b Normalized 42  
3 The Manuscripts of a Lecture on Ethics 52  
4 Description of the Manuscripts 66  
5 Symbols Used in the Diplomatic Transcriptions 69  
6 Proto-Draft: Diplomatic Transcription 71  
7 MS 139a: Diplomatic Transcription 77  
8 MS 139b: Diplomatic Transcription 101  
9 TS 207: Diplomatic Transcription 123  

References 135  
Index 137
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Introduction

The Content of a Lecture on Ethics

(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

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\(^1\) 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.
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. 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. These are themselves culled from a dozen pages in Wittgenstein’s diary from the second half of 1916. 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. 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

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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.) 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. 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

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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.”

(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. 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

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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.