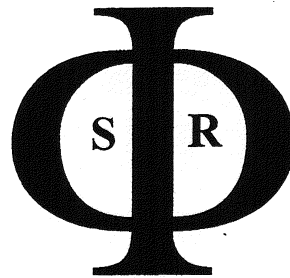


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WITTGENSTEIN AND THE PRIVATE LANGUAGE OF ETHICS

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What can we say (or not say) about ethics? Although not your typical ethicist, Wittgenstein offers some insights into this question. His few remarks on ethics (most notably in "A Lecture on Ethics") present some deep quandaries and raise some interesting questions about the possibility of ethical discussion. Despite his assertions that ethics concerns what is of ultimate value and that it is of central importance for human life, Wittgenstein nonetheless holds that ethics is literally nonsense. There would be no real problem here if Wittgenstein simply dismissed ethical talk as insignificant nonsense and rejected the entire ethical enterprise. This he does not do. Rather, Wittgenstein claims that while the attempt to express ethics is "absolutely hopeless," he has the deepest respect for those who attempt such expressions (Wittgenstein, PO 44). On the one hand, Wittgenstein regards ethics as of ultimate significance for human life. On the other hand, he is committed to the view that talk of absolute values or categorical imperatives is nonsense. How is one to reconcile these conflicting attitudes towards ethics?

The tension lies at the point of intersection between action and rational reflection. Intuitively, I believe there is something deeply right in Wittgenstein's approach: ethics, as both a realm of values and as a guide for our acting in accordance with those values, is of absolute importance; yet, ethical expression does constantly escape us. Still, to consign ethical inquiry to the realm of nonsense is seemingly to throw up one's hands in resignation. Ethical behavior (like all human behavior) cannot be entirely unprincipled.¹ Surely we must be capable of saying something about ethical principle(s) and our ability to distinguish right and wrong. If Wittgenstein is right about the inexpressibility of ethics we have the substantial problem of explaining how something inherently inexpressible can guide our behavior in a meaningful, defensible way.

I shall focus here on three issues. First, I discuss the relation of Wittgensteinian claims concerning ethics to a more traditional Kantian account, focusing specifically on the categorical significance and transcendence which Wittgenstein gives to ethics. While rejecting the possibility of offering a ground for ethics, Wittgenstein adopts a strongly Kantian attitude

toward ethical value. Second, I briefly discuss why Wittgenstein must regard ethical discourse as inherently and essentially nonsense. Finally, I explore the conflict between Wittgenstein's dual commitment to the categorical force and intrinsic nonsensicality of genuine ethical expressions. Treating ethical value as inexpressible allows Wittgenstein to emphasize the depth and mystery of ethical experience, but it effectively consigns ethics to the realm of private language. Ultimately, this approach to ethics offers the moral agent no tools for distinguishing legitimate from illegitimate ethical experience. Furthermore, it cannot defend the kind of transcendent ethical values to which Wittgenstein appeals for it leaves no room between believing one is right and being right.

I. The Necessity of Absolute Value

In "A Lecture on Ethics," Wittgenstein builds on Moore's account of ethics as "an inquiry into what is good," further describing ethics as "the enquiry into what is valuable, or, into what is really important, or...into the meaning of life, or into the right way of living" (PO 38). Each of these expressions, however, has two different senses. The first sense Wittgenstein calls the trivial or relative sense, something which is judged to be good (or right, etc.) if that thing serves some predetermined purpose or meets some predetermined standard. For example, a road is judged to be the right one only relative to some standard such as getting to some place in the shortest amount of time. Because trivial or relative judgments state facts (such as, "this is the right road, if you want to get to Chicago quickly"), these judgments can be stated in a purely factual manner that eliminates any ethical-sounding elements. The second sense of value expressions is the genuinely ethical, absolute sense, the sense in which something is judged absolutely and without reference to any factual claims, purposes, or standards. Wittgenstein highlights the distinction between relative value and absolute value with the following example:

Supposing that I could play tennis and one of you saw me playing and said "Well, you play pretty badly" and suppose I answered "I know, I'm playing badly but I don't want to play any better," all the other man could say would be "Ah then that's all right." But suppose I had told one of you a preposterous lie and he came up to me and said "You're behaving like a beast" and then I were to say "I know I behave badly, but then I don't want to behave any better," could he then say "Ah then that's all right"? Certainly not; he would say "Well, you *ought* to want to behave better." Here you have an absolute judgment of value, whereas the first instance was one of a relative judgment. (PO 38-39)

The difference between the relative judgment and the absolute judgment lies in how each judgment relates to the facts. In the relative case, there is no reason, independent of one's desires, to think that being a poor tennis player is either a good or a bad thing. With relative values, one is free to disagree (with impunity) about standards or free to weigh certain values differently. Absolute values, on the other hand, transcend facts and purposes; they are universally binding. In the absolute case, "badly" does not simply describe how one acts; rather, the term passes judgment, independently of any particular motivation the agent might have.

