

BOOK REVIEWS

Wittgenstein's *Lecture on Ethics*, edited by Zamuner, Di Lascio & Levy

Lars Hertzberg

Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Lecture on Ethics*, edited with commentary by Edoardo Zamuner, Ermelina Valentina Di Lascio and D. K. Levy. Wiley Blackwell: Chichester, 2014, vii + 141 pp.

This volume contains Wittgenstein's 1929 *Lecture on Ethics* as well as a long philosophical introduction in which the editors lay out their reading of the lecture and its place in Wittgenstein's thinking. In addition there are four different versions of the lecture in diplomatic transcription with text samples in facsimile, and a history of the manuscripts.

The editors point out that the ethics lecture is unique in several respects. It was Wittgenstein's only lecture to a non-philosophical audience (The Heretics Society in Cambridge), his only text dealing exclusively with ethics, as well as the only lecture of his of which drafts – indeed several drafts – exist. Normally Wittgenstein would not speak from a prepared text. The three regards in which the Lecture is unique are probably interconnected.

The volume is a careful and beautiful production. It is evidently a further development of a work by the same editors with a similar title published by Quodlibet in 2007.

The editors' commentary provides a number of thoughtful and challenging analyses; it also gives rise to questions. They wish to correct the impression that Wittgenstein had little interest in ethics by arguing that he was morally serious and that, for him, philosophy was an ethical undertaking. In this context, though, it would be important to distinguish between being ethically serious and taking an interest in moral philosophy. It seems clear to me that issues in moral philosophy did not stir Wittgenstein's intellectual imagination to any degree comparable to the way questions of language and mind did. This on the

other hand does not in any way detract from his moral seriousness.

The main point of the lecture, as Wittgenstein pointed out, was the paradox that certain experiences seem to have absolute (or supernatural) value, yet experiences occur in the world, and nothing in the world can have absolute value. For a state of affairs to have absolute value would mean that no one could abstain from pursuing it (or, as Wittgenstein puts it at one point, no one could abstain without feeling ashamed); however no such state of affairs could exist. Wittgenstein's solution to the paradox was to declare that the attempt to articulate the experiences in question (or to attribute value to them) is nonsensical.

As the authors point out, what motivated Wittgenstein was above all the determination to separate ethics from the realm of facts. On a common understanding of early Wittgenstein, this motive is directly bound up with the outlook on logic and representation advanced in the *Tractatus*: no matter how closely we investigate what happens in a murder, we will only uncover "facts, facts, facts but no Ethics" (to quote the Lecture) – nothing that would *compel* us to acknowledge the wrongness of the act. (Thus according to early Wittgenstein. This point might be queried. For instance, what precisely is meant by compulsion here? I can imagine someone asserting, say, that in reading Nabokov's *Lolita* one *cannot help* coming to think of the

protagonist as a moral monster – this assertion, of course, would not be meant as an empirical generalization, but rather as a moral reaction, involving the suggestion that anyone who did not share it was morally obtuse.)

However, Zamuner et al. put forward an alternative, or additional, reading. They claim that Wittgenstein's central purpose is an ethical one. They write: "[Wittgenstein's] motivation is to warn his audience about the false hope that describing and analysing ethical experiences and expressions will help them to satisfy the ethical demand each subject must answer" (p. 19). In addition to the idea that no facts can coerce us to take up any given attitude to events, they advance a further notion: they argue that according to Wittgenstein the ethical cannot be described since whatever can be described can be controlled, and thus, if we could describe the ethical, this means that we could (if not now then at some time in the distant future, perhaps) learn a technique for making ourselves, and others, better, and that would dissolve individual responsibility.

This latter suggestion sounds interesting, but is in need of closer scrutiny. For one thing, if there is a problem with the idea of making someone better, it is surely a logical rather than an ethical problem. For another thing, there is scant ground for attributing such a thought to Wittgenstein: it is true that he talks about making experiences controllable by describing them (pp. 46 f),

but this is simply in the interest of clarification: he speaks about the need to nail down a specific experience in order to get the topic of discussion into focus.

The authors' emphasis on Wittgenstein's ethical motivation is bound up with an idea that seems central to their reading of the Lecture: they argue that Wittgenstein's ethical outlook was independent of his view of language. The basis of their argument is the claim that Wittgenstein's ethical outlook remained unchanged from the 1916 remarks in the Notebooks through the 1929 Lecture up until diary notes made in 1937 (published as *Denkbewegungen*, English version in *Ludwig Wittgenstein: Public and Private Occasions*, ed. J. Klagge and A. Nordmann, Rowman & Littlefield, 2003); on the other hand, this was of course a period in which there was a marked development in his thinking about language and meaning. Now there is no doubt that Wittgenstein's ideas about ethics were an independent source of motivation in his early work, rather than something that, as it were unexpectedly, grew out of his reflections on logic and meaning. Yet Wittgenstein's way of articulating his outlook on ethics was clearly influenced by his logical thought. Just try reading the Lecture without having the *Tractatus* at the back of your mind!

The authors quote a diary note from 15.2.1937 in which Wittgenstein, in discussing an ethical matter, writes about making "a gesture which means something similar to

'unsayable'" (p. 36), and they equate this with his earlier remarks about ethical remarks being nonsensical. However, the conceptual environment of the remark is wholly different from that of the Lecture. By 1937 Wittgenstein had moved far away from the, as it were, romantic concept of nonsense of the Lecture, as well as from the idea that only factual assertions make sense. And a close reading of the 1937 remark makes it clear that the point being made is much subtler and more complex than a simple gesture towards nonsense.

Despite some points of disagreement, I believe the introduction performs a valuable service by taking a fresh look at Wittgenstein's intentions. In all, this volume will be a valuable reference point for continued discussion of Wittgenstein's *Lecture* and his view of moral philosophy.

Åbo Akademi University
lhertzbe @ abo.fi