

# ISSA Proceedings 2002 - Some Remarks On Wittgenstein's Ideas About Ethics



## *Introduction*

The subject of this paper [i] is the delimitation of Ethics in Wittgenstein's work. For that, I take into account his view on ethics in the *Tractatus*[ii] (1921) and in the *Lecture on ethics* (1930), in connection with the intuitionism of Moore (*Principia Ethica*, 1903) and the last utilitarianism of Henry Sidgwick (*The Methods of Ethics*, 1874).

First I want to expound the main Wittgenstenian ideas about ethics: the relation between his ideas on ethics and language and his view on the essence of ethical language. I will propose an interpretation of the writings of Wittgenstein taking into account the distinction between what is shown and what is said. After that, my intention is to comment on the possible connections between Wittgenstein's view on ethics and one of the more decisive work on ethics for the ethical thought in the XX century, *The Methods of Ethics* of Sidgwick, through its influence on one of the main founders of analytic philosophy, namely G. E. Moore.

The thesis I claim is the following one: There is a line of continuity between those three philosophers, a line that represents the western philosophical tradition and that leads ethics to a problematic point. It is interesting to draw a line from Sidgwick's and Moore's recognition of ethical intuitions and of the idea that "good" is a simple notion and therefore that cannot be defined, until Wittgenstein's statement that ethics taken as theory is imposible. Sidgwick, Moore and Wittgenstein are three examples of what I call "the maximum purification of Ethics": the task of stripping ethics of its several contingent dimensions. Those three philosophers are worried about the grounds of ethics and in their task they tried to distinguish it from natural science and methaphysics. Then, ethics remains free from natural and methaphysical dimensions, its object of study has been limited. But the problem that I can see is the following one: in these ethical views the object of study cannot be defined and, therefore, this object has become more and more diffuse, abstract and indeterminate. In my

opinion, Wittgenstein carries out until the last consequences this metaethical task, when he confines the ethical field on the one hand to what is shown, i.e. to what cannot be expressed by propositions, and on the other hand to private experiences.

### *1. Wittgenstein: to express and to show*

In Wittgenstein's words the crucial problem of philosophy is the distinction between what can be expressed (*gesagt*) by propositions and what cannot be, but only be shown (*gezeigt*). According to him, ethics is confined to the space of what is shown. In order to understand Wittgenstein's thought on this point, it is necessary to know what is his notion of proposition, in particular, and of language in general. This immediately leads us to consider the notions of figure, logical form and sense. Let me begin with the notion of "sense". Wittgenstein inherits this term from his master Frege, as well as he takes from him a logical **[iii]** and antipsychological position. For Frege sense is what allows us to connect a word and the object that it refers, i.e. language and world. Sense is an objective property **[iv]**, though it supposes a way of looking, or at least, a perspective of the world. For Frege sense is the obligatory road to reach the reference of a term. It is also the thought (the propositional content) that a sentence conveys and, therefore, it allows the sentence to be true or false. Briefly said, what Wittgenstein had in mind when he used "sense" **[v]** is something objective that gives to a proposition the possibility to be true or false. Sense is concerned with the truth value of a proposition. We understand a proposition when we are able to imagine how the world would be if the proposition was true or false. These quotes from the *Tractatus* show that very well:

*4.021: A proposition is a picture of reality: for if I understand a proposition, I know the situation that it represents.*

*4.023: A proposition must restrict reality to two alternatives: yes or no.*

*In order to do that, it must describe reality completely. (...)*

*4.024: To understand a proposition means to know what is the case if it is true. (one can understand it, therefore, without knowing whether it is true). (...)*

In Wittgenstein's viewpoint a picture is a figure of reality (4.01), it is a description (true or false) of a state of affairs, that is, in Wittgensteinian terms, a description of facts. In order to make possible a description of a fact with a proposition, a correspondence between elements or parts of language and entities of reality is necessary. The logical form is the necessary condition that

makes possible to take propositions as figures:

