Wittgenstein on Realism, Ethics and Aesthetics

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Abstract

This paper discusses some of the few but most interesting passages in which the later Wittgenstein discusses ethical language. As I will try to show, these passages are best read as suggesting an antirealist view of ethics. In order to support that interpretation, I consider passages from the 1938 lectures on aesthetics. They oppose aesthetic realism, and there are some further references to ethics, in particular to Moore. Rejecting realism, Wittgenstein seems to endorse a broadly expressivist interpretation of moral language, joined with a modest conception of truth. As the lectures on aesthetics show, there is room for further, more refined antirealist interpretations. Critical intentions are, however, primary: What unites his views on ethics and aesthetics is an uncompromising opposition to the realist idea that what is good, admirable or beautiful is so independently of the rules that we "laid down".

First, a word about terminology. It is often supposed that Wittgenstein is not involved in, and may even have undermined, distinctions in philosophical theory like the one between realism and antirealism in most of its manifestations. This view is untenable. First, it is implausible in itself to think that there is no substance to the distinction, and therefore it is *prima facie* implausible to ascribe this view to Wittgenstein. It is a sensible and important question whether a given domain of discourse is to be interpreted in such a way that what we say when we are involved in it is, at the very least, true or false. Moreover, it is a sensible and important question whether what we say, given that it is true or false, is true or false independently of our saying it, independently of our language, and independently of our way of life. In other words, it is an open question, in a given domain of discourse, whether there is a fact of the matter at all, and if there is, whether and how that fact is to be thought of as independent of our perspective. Physical theory is an example of a domain that clearly does, while ascribing colours to objects is an example of a domain that on reflection does not, support strong claims to objectivity. If so, there is room for a

distinction, and with it, for a wide range of realist and antirealist interpretations of language.

Second, it flies in the face not only of good philosophical sense, but is inconsistent with his texts to deny that Wittgenstein trusts and employs something like this distinction. Much of the time, he is involved in identifying mistakes and confusions that arise from ignoring it. In mathematics and logic, in his discussions of colour and of religion, and especially in ethics and aesthetics, Wittgenstein is taking sides. Among other things, he clearly diagnoses a number of realist mistakes and confusions, and he goes on to suggest a cure by sketching alternative, antirealist interpretations of the linguistic practice in question. I hope that my interpretation of the passages on ethics and aesthetics serves as a case study to make the cogency of these claims clear.

Rush Rhees reports that Wittgenstein discussed the subject matter of ethics with him on several occasions. In conversations in 1942, Rhees brought up the problem facing a man who has come to the conclusion that he must either leave his wife or abandon his work of cancer research. Wittgenstein says that such a man may face a tragic dilemma. A striking fact about the passage is that Wittgenstein construes the situation and the possible responses to it as dependent on the different attitudes the husband or a friend may take:

> If he has, say, the Christian ethics, then he may say it is absolutely clear: he has got to stick to her come what may. And then his problem is different. It is: how to make the best of this situation, what he should do in order to be a decent husband in these greatly altered circumstances, and so forth. The question 'Should I leave her or not?' is not a problem here. (Rhees 1965, 23)

In other words, not only the solution to the problem, but the answer to the question whether there is so much as a problem will depend on the commitments the husband already has.

At this point, a familiar realist impulse sets in. Surely what the man should do is not up to him, nor entirely dependent on attitudes? We want to say that one of the choices he faces must be the *right* one, and that one of the attitudes he may take must be *right*, must be the one he should take. Wittgenstein says, pointedly, "that this question does not make sense".

Suppose the man takes a different view and concludes that he should carry on with his research, leaving his wife to her own devices. He might say:

> 'Surely one of the two answers must be the right one. It must be possible to decide which of them is right and which is wrong.'

Wittgenstein counters:

> But we do not know what this decision would be like – how it would be determined, what sort of criteria would be used, and so on. Compare saying that it must be possible to decide which of two standards of accuracy is the right one. We do not even know what a person who asks this question is after. (Rhees 1965, 23)

Now we are faced with two different questions. On the one hand, there is the question whether one of the answers is *right*. On the other hand, there is the question of how to *decide* which one, if any, is right, and *how* one could go about making such a decision. Evidently, there may *be* a right answer, even if we cannot *determine* it.

