

"There Is Indeed the Inexpressible". Some Remarks on Ethics and Aesthetics in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*

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Abstract

In this paper, I will analyse proposition 6.522 of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, which states that "[t]here is indeed the inexpressible" (TLP 6.522). My aim is to show that this proposition is closely related to much of what we read about ethics, aesthetics (and logic) and their connection in the *Tractatus*. In particular, I will first point out that the problem of the inexpressible refers back to an issue that is central both in the *Tractatus* and in Wittgenstein's later philosophy, that is: the idea that the sense of a proposition is not "something" different and distinct from the proposition itself, just as the sense of life is not "something" different and distinct from life itself. In the last part of the paper, I will illustrate how this idea also underlies the way in which Wittgenstein addresses aesthetic matters and the distinction between world and facts of the world.

As is widely known, according to Wittgenstein the problem of what can be said (or expressed) by a proposition and what can only be shown by it is the "cardinal problem" of philosophy (WC: 98, letter to B. Russell, 19.8.1919). Again according to Wittgenstein, it was the failure to fathom this that prevented Russell from really understanding his first book. The explicit formulation of this 'cardinal problem' is found in proposition 6.522 of the *Tractatus*, which reads: "There is indeed the inexpressible [*unaussprechlich*]. This shows itself; it is the mystical" (TLP: 6.522). As we shall see, the problem in question also involves ethics and aesthetics, although it might not be so easy to recognise this without analytically considering what the *Tractatus* (together with the writings contemporary to it) suggests about ethics, as well as aesthetics. More specifically, one should consider what is stated in proposition 6.42 and some of its comments.

In proposition 6.42 Wittgenstein writes that "there can be no ethical propositions" (TLP: 6.42), while in the first paragraph of proposition 6.421 he writes that "ethics cannot be expressed [*aussprechen*]" (TLP: 6.421). If we read these two statements alongside the last paragraph of proposition 6.421, where ethics and aesthetics are identified by stating – with dizzying conciseness – that "[e]thics and aesthetics are one" (TLP: 6.421; see Schulte 2013), we cannot but extend to aesthetics what Wittgenstein writes about ethics: there can be no aesthetic propositions and aesthetics, like ethics, cannot be expressed.

The same consideration applies to the second paragraph of proposition 6.421: "Ethics is transcendental" (TLP: 6.421). If ethics is transcendental, and if ethics and aesthetics are one, then aesthetics too is transcendental; as is logic, according to one of the two paragraphs of proposition 6.13: "Logic is transcendental" (TLP: 6.13). Note also that, according to a fairly explicit remark in the *Notebooks 1914-1916*, the fact that ethics is transcendental means that it "does not treat of the world [as science does]. Ethics must be a condition of the world, like logic" (NB: 77e, 24.7.1916). Assuming one continues to take the identification between ethics and aesthetics seriously, it follows that neither does aesthetics treat of the world. Instead, for aesthetics, as for ethics (and logic), "[h]ow the world is, is completely indifferent" (TLP: 6.432). It is science that is interested in discovering how the world is; on the contrary, what ethics and aesthetics (and logic) are interested in is "[n]ot how the world is, [...] but *that* it is" (TLP: 6.44). And this is just another way of saying that ethics and aesthetics (and logic) are 'conditions' of the world. Therefore, it is absurd to speak of ethics as a science, just as it is absurd to speak of a "science of Aesthetics" (LA: 11). Indeed, we might say that among the facts into which the world is divided (cf. TLP: 1.2) there are properly neither ethical nor aesthetic facts, just as there are no logical facts.

Of course, in order to come to terms with all this, one has to ask what Wittgenstein properly means by 'condition' when in the *Notebooks* he speaks of ethics, of logic, and thus – as I am suggesting – also of aesthetics as "a condition of the world" (NB: 77e, 24.7.1916). But I will return to this in a moment. First, it is worth clarifying the distinction between saying (or expressing) and showing, to which – as mentioned above – Wittgenstein assigns paramount importance. In particular, attention should be drawn to the fact that, in the *Tractatus*, this distinction plays different roles and has at least two senses or uses.