*2.18 What any picture, of whatever form, must have in common with reality, in order to be able to depict it - correctly or incorrectly - in any way at all, is logical form, i.e. the form of reality.*

Independently from some justified attacks to this descriptive notion of language, I can state that the question of the distinction between representing and showing is primordial, and that the ethical question is put by Wittgenstein in the field of showing. The philosophical thought often make distinctions that in reality walk together: the phenomenon of talking is not a separate case. A proposition says us something, but also show us something. An example of this is the phenomenon of implicatures, where what is shown is really shown by means of what is said. However, the relation between what is said and what is shown is not quiet clear. On the one hand, we can imagine a phenomenon (for example, a face gesture) that expresses something without words. There are also some cases (for example, the above mentioned implicatures) where what is shown is only possible by means of what is said. On the other hand, we can suppose things that can be said and/or can be shown without altering their essence or sense in a relevant way. Therefore, there are, at least, two ways of showing: with propositions and without them.

Anyway, the important question which matters us is to know the place where Wittgenstein situated the ethical world. He thought that the ethical world belongs to the kind of things which cannot be said, but only be shown[**vi**]. But, in which way is shown the ethical space? Of course, there are two alternatives that were already mentioned above. This point has been broadly discussed and some philosophers have claimed that Wittgenstein pushed ethics to a irrational space, where language and argumentation are helpless. This is not enterely right even though there could be some true in that opinion. In the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein hold a narrow conception of rationality and language, and as a result of this, ethics remained out of rationality understood in logical terms. But, with the last words of the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein did not mean that ethical questions ought to be left aside, silence being the proper space of ethics. On the contrary, he wanted to say that we cannot stop talking and that we cannot leave aside ethical questions.

According to Wittgenstein, the peculiarity of ethical expressions is their lack of sense, that is, they are lacking a connection with the facts of the world. Said in his

own words:

*“these nonsensical expressions were not nonsensical because I had not yet found the correct expressions, but that their nonsensicality was their very essence. For all I wanted to do with them was just to go beyond the world and that is to say beyond significant language. My whole tendency and I believe the tendency of all men who ever tried to write or talk Ethics or Religion was to run against the boundaries of language. This running against the walls of our cage is perfectly, absolutely hopeless. Ethics so far as it springs from the desire to say something about the ultimate meaning of life, the absolute good, the absolute valuable, can be no science. What it says does not add to our knowledge in any sense. But 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”* (Wittgenstein 1965: 11).

This means that ethical expressions are not propositions, if we accept the definition of proposition as figure as Wittgenstein proposes. Its absence of sense does not decrease the importance of ethical questions. On the contrary, for this philosopher, they are the most relevant questions in human life. As we can read in his *Lecture on Ethics*, these questions show the natural human tendency[vii] to say something that cannot be expressed with the ordinary propositions we use to talk about facts. In short, we have not a descriptive language appropriate enough to say the *inexpressible*, that is, it will only be shown by means of what is said, being something more than what is said.

To sum up, within the relations between what is shown and what is said as description, the ethical expressions show something beyond *what is said*, but by means of what is said. What is shown cannot be said but it needs what is said, in order to show itself. Paradoxically, Wittgenstein stated that what is shown was contained in what is said, and furthermore, if I am right, that what is said gets its meaning only as a part of a wide framework where *the inexpressible* is a basis, a necessary condition for saying something. This is what I understand when Wittgenstein says that *logical truths* are the skeleton of the world, the basis for making possible the activity of thinking and talking. In Tractarian words: *“The propositions of logic describe the scaffolding of the world, or rather they represent it. They have no “subject-matter””* (Wittgenstein, 1921: 6.124). *“Logic has nothing to do with the question whether our world really is like that or not”* (6.1233) The same is meant in this strange quotation about the logical form (moreover a new vocabulary associated to what is shown is introduced: reflection, mirrored, display):

*“Propositions cannot represent logical form: it is mirrored in them. What finds its reflection in language, language cannot represent. What expresses itself in language, we cannot express by means of language. Propositions show the logical form of reality. They display it.”* (1921: 4.121). And this quote sums up it: *“What can be shown, cannot be said”* (1921: 4.1212).