Genuine ethical values, then, are categorically binding. Wittgenstein says: "the absolute good, if it is a describable state of affairs, would be one which everybody, independent of his tastes and inclinations, would *necessarily* bring about or feel guilty for not bringing about" (PO 40).² Wittgenstein is clear that if we ever could discover absolute ethical values, we would find them to be necessary. This view of ethical value parallels Kant's distinction between hypothetical imperatives, which are relative to one's desires, and the categorical imperative, which commands independently of inclination. Like Kant, Wittgenstein insists that no state of affairs (no merely empirical fact) can produce such a universally applicable coercive power. Instead of denouncing ethical discourse as an ill-conceived metaphysical endeavor, however, Wittgenstein counterfactually describes absolute values as entailing a universal and necessary application, regardless of feeling or inclination. If ethics could be spoken, its expression would be one of necessary and universal commands.

Opposed to this assertion of the universal, necessary nature of ethical commands is Wittgenstein's insistence that such categorical pronouncements have no literal sense.³ Take the following example from "A Lecture on Ethics:"

Suppose one of you were an omniscient person and therefore knew all the movements of all the bodies in the world dead or alive and that he also knew all the states of mind of all human beings that ever lived, and suppose this man wrote all he knew in a big book, then this book would contain the whole description of the world; and what I want to say is, that this book would contain nothing that we would call an *ethical* judgment or anything that would logically imply such a judgment. (PO 39)

Because facts can be stated, this world-book would contain relative or hypothetical judgments that depend upon facts about one's culture. But, because absolute values transcend experience, this book could never contain any genuine ethical judgment. Wittgenstein continues the example: "If for instance in our world-book we read the description of a murder with all its

details physical and psychological, the mere description of these facts will contain nothing which we could call an *ethical* proposition” (PO 39-40). Absolute values transcend the natural world, and therefore, propositions that try to express them are inherently nonsensical.

The puzzling part of Wittgenstein’s attitude toward ethics is not that he attributes categorical force to ethical expressions; it is that he goes out of his way to assert the significance of ethics. Wittgenstein typically displays little patience for those who make metaphysical or supernatural assertions. In the case of ethics, however, Wittgenstein claims the endeavor is “absolutely hopeless” but that “it is a document of a tendency in the human mind which I personally cannot help respecting deeply and I would not for my life ridicule it” (PO 44). This combination of (1) the categorical, albeit counterfactual, force of ethical claims, (2) the hopelessness of saying anything ethical, and (3) the deep respect Wittgenstein has for ethics together raise intriguing questions. Presumably, Wittgenstein’s respect for ethics indicates that he does not think it is irredeemable nonsense. Absolute value, if it could be expressed, would be universally necessary. But, can inexpressible ethical claims really be said to carry necessity? Since these judgments can never be expressed, can we really know what force they would have? It is as if I told you: “there is something that you absolutely must do; I cannot tell you what it is, but you must to do it.” Is there any significance to the claim that such inexpressible ethical propositions are categorically binding? If one holds, as Wittgenstein does, that ethical discourse is inherently nonsensical, there is little room to assert anything about ethics, much less that, if we could describe them, ethical values would hold universally. First, though, let me say something about why ethical discourse is nonsense.