(1) There is a sense (or use) in which Wittgenstein speaks of showing in relation to propositions (with sense – *sinnvoll*) and, more generally, to pictures. I will try to explain this point in the least 'technical' terms possible through the following example. The proposition 'It is raining' tells us that it is raining – and it is true if it is raining, false if it is not raining. But that 'It is raining' is a proposition, is not, in turn, something that the proposition tells us: the proposition does not *say* of itself that it is a proposition; rather, it *shows* that it

is one the very moment we understand it. We might also say that when we hear 'It is raining', we do not need to worry about the proposition ('Is it really a proposition?'); instead, we usually simply wonder whether it is raining or not. In other words, what we care about is not the proposition, but the weather. As Wittgenstein writes in the *Notebooks*, we do not "need to worry about language" since "language takes care of itself" (NB: 43e, 27.4.1915 and 26.4.1915 respectively). In the *Tractatus*, the proposition does not say, but "shows its sense./The proposition shows how things stand, if it is true. And it says, that they do so stand" (TLP: 4.022). We could then say that, by distinguishing between saying and showing, Wittgenstein does not at all wish to maintain that there is something, i.e. saying, that the proposition should or would like to do, but nevertheless cannot or is unable to do.

Certainly, what Wittgenstein writes could suggest otherwise, but I believe that what Wittgenstein stresses in a significant remark in the *Philosophical Investigations*, namely that often in philosophy "[t]he great difficulty [...] is not to present the matter as if there were something one *couldn't* do" (PI: §374), also applies to the *Tractatus*. Indeed, overcoming this difficulty here means recognising that what the proposition shows, by showing its sense, is simply that it is a proposition. And this is because, according to the *Tractatus*, the sense of a proposition is not 'something' that is added to the proposition or accompanies it. But, I repeat, this is not an easy difficulty to overcome if, as Wittgenstein somewhat disconsolately reminds us in *Zettel*, "[w]e don't get free of idea that the sense of a proposition accompanies the proposition: is there alongside of it" (Z: §139).

(2) But there is also a second sense (or use) of the distinction between saying (or expressing) and showing, and it can be explained as follows. What Wittgenstein wants us to recognise is that ethics (but also, as we know, aesthetics) does not treat of the world and that, consequently, its problems are never problems of natural science (cf. TLP: 6.4312; see Perissinotto 2022). Let us suppose, for instance, that someone asks: 'How can our life have any sense if we are destined or condemned to die?'. Suppose now that it turns out that the human soul is eternal and survives death. The question that Wittgenstein would ask us at this point is why an eternal life thus understood, i.e. understood as 'temporal immortality', should have a sense that our mortal life does not have (cf. TLP: 6.4312). Such a question leads us acknowledge that the

sense of life does not depend on how the world is. Moreover, this explains "why men to whom after long doubting the sense of life became clear, could not then say wherein this sense consisted" (TLP: 6.521). For if it could be said what the sense of life consists in, this would mean that the sense of life is not life, but 'something' that happens (or fails to happen) within it. What Wittgenstein has in mind here is explained very well in an annotation from 1930 that deserves more attention than is usually given to it: "If anyone should think he has solved the problem of life and feels like telling himself everything is quite easy now, he need only tell himself, in order to see that he is wrong, that there was a time when this 'solution' had not been discovered; but it must have been possible to live *then* too and the solution which has now been discovered appears in relation to how things were then like an accident" (CV: 6).

I think that the link between points (1) and (2) is quite evident. Just as the sense of a proposition is not 'something' added to the proposition, so, in a very similar way, the sense of life is not 'something' added to life. Just as we cannot discover that a proposition was not yet a proposition, so we cannot discover that life was not yet (fully) life. In short, a life with a sense is not life plus its sense, just as a proposition with a sense is not a proposition plus its sense. Incidentally, it is remarkable that Wittgenstein treats the semantic and the ethical sense in the same way.

To return now to the men of proposition 6.521, among whom Wittgenstein himself should perhaps be counted, it could also be said that their attitude towards life has radically changed, even though life (the world) may have remained unchanged as far as its 'how' is concerned. The sense of life, so to speak, does not come to us as an inheritance that makes us rich from poor, or as a medicine that gives us back the health we had lost. All this could also be expressed by saying that no fact is ethically relevant. It is for this reason that "there can be no ethical propositions" (TLP: 6.42), even if "[t]here is indeed the inexpressible" (TLP: 6.522). And what is 'inexpressible' is life itself, not some hidden or profound side or aspect of it.