That leads to consider the relation between logical truths and ethical expressions, because it seems to me that both were introduced by Wittgenstein in the sphere of what is shown. As we have just seen, the difference between the latter and propositions is clear. Propositions represent facts and do not take into account values. For that reason, propositions have sense and are, in consequence, false or true. What logical truths and ethical expressions have in common, in Wittgenstein’s perspective, is that they are not propositions. This is clear, because neither the former nor the latter represent a possible fact. But the great difference, as Anscombe claimed, is the following one: the logical truths are sense-less and the ethical expressions are also non-sensical, because they are illegitimate constructions from the point of view of the right formation of expressions. Wittgenstein said that we are misusing the language when we try to talk about our ethical experiences[viii]. This clarification can help us to understand Wittgenstein’s view about the typical characteristics of ethical language as non-sensical and sense-less expressions, but very important because they show what cannot be said in a descriptive way. As a consequence, I do not agree with a lot of interpretations of the last pages of the *Tractatus* which consider that Wittgenstein prescribed silence in ethical matters. In my view, when Wittgenstein talked about “ethical silence” what he meant is the fact that ethics belongs to the space of what is shown. In any case, we should not forget that what is shown can only be displayed by means of what is said. Hence, we are allowed to continue using ethical expressions.

Having discussed some ideas of Wittgenstein’s ethics, I want to discuss now their connection with the ideas of these two philosophers: Moore and Sidgwick. I will start with Sidgwick, given his influence on Moore.

## *2. Sidgwick’s and Moore’s intuitionism*

Sidgwick is the great last utilitarian. Although he is considered as a traditional utilitarian, he discovered some gaps or vacuums there. He thought that the conflict between individual happiness and universal happiness, between private interest and general good, cannot be resolved by Utilitarianism. Hence, he

claimed that the Kantian universal maxim ought to be accepted as an autoevident principle that needs not rational proof. There is no other solution but the acceptance of this principle if we want to hold the utilitarian principle that aims at universal happiness. In fact, it would be reasonable to ask individuals to search universal happiness (when it goes against his own happiness) if the individuals do not feel compelled by the Kantian categorical imperative. With this solution, Sidgwick refused the traditional opposition between Utilitarianism and Intuitionism.

The crucial point in *The Methods* is its step toward Intuitionism, as this quotation corroborates: *“What definition can we give of “ought” “right” and other terms expressing the same fundamental notion? To this I should answer that the notion which these terms have in common is too elementary to admit of any formal definition. (...). I find that the notion we have been examining, as it now exists in our thought, cannot be resolved into any more simple notions: it can only be made clearer by determining as precisely as possible its relation to other notions with which it is connected in ordinary thought, especially to those with which it is liable to be confounded”* (Sidgwick, 1874: 32). These ideas were precisely developed by Moore in *Principia Ethica*, in these two theses: first, the main question in ethics is to study what is good (hence, the question about human conduct is only derived from this one) and second, “good” denotes a simple quality, and hence, inanalysable and indefinable. The intuitionism of Moore **(ix)** makes it clear in this quotation: *“If I am asked “What is good? My answer is that good is good, and that is the end of the matter. Or if I am asked “How is good to be defined?” my answer is that it cannot be defined, and that is all I have to say about it.”* (Moore, 1903: I, 6).

The consequences of these theses are not as trivial as they may appear: *“propositions about the good are all of them synthetic and never analytic, and that is plainly no trivial matter. And the same thing may be expressed more popularly, by saying that, If I am right, then nobody can foist upon us such an axiom as that “Pleasure is the only good” or that “The good is the desired” on the pretence that is “the very meaning of the word”* (Ibid). According to this, the naturalistic ethics (inside utilitarianism) is mistaken and falls in the naturalistic fallacy.