II. Ethical Sense and Nonsense

A predominate theme of Wittgensteinian philosophy is that “the aim of philosophy is to erect a wall at the point where language stops” (PO 187). Wittgenstein consistently holds that the limits of language are the limits of the world.⁴ Yet outside the limits of language and world lies an essential aspect of human life: ethics (inquiry into the right way of living, or inquiry into what is good). At the heart of Wittgenstein’s philosophy, whether early or late, is the idea that there is a point beyond which human language and representation cannot go. Intertwined with this drawing of the boundaries of the meaningful is a deep respect for aspects of life that go beyond language and representation.⁵ Ethical discourse is literally nonsense; it is the sort of thing that produces the bumps that understanding gets when it runs

“its head up against the limits of language” (Wittgenstein, PI §119). However, ethics is also “what makes life worth living” (Wittgenstein, PO 38). Assuming ethics has the significance which Wittgenstein attributes to it, this tension between the ultimate worth of ethical action and the inexpressibility of ethical claims is a consequence of Wittgenstein’s theories of meaning, both early and late.

What is it about Wittgenstein’s view of language that leads him to reject the expressibility of ethical value? Every ethical expression has a trivial or relative sense and an absolute or genuinely ethical sense. The trivial sense is what can be captured in describable states of affairs; the genuinely ethical sense is what goes beyond the world. Wittgenstein claims that while the trivial sense of ethics is easily expressed, the absolute sense is inherently and essentially nonsensical (PO 44). Given a Tractarian account of language, one in which language is capable of expressing only natural meaning or sense, this denial of sense for absolute or genuine ethical propositions is a natural consequence of their transcendent nature. In the *Tractatus*, language is capable of expressing only facts about the natural world. The propositions of our language represent the world by picturing facts, the totality of which constitute the world.⁶ To discover which propositions are true or false, we must compare them with the world and see if our pictures accurately model the facts. Because facts, or describable states of affairs, are always contingent, there are no pictures that are true *a priori* (Wittgenstein, *Tractatus* 2.222-2.2.225, 6.37). Any proposition that expresses something necessary must go beyond the empirical world. Because genuine ethical propositions try to picture or express something necessary, namely absolute value, they can have no truth-value and, hence, no sense.

Of course, Wittgenstein does repudiate this Tractarian account of language, but I believe that he continues to view ethical discourse as nonsensical.⁷ In his post-Tractarian writings, the limits of language are no longer rigidly set by logical structures. Rather the limits are set by more fluid language-games which emerge from and are limited by particular purposes.⁸ Used in their ordinary, everyday sense, words have clear meaning, but uses of language that exceed established language-games lack this clarity (Wittgenstein, PI §142). As philosophers, our task is to clarify language by bringing words back to their everyday use and to abandon as senseless any words that cannot be brought to an everyday use (Wittgenstein, PI §116; PO 161, 167). Expressions of relative value surely have an everyday use, but expressions of absolute value (i.e., values that lie outside particular states of affairs) are precisely the type of expression that must be abandoned as senseless. After all, absolute ethical values, if there are such things, function

as ideals that transcend particular language games.⁹ Although in his later work Wittgenstein is silent on the topic of ethics, he does struggle with the possibility of “the ideal” in language-games. In *Philosophical Investigations*, he writes:

We are under the illusion that what is peculiar, profound, essential in our investigation, resides in its trying to grasp the incomparable essence of language... Whereas, of course, if the words “language”, “experience”, “world”, have a use, it must be as humble a one as that of the words “table”, “lamp”, “door”. (§97)

In the realm of ethics, what this would amount to is saying that “good,” “bad,” “right,” and “wrong” must have a use in particular language-games, and this use could be no more absolute than our use of ordinary, humble words for objects in the world. Once again, ethical terms seemingly have use only in the expression of relative (non-absolute-values).

On the other hand, Wittgenstein continues this discussion with the following:

The ideal, as we think of it, is unshakable. You can never get outside it; you must always turn back. There is no outside; outside you cannot breathe.—Where does this idea come from? It is like a pair of glasses on our nose through which we see whatever we look at. It never occurs to us to take them off. (PI §103)

Here, Wittgenstein presents a slightly different perspective. Ideals are not there apart from how we look at the world, but we still see the world through them. In fact, we cannot get outside of them, and we never think to question them.¹⁰ While Wittgenstein maintains that we should resist the temptation to go beyond the subjects of our everyday thinking or to search for the order or ideal in our actual language, he nonetheless recognizes that the temptation always remains.¹¹ We continue to use words such as “good” in an absolute sense. And since “every sentence in our language ‘is in order as it is,’” there must be some order to such sentences (Wittgenstein, PI §98). Justifications of ethical actions are a language-game, even if we cannot establish the foundations of this game. When I reach bedrock in an ethical justification, I can say simply: “This is what I do.” Or better: “This is what I *must* do.” It is far from clear, however, that this is a sufficient response. Can inexpressible ethical values actually guide human conduct, and do so with categorical force? The ethical sentences of our language must have some order. There must be something that they do. The problem is finding a way in which this “something” can justify or support universally binding ethical claims.

