Edoardo Zamuner, Ermelinda Valentina Di Lascio, and D.K. Levy (eds.), *Lecture on Ethics* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014), vii + 141 pages. ISBN: 9781118842676. Hardback: £50.00.

After more than ten years of absence, Wittgenstein returned to academic philosophy in 1929. In the same year, he gave a lecture on ethics for The Heretics, a non-academic discussion group. Several versions of his written preparations have been preserved. The lecture on ethics is remarkable because, although it is hardly ten pages long, it is Wittgenstein’s only sustained treatment of the topic. A version of it was first published in 1965, but even among Wittgenstein scholars it has received relatively little critical attention and its influence on developments in moral philosophy has been negligible.

The editors of *Lecture on Ethics* discuss the content of Wittgenstein’s lecture in a comprehensive introduction (pp. 1-42). In addition, the book contains a normalized version of the established text of the lecture, diplomatic transcriptions of three preserved manuscripts and one typescript and a section about the chronology of these texts. The editors argue that, in contrast to what is generally believed, the typescript is not the version Wittgenstein read when he gave his talk. This typescript (TS 207), on which all previously published versions of the lecture were based, was almost certainly compiled after the delivery of the lecture (pp. 52-65). The editors convincingly show that Wittgenstein probably used one of the manuscripts (MS 139b) and conclude that this manuscript should henceforth be regarded as the established text of the lecture. While their account is compelling, it will most likely not cause great shifts in the interpretation of Wittgenstein’s views on ethics, because the differences between TS 207 and MS 139b are not significant. The manuscripts hardly throw any new light upon the content of Wittgenstein’s talk. Their newly established chronology enhances our understanding of the genesis of the lecture, but the philosophical (as opposed to historical or biographical) interest of the editors’ achievement here is limited.

Things are different for the introduction, in which the editors discuss some of the most pressing questions concerning Wittgenstein and ethics. Why did Wittgenstein, given his lifelong struggle with moral problems, and given the fact that he never doubted their importance, write so little about ethics? And if he had good reasons not to do moral philosophy, for example because he thought of it as a useless or meaningless endeavour, why then did he give a lecture on ethics? By offering a close reading of the lecture, the editors help readers to deal with these questions. They explain what Wittgenstein means by ‘the paradox that an experience, a fact should seem to have absolute value’ (p. 6). They discuss Wittgenstein’s contention that he would reject *ab initio*, ‘every significant description that anybody could possibly suggest’ of ‘absolute value’ (p. 12), a contention that many have seen as dogmatic because it seems to embody a refusal to think seriously about such descriptions.

A crucial part of the editors’ introduction concerns the relation between ethics and science. According to Wittgenstein, every attempt to investigate the ethical in a scientific way testifies of an incapacity to understand it. While science is about facts, ethics is not. Talking about facts makes sense, talking ethics is nonsense. That does not mean that Wittgenstein condemns the *tendency* to say something about the meaning of life or to express the absolute. On the contrary, he regards ethics as ‘a document of a tendency in the human mind which I personally cannot help respecting deeply’ (p. 21).

For the most part, the introduction helpfully summarizes issues that have been discussed in the secondary literature. It challenges most of this literature on at least two points, however. First, the editors argue that in the lecture on ethics Wittgenstein does something similar to what he did in the *Tractatus*. In the famous paragraph 6.54 of the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein says that those who understand the book will recognize its propositions as senseless. According to a contentious reading of so-called ‘resolute’ readers, Wittgenstein tries to make us understand in 6.54 that most of the *Tractatus* consists of sheer nonsense, not logically distinct from ‘piggly wiggle tiggle’, and we should give up the idea that Wittgenstein is trying to say anything but this kind of nonsense by the propositions in the book.

The editors of *Lecture on Ethics* seem (1) to take this controversial reading of the *Tractatus* for granted and (2) to assume that the lecture on ethics is to be read in a similar way. Wittgenstein is allegedly ‘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’ (p. 24). This reading of the lecture as an exercise in futility raises serious questions that are insufficiently addressed by the authors. If the lecture consists of sheer nonsense, then how could it be philosophically interesting? When Wittgenstein says that ‘no statement of fact can ever be, or imply, a statement of *absolute* value’ (p. 45), or when he claims that words such as ‘good’ and ‘important’ are used in two different senses, a trivial/relative (‘a good chair’) and an ethical/absolute sense (‘a good man’), and that ‘there are no propositions which, in any absolute sense, are sublime, important, or trivial’ (p. 45), is there not something he wants to *say* here, something more than ‘piggly wiggle tiggle’? And what about Wittgenstein’s claim that he cannot help respecting the tendency to express the absolute? Is that nonsense, too? Supporters of a resolute reading, it seems, have no option here but to retreat to some kind of framework reading: some statements in the lecture are sheer nonsense, others are not, and the latter form a meaningful framework which helps us to understand that the former are meaningless or nonsensical. The question then becomes how we can distinguish the ‘futile’, nonsensical statements from the meaningful ones. Wittgenstein does not offer a criterion, which inevitably threatens to make it seem arbitrary or dogmatic to claim that some parts of the lecture are nonsense (the definition of ethics on p. 43, for example) while other parts are meaningful (those expressing Wittgenstein’s respect for ethics, for example) (p. 20).

The second point on which the editors challenge much of the existing literature concerns the relation between ethics and language in Wittgenstein’s work. It is often said that what Wittgenstein says about ethics in his lecture is determined to a large extent by the views on language he sets out in the *Tractatus*. In the *Philosophical Investigations,* Wittgenstein defends a broader and more varied conception of meaningful language. Hence there is no reason to assume that the later Wittgenstein still regarded ethical language as nonsensical. Against this picture, the authors object that Wittgenstein’s ideas about ethics did not change, while his ideas about language changed radically. If his ethical views were determined by his views on language, a radical change in the latter should have resulted in a change in the former (p. 30). The authors’ reading is problematic for at least two reasons.

(1) First, it is difficult to maintain that Wittgenstein’s ethical views did not change, not because they obviously *did* change, but because conclusive evidence for or against the hypothesis is lacking. The authors support their claim about the continuity in Wittgenstein’s ethical views with a passage from his diaries from 1937 (p. 32), but at that time Wittgenstein’s new philosophy of language was still in the throes of development (although it had already changed considerably, as the authors rightly note). Moreover, it is unclear what status should be given to remarks in Wittgenstein’s diaries. The authors’ case would have been stronger if they had offered an example from Wittgenstein’s philosophical works written in the forties in which he repeats several things he said in the lecture on ethics. The problem is that there are no such examples.

(2) Secondly, even if it could be shown that Wittgenstein’s ethical views did not fundamentally change after the lecture on ethics, that would be no reason to doubt the claim that Wittgenstein’s views on ethics in the lecture were determined by his views on language in the *Tractatus*. It could be argued that the views on language in the *Philosophical Investigations* made it *possible* for Wittgenstein to change his ethical views, without pronouncing on the question whether these views did actually change. In the absence of clear evidence for or against the fact that Wittgenstein’s views *did* change, such a reading leaves open a door that the authors have prematurely closed.

The editors of *Lecture on Ethics* deserve credit for their impeccable transcriptions of Wittgenstein’s texts and for their well-argued claim that MS 139b and not TS 207 should be regarded as the established text of the lecture. Their introduction helpfully discusses several issues raised by the lecture, but it proposes a controversial reading of Wittgenstein’s text that I regard, for several reasons I have mentioned, as untenable or at least much more difficult to support than the authors suggest.

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