Now, as we already know, what applies to ethics also applies (with all due distinctions) to aesthetics. Here again, an example may be useful to clarify the issue. Cézanne painted the Sainte-Victoire mountain in Provence many times.

As regards its 'how', the mountain painted by Cézanne was the same mountain that the inhabitants of Aix-en-Provence, including Cézanne himself, saw every day. Cézanne discovered nothing new about that mountain – at least, not in the sense in which a geologist, say, might discover something new about the composition of its rocks or its origin. Nevertheless, the former, the Sainte-Victoire mountain painted by Cézanne, is radically different from the latter, the real Sainte-Victoire mountain. But insofar as it has nothing to do with how the mountain is, this difference is 'inexpressible', even if – as Wittgenstein writes – this "inexpressible [...] shows itself" (TLP: 6.522). We could say that in Cézanne's paintings of the Sainte-Victoire mountain the inexpressible shows itself, and shows itself with such force that Cézanne's mountain is, so to speak, more 'real' than the real mountain. After all, tourists in Provence are probably more likely to photograph the former than the latter.

What we find here, in the case of Cézanne's mountain, is the same attitude or idea that I have illustrated in relation to the sense of a proposition and the sense of life. Cézanne's mountain does not have 'something' that a tourist's photograph or an amateur's drawing does not have; at the same time, however, the former is radically different from the latter. Nor does the former convey information that the latter do not convey, or only convey in an incomplete or inadequate way; however, there is no science that can explain where the difference lies between Cézanne's mountain and a Sunday painter's painting. In an almost Platonic spirit, we might thus say that Cézanne did not paint a mountain but 'the' mountain. But we should also add, this time in a non-Platonic spirit, that there is no other way to see 'the' mountain except by looking at Cézanne's mountain. This is precisely the way in which the problem of the inexpressible is transposed and addressed by Wittgenstein in the field of aesthetics.

What I have highlighted so far also allows us to better understand what Wittgenstein means when he speaks of ethics and aesthetics (and logic) as conditions of the world, i.e. as transcendental. The term 'condition' lends itself to many readings and misunderstandings, and it is perhaps no coincidence that this expression is not taken up in the *Tractatus* but remains confined to the *Notebooks*. Certainly, when he speaks of 'condition', Wittgenstein is not referring to 'something' that precedes the world or stands at its origin as its cause or foundation (see Tejedor 2014). In this sense, the term is devoid (or

intended to be devoid) of any metaphysical significance. To put it somewhat roughly, what we have is not the world on the one hand and its conditions on the other. What Wittgenstein rather seems to be suggesting is that the world already appears to be ethically and aesthetically connoted, even though the facts of the world, as facts, are always indifferent and irrelevant to ethics and aesthetics (and logic). We could also put it this way: for science there are the facts of the world, for ethics and aesthetics there is the world, even though the world of ethics and aesthetics is not another world compared to the world of scientific facts.

In a famous passage in the *Notebooks*, Wittgenstein makes this point clear through the oft-quoted example of the stove – it may also be useful, when reading the passage, to replace the word ‘stove’ with the expression ‘Sainte-Victoire mountain’. The example appears in a note dated 8 October 1916, which opens with a statement that could be considered an explicit comment on what I have tried to argue so far: “As a thing among things, each thing is equally insignificant; as a world each one equally significant” (NB: 83e, 8.10.1916). Perhaps in order to tone down his statement, Wittgenstein then immediately explains himself by introducing the example of a humble and ordinary object, the stove: “If I have been contemplating the stove, and then am told: but now all you know is the stove, my result does indeed seem trivial. For this represents the matter as if I studied the stove as one among the many things in the world. But if I was contemplating the stove *it* was my world, and everything else colourless by contrast with it” (NB: 83e, 8.10.1916). It is also interesting to note that Wittgenstein realises the difficulty of expressing all of this, so much so that he adds in brackets: “Something good about the whole, but bad in the details” (NB: 83e, 8.10.1916). Evidently, this parenthetical remark expresses Wittgenstein’s dissatisfaction with his formulation, but it is also a sign or clue that the ‘cardinal problem’ of the inexpressible has been reached here. Significantly, in the annotation made the following day, Wittgenstein plainly reveals the task ahead of him: “But now at last the connection of ethics with the world has to be made clear” (NB: 84e, 9.10.1916) – and with it, we might add, that of aesthetics.

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