III. The Private Language of Ethics

Philosophical and ethical discourse attempt to clarify a point of view, to bring out a way of seeing things, to indicate useful comparisons that bring to light circumstances that illuminate the issue.¹² Take, for example, philosophy's task of clarifying misleading analogies in the use of language. Wittgenstein claims: "The effect of a false analogy taken up into language...means a constant battle and uneasiness (as it were, a constant [irritation])" (PO 163). A false analogy, an analogy that is not quite right, produces an uneasiness that philosophy is supposed to dissolve by showing where the analogy is incorrect. Nonetheless, while these analogies often stand in need of correction, they are useful and necessary for expressing certain ideas, particularly in aesthetics. Aesthetics tries to give reasons that are "of the nature of further descriptions" (Wittgenstein, PO 106). Wittgenstein maintains that "you can make a person see what Brahms was driving at by showing him lots of different pieces by Brahms, or by comparing him with a contemporary author;" yet, this "drawing of attention" or placing the pieces side by side is all you can do. There is no further appeal. If the other person fails to see what you attempt to bring out by a comparison (i.e., if the other person fails to "see what you see"), "this is 'an end' of the discussion" (Wittgenstein, PO 106). The same holds true for ethics.

Ethics has the capacity to offer "reasons" in the form of further descriptions. Ethical discourse is able to draw attention to values through comparison (e.g., between playing tennis badly and behaving badly). It can work on one's conception or way of seeing things and can attempt to clarify issues through comparison. What it cannot do is produce agreement in the absence of one's "coming to see." Yet, should one "fail to see," ethical judgments still, in principle, retain their necessity and universality. After all, if the absolute good were describable, we would see that we must bring it about.

Of course, one could say: this may be true in Wittgenstein's early work but not in his later writings where ethics, at least in its ordinary use, is simply another language-game.¹³ While Wittgenstein clearly rejects the rigidity of the *Tractatus*, he does not thereby accept relativism or skepticism about language-games, even ethical ones. Take, for example, the following passage from *On Certainty*:

Suppose some adult had told a child that he had been on the moon. The child tells me the story, and I say it was only a joke, the man hadn't been on the moon; no one has ever been on the moon; the moon is a long way off and it is impossible to climb up there or fly there.—If now the child

insists, saying perhaps there is a way of getting there which I don't know, etc. what reply could I make to him? What reply could I make to the adults of a tribe who believe that people sometimes go to the moon..., and who indeed grant that there are no ordinary means of climbing up to it or flying there?—But a child will not ordinarily stick to such a belief and will soon be convinced by what we tell him seriously. (§106)

Here Wittgenstein attacks the notion that truth is only relative to language-games. There is no fact of the matter outside all language-games, but all is not relative. As Wittgenstein goes on to say: "I want to say: my not having been on the moon is as sure a thing for me as any grounds I could give for it" (OC §111). He goes on to further claim that "the game of doubting itself presupposes certainty" (OC §115). There are reasons one can give, but such reasons must, at some point, end. This is where Wittgenstein asserts a real difference between believing one is right and being right: "Giving grounds..., justifying the evidence, comes to an end;—but the end is not certain propositions' [sic] striking us immediately as true, i.e., it is not a kind of *seeing* on our part; it is our *acting*, which lies at the bottom of the language-game" (OC §204). Seeing or not seeing the ethical point is not the heart of ethical expressions; action is the heart of ethics.

To return to the ethical case, one cannot, with impunity, fail to see the need to refrain from behaving immorally. I am morally responsible for my behavior, even if I fail to see the immorality of it. Someone may say to me: "Look, don't you see that the case of playing tennis is different than the case of, say, stealing your neighbor's lawn mower? Don't you see that it is fine to play tennis badly, but it's wrong to act badly toward others?" Now, should I fail to "see" that to which my attention is being drawn, ethical discussion comes to an end. That does not mean that I am free to act any way that I please. Because ethical language cannot express the necessity that is evident in seeing the point of the comparison, there are no principles to which one can appeal. But, ethical language-games are supposed to draw our attention to something. To what? Probably, ethical experience. Unfortunately, ethical experience transcends language and is, of necessity, private.