This is an important distinction, but what Wittgenstein is getting at is fairly clear precisely for the reason that he does not pause to distinguish between the two questions. The reason why we cannot find the right answer may be found in our epistemic perspective, which would explain why we have no method for determining truth in an ethical conflict. But the reason may also be that there is no truth to be determined. That the latter interpretation is more appropriate is suggested by the fact that Wittgenstein rejects the question of the right standard of accuracy as unintelligible. Here, it is clear that the question has no answer independently of our perspective, that is to say, independently of expectations and customs and uses we go on to make of that standard. Thus, Wittgenstein seems to deny that ethical outlooks can be divided into the true and the false, where this involves a reference to objective standards.

That moral objectivity, so understood, is his main target is further confirmed by conversations with Rhees in 1945. Here, Wittgenstein criticises what he calls "ethical theory", which involves "the idea of finding the true nature of goodness or of duty" (Rhees 1965, 23). Plato is named as a proponent of ethical theory so understood, while objectivity is said to be what ethical theory aims to achieve. Objectivity saves us from

relativity. Relativity in turn "must be avoided at all costs, since it would destroy the *imperative* in morality" (Rhees 1965, 23).

This is an illusion, with respect to both ethical objectivity and the fears that inspire the search for it. Does it follow that there is no room for representation, truth and knowledge in ethics at all? Anticipating antirealist strategies found in Stevenson, Blackburn and Gibbard, Wittgenstein admits truth and related notions into ethical discourse, and he does this by explicitly appealing to a modest conception of truth:

> Remember that '*p* is true' means simply '*p*.' If I say: 'Although I believe that so and so is good, I may be wrong': this says no more than that what I assert may be denied.
>
> Or suppose someone says, 'One of the ethical systems must be the right one – or nearer to the right one.' Well, suppose I say Christian ethics is the right one. Then I am making a judgment of value. It amounts to *adopting* Christian ethics. It is not like saying that one of these physical theories must be the right one. The way in which some reality corresponds – or conflicts – with a physical theory has no counterpart here. (Rhees 1965, 24)

This is a significant passage, and it raises very sharply the question of how to construe the difference between ethics and physical theory with respect to their relations to a reality that exists independently of our perspective. That Wittgenstein does not merely mean to distinguish between different *ways* in which objective standards might be involved is clear from his inclusive formulation. What has no counterpart in ethics is the way in which *some* reality corresponds to a physical theory - not merely *the way in which* reality corresponds to a physical theory.

Rejecting realism, Wittgenstein seems to endorse a broadly expressivist interpretation of moral language instead. But note that there is room for a different interpretation. We may roundly reject all claims to objectivity in ethics, but allow that there are moral truths and facts. Given the link between 'truth' and 'fact' and 'reality', we may even say that a true ethical statement represents the ethical facts, and in this sense, represents part of reality. The point would be that ethical concepts apply from within a perspective that has no grounding in objective ethical fact. It would therefore still be true that "the way in which some reality corresponds – or conflicts with – a physical theory has no counterpart here". Moreover, it is fully compatible with the claim that to call an ethical framework like the Christian one 'true' is to adopt it. Indeed, now a substantial contrast would emerge between saying that a moral judgement may be true or false given a certain

perspective, in particular an ethical outlook and a custom or practice of using words, which is not objectionable, and saying that such a moral perspective itself may be true or false. Unlike the former, the latter is not a useful expression, unless it serves to affirm that perspective.

What exactly Wittgenstein would have said had he addressed the issue is an open question, and the textual evidence is slim. The important point is his pronounced resistance to the realist temptation. This is no less evident in his 1938 lectures on aesthetics, to which I now turn. The situation is quite similar:

> "'Beautiful' is an adjective, so you are inclined to say: "This has a certain quality, that of being beautiful"" (Wittgenstein 1966, 1).

There is of course a sense in which it is perfectly true that beautiful things have the quality of being beautiful, just as there is a sense in which it is true that good things have the quality of being good. This is just a variation on 'It is true that these things are beautiful' or 'These things are good'. The important point is that this does not introduce an item or a quality *in the sense in which the realist construes it*. To think of beautiful objects in terms of a feature called 'beauty' that an object either has or lacks, and that exists somehow alongside all its other qualities, is a mistake. If so, the situation in aesthetics is strikingly similar to that in ethics. Indeed, according to Rhees, who took some of the notes from which the lectures were reconstructed, we find Wittgenstein speaking in that very sentence of both 'beautiful' and 'good' (Wittgenstein 1966, 1).

Whatever Wittgenstein said, the nature of the problem certainly suggests a connection. Moore famously thought that ethics takes the form of an enquiry into which actions or states of affairs have a certain quality, that of being good. Moore construed these claims in a realist fashion, and Wittgenstein thought this was a mistake. But what is the use of 'beautiful' and 'good', if it is not to represent a quality?