Although all ethical expressions misuse language, they do attempt to capture experience. For example, Wittgenstein speaks of ethical experience, such as the experience of wonder at the existence of the world (PO 41-42). This experience of wonder is quite different than, say, wondering if a certain house still stands. To wonder if a certain house still stands concerns a contingent matter of fact that can be conceived as either being or not being the case; hence, it has a clear sense. On the other hand, to wonder at the existence of the world does not allow one to think of the world as non-

existent. It makes no literal sense for me to say that I wonder at the existence of the world for I cannot imagine the world as not existing. We know what it is to wonder at the world's existence, but we cannot say what that wonder is.¹⁴ Like their trivial or relative counterparts, ethical expressions appear to constantly use similes. Nonetheless, Wittgenstein points out, "a simile must be the simile for something" (PO 42-43). There must be some fact that stands behind a simile. In the case of ethical expressions, however, when one attempts to drop the simile in favor of a description of the facts, one finds no facts behind it. Seemingly, genuine ethical expressions point to nothing.

Once again, then, ethical expressions are essentially and irrevocably nonsensical—yet not insignificant. A key feature of any understanding of an ethical, religious, or aesthetic judgment lies, for Wittgenstein, in *how* one views it. For example, we all know what would count as a miracle in our everyday lives: "an event the like of which we have never yet seen" (PO 43). Nevertheless, if a miracle were to occur (e.g., someone grows a lion's head and begins to roar), we would seek some scientific explanation for the event, and as Hume so aptly puts it: "nothing is esteemed a miracle, if it ever happen in the common course of nature" (76). In providing a scientific account of the event, we undercut its miraculous nature. It is to take "miracle" in its relative, not its absolute, sense. Hence, "the scientific way of looking at a fact is not the way to look at it as a miracle" (PO 43). The absolute sense of "miracle" cannot be expressed in language. In the absolute sense, ethical experiences cannot be expressed in language for they are not experiences of contingent features of the world. We cannot say what our ethical experiences are.

Now, there are certain advantages to conceiving of ethics as transcendent, especially if one wishes to maintain the objectivity and categorical force of ethics. Since ethical value lies outside of language, it does not depend on any contingent state of affairs. In fact, given that Wittgenstein is eager, at least in his early work, to maintain the universal significance and categorical force of ethics, he must hold that it lies outside of language. He must hold that ethics is something of which we cannot speak, for if we could speak it, it would be a mere fact about the world. Ethical judgments would be contingently true or false. In this way, Wittgenstein avoids the problem of getting an "ought" from an "is." Ethical values and commands are not grounded in facts about the world; they transcend the world.

Nonetheless, it is one thing to assert that ethics concerns absolute values, to insist that ethics tries to express the meaning of life, to say that ethics can only be shown. It is another thing entirely to build an ethical life upon such assertions. While I may genuinely attempt to rely on my grasp or experience

of absolute value, how can I know that I have a correct grasp of what is inexpressible. In the realm of absolute value, can there be a difference between thinking one is right and being right?

Ethical action cannot be independent of particular purposes or inclinations. It must be embedded in the particular practices of one's community. However, insofar as one can discuss and reason about practices, including ethical practices, one must address ordinary, non-absolute ethical values. If we wish to focus on genuine ethical action, we must look to some transcendental, inexpressible value, and here the similies of ethics dissolve. Absolute value appears as a transcendent mystery, an elusive ground for our everyday ethical lives. In the realm of absolute value, language and logic fail us. We can make noises, but we cannot say anything. Genuine ethical discourse attempts to capture private experience. Ethical discourse may be capable of drawing one's attention in order to "make one see" ethical values, but these values, and the actions they command, can only be hinted at since they go beyond reality to the ultimate meaning of the world. It seems, then, that two possibilities emerge: either absolute value is really an illusion and all ethics is relative, or absolute ethical value cannot be rationally articulated, considered, or defended.

Wittgenstein appears to reject the first option (as I think he should, although that's another matter entirely). However, the epistemic dilemma created by the second option is substantial. My ethical perspective or the "way I see things" governs my ethical judgments and actions. If I can only point toward ethics, if I can never articulate ethical principles or values, how can I know my way of seeing things is "correct"? This parallels one of the analogies Wittgenstein gives in the *Investigations*.¹⁵ What if ethics is like the beetle each of us has in our own box? We can each see our own beetle, but no one can see anyone else's beetle. Our "ethical beetles" are not completely obscured because each of us can point to ethical value through the use of analogies. Still, what if you and I seem to have different "beetles" in that we radically disagree on the import of our ethical analogies? Whose "beetle" (if either) is the correct one? As Wittgenstein recognizes, the word "beetle" has meaning only within people's language-game; hence, the actual beetle (the private, inaccessible to others, beetle) drops out and is irrelevant to the actual language-game. If we insist that the "beetle" of absolute value is there and is what makes life worth living, surely we must be able to say something about what makes this value significant or meaningful for our lives.

Thus, if Wittgenstein is right about the inexpressible nature of ethics, we have a serious epistemic problem. Certainly, I can defend relative ethical

values by appeal to practices (for all the good that will do against the person who does not share in those practices), but can I defend my values or “how I see” value in the absolute sense? Whatever ethical discourse is possible can provide further descriptions and comparisons of absolute value, but Wittgenstein offers no means for clear articulation or rational grounds for defense of one’s ethical “way of seeing.” Rather, he appears to assume that we will share the same ethical vision and see the point of each other’s analogies. Wittgenstein, however, knows better. Interpretation, or *correct* interpretation, is a real problem, especially when there is no way to express what we are interpreting. We need not always be entirely correct in our ethical decisions or judgments, but there must be a real difference between a ethically good and ethically bad action. Ethical value cannot be private and, in principle, inexpressible experience if these values are to guide our lives in any meaningful way. If ethics is as important as Wittgenstein says it is, philosophers should not be content to remain silent on the topic of ethical value. The “truth” of ethics may always escape us, but we should not for that reason stop doing ethics. Perhaps that is what Wittgenstein understood in respecting those who undertake the difficult task of trying to talk about ethics.¹⁶

Notes

¹ I am not claiming that humans never act irrationally or without principle, just that we do not usually act without reason or principle.

² Of course, Wittgenstein does not think such an absolute state of affairs is possible, but he acknowledges the universal temptation to use expressions such as “absolute good.”

³ In the following section, I discuss this in more depth.

⁴ See Wittgenstein, PO 189, 193; Wittgenstein, *Tractatus* 5.6, 7.0.

⁵ Language may define the limits of the world, but not everything is *in* the world. For example, in the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein says, “there is indeed the inexpressible [*Unaussprechliches*]. This shows itself; it is the mystical” (6.522).

⁶ See Wittgenstein, *Tractatus* 1.1, 2.1-2.1512, 4.01, 4.021-4.024.

⁷ After all, he does cease attempting to say anything about ethics in his later work.

⁸ Language, however, still cannot say everything. See Wittgenstein, PO 189.

⁹ See Wittgenstein, PO 40. I will develop this point further in the following section.

¹⁰ An obvious question here is: Can we take the glasses off? An answer to this question would require either actually removing the glasses (which Wittgenstein never accomplished) or a transcendental standpoint from which to see if the glasses could in principle be removed (a perspective which Wittgenstein denies is possible).

It seems, then, we are stuck with the glasses unless someone can demonstrate how they could be removed, assuming they can be removed at all.

¹¹ See Wittgenstein, PI §105-106.

¹² Moore records in his notes of Wittgenstein's lectures of 1930-33 that ethics can offer these kinds of reasons. This is clearly something of a departure from "A Lecture on Ethics" where Wittgenstein contends that although ethical language seems to express similes, there is nothing that it is a simile for. See Wittgenstein, PO 42-43.

¹³ Ethics, as an expression of absolute values, surely remains beyond the purview of language-games.

¹⁴ Another example Wittgenstein gives of an ethical experience is the experience of absolute safety. We know what it means to be safe in an ordinary context, but the idea of being absolutely safe, no matter what happens, makes no sense.

¹⁵ See §293. The analogy I refer to here concerns the problem of knowing another person's pain. I believe that if Wittgenstein's ethical view is as I have represented it, ethical experience is much like any other subjective experience, hence, the parallel with the "beetle in the box" analogy.

¹⁶ My thanks to Peter Winch, Augusta Gooch, and Brian Martine for their helpful comments and insights throughout the development of this paper.

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