Wittgenstein asks how a word like 'good' and 'beautiful' is taught. This yields a primitive language, and even though "this language is not what you talk when you are twenty, you get a rough approximation to what kind of language game is going to be played" (Wittgenstein 1966, 1f.). As it turns out, these words have a different use than the realist imagines:

> A child generally applies a word like 'good' first to food. One thing that is immensely important in teaching is exaggerated gestures and facial expressions. The word is taught as a substitute for a facial expression or a gesture. The gestures, tones of voice, etc., in this case are expressions of approval. (Wittgenstein 1966, 2)

Still, we will ask if this is the correct analysis of the language game we play 'when we are twenty'. Could it not be that this quite basic language game becomes much more sophisticated than expressivist analysis implies?

In one sense, the answer to that question must be 'yes'. There is a point at which we could no longer replace the words with exaggerated gestures or facial expressions. Indeed, there is a point at which the language game becomes complex enough to make it artificial if not inappropriate to say that we are dealing with 'expressions of approval'. Wittgenstein keeps emphasising differences:

> "What similarity has my admiring this person with my eating vanilla ice cream and liking it?" To compare them seems almost disgusting. (But you can connect them by intermediate cases.) (Wittgenstein 1966, 12)

Now none of this discourages a realist who also waives all aspirations to a uniform analysis. But the fact is that what he says about words like 'good' and 'beautiful' tends to be philosophically confused. If so, we have reason to expect that the basic language game exposes that confusion. If Wittgenstein is right in stressing the pragmatic, the expressive, the affective side of ethics and aesthetics, as he clearly seems to do, then we must conclude that moral or aesthetic realism fails to provide the adequate interpretation of our attitudes even when we consider language that we speak 'when we are twenty':

> Would it matter if instead of saying "This is lovely", I just said "Ah!" and smiled, or just rubbed my stomach? As far as these primitive languages go, problems about what these words are about, what their real subject is, don't come up at all. (Wittgenstein 1966, 3)

Realism is the illness, not the cure:

> You could regard the rules laid down for the measurement of a coat as an expression of what certain people want. (...) The rules of harmony, you can say, expressed the way people

wanted chords to follow—their wishes crystallized in these rules (the word 'wishes' is much too vague.) (Wittgenstein 1966, 5f.)

This is an interesting observation that helps us to avoid two different kinds of mistake. First, there is no suggestion that whenever we say that a coat should be cut in a certain way, this is merely an expression of a personal preference. There is a standard that is independent of a given preference, and one may dislike that standard. Second, there is no suggestion that there is a standard of correctness for the way in which coats should be cut that goes beyond the rules that were laid down. The rules themselves are said to answer, not to some realm of facts about the way coats should *really* be cut, but to our attitudes and expectations. Of course, there is not normally a clear division, so that first there were the wishes, all articulate and clear, and the rules were made to fit them. The process is much more involved than that. Wishes change as rules develop. Even talk of 'wishes' can become misleading: "And although we have talked of 'wishes' here, the fact is just that these rules were laid down" (Wittgenstein 1966, 6, n.2).

This is not, I take it, all that realists would want to say about this kind of situation. Few people are realists about the standards for the measurements of coats, but the situation is essentially the same in ethics and aesthetics. The false assumption is that language serves a single purpose:

> If I had to say what is the main mistake made by philosophers of the present generation, including Moore, I would say that it is that when language is looked at, what is looked at is a form of words and not the use made of the form of words. (Wittgenstein 1966, 2)

Here we have the prime example of the moral realist who considers moral language through the spectacles of some misleading theory. Rightly realising that 'good' cannot be identified with, for example, 'pleasurable' or 'useful', he concludes that it must stand for some intrinsic, irreducible and very special feature. And this is a mistake. Ultimately, it is the expression of the myth that every word stands for an *object* or, failing that, for a *quality* of such an object. This is the Augustinian picture, and it is deeply flawed. There is no such thing as a science of aesthetics, as the realist construes that term. Science is the very paradigm of our attempt to transcend our individual and shared perspectives, so as to enable us to form a view of things and their relations as they are independently of us.

What would that view amount to in the realm of ethics and aesthetics? Ought it not to include, as Wittgenstein quips, what sort of coffee tastes well?

> You might think Aesthetics is a science telling us what's beautiful – almost too ridiculous for words. (Wittgenstein 1966, 11)

Less obviously perhaps, the same is true in ethics.

Literature:

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Wittgenstein, L. 1966 *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief.* Ed. C. Barrett.
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