Anyway, the intuitional thesis of Moore about the impossibility of rational proofs in ethical propositions refers to the irreducibility of ethical thought. With his

thesis, Moore wanted to protect Ethics against positive sciences and metaphysics. I think that the intuitionism about the main ethical notions and, as a result, the irreducibility of ethical thought is a step toward the purification of Ethics; the task of stripping Ethics of its several contingent dimensions. Following Moore we cannot confound natural predicates with ethical predicates. "Good" cannot be defined by means of neither natural nor metaphysical objects. From Moore's saying "good is good and that is the end of the matter" (Ibid) to Wittgenstein's saying "Ethics cannot be expressed. Ethics is transcendental" (Wittgenstein, 1921: 6.421), there is a line of continuity. There is really a great difference between saying that ethical propositions cannot have rational proof and saying that there can be no ethical propositions, but, in fact, they constitute two steps toward a task which I call "purification of Ethics".

### *3. The purification of ethics and moral reasoning*

I claim that Sidgwick, Moore and Wittgenstein could be considered as three examples of "the maximum purification of Ethics". Sidgwick, because he orientated his task to that point, when he claimed that elementary ethical notions are indefinable, but at the same time they are known as intuitions. Moore inherited that orientation and gave a further step in this process of progressive purification of Ethics: the main question in ethics is what is good and the problem of human conduct is only derived from this main question. Sidgwick considered Ethics as "the science or study of what is right or what ought to be, so far as this depends upon the voluntary action of individuals" (Sidgwick, 1874: 4). As we have seen, Moore left aside the considerations about human conduct in the task of the foundations of Ethics. On the other hand, Wittgenstein's contribution to the purification of Ethics is quite radical, taking into account that he almost carried it to its extinction, given the fact that he claimed the impossibility of finding a theoretical basis for Ethics. However, he claimed that human beings cannot avoid looking for those grounds, because it is an essential human tendency.

I find some similarities[x] between these three philosophers. All share a strong conception of Ethics in terms of duty, that forces individuals to run the common good often against their impulses and egoistic interests. Also, all three were worried about the fundamentals of Ethics and all three made the choice of an analytical method. Language in general, and ethical language in particular, is a common concern they share. However, each one has his particular point of view about these problems. Sidgwick and Moore thought that there were ethical

propositions that cannot be reduced into neither propositions of natural science nor of metaphysics: they are *sui generis* ethical propositions. On the other hand Wittgenstein claimed that there cannot be ethical propositions, because they are non-sensical expressions, linguistic misuses. Their view on what is Ethics depend on their conceptions about language in general and ethical language in particular.

As far as their worries go around ethical language, their analyses take into account moral reasoning. Wittgenstein's analysis of moral reasoning is grounded in his propositional point of view about language. In his *Lecture on ethics* he uses a common distinction between relative and absolute judgments of value. The former can be put in such a form that it loses all the appearance of a judgment of value: it is a mere statement of facts. In this judgment of value "right" depends on a previous purpose. On the contrary, the absolute judgments of value cannot be reduced into statements of facts and these are, in Wittgenstein's view, the genuine ethical expressions.

In the case of Sidgwick, he was particularly interested in moral reasoning, as he expressed that in the Preface of *The Methods*: "*in considering how conclusions are to be rationally reached in the familiar matter of our common daily life and actual practice*" (Sidgwick 1874: viii). On the other hand he was also interested in ethical thought, in such a way that he wanted "*to consider what conclusions will be rationally reached if we start with certain ethical premises, and with what degree of certainty and precision*" (ibid). As a consequence, we can distinguish two points of focus in order to examine moral reasoning: on the one hand, moral reasoning of ordinary people in matters of daily life, and on the other hand, the ethical argumentation that philosophers do in their business to reach ethical conclusions in a rational way (here we can speak of ethical argumentation). With this purpose, Sidgwick intended to "*dispel the original vagueness and ambiguity which lurks in the fundamental notions of our common practical reasonings*" (Sidgwick 1874: 13) "*because men commonly seem to guide themselves by a mixture of different methods, more or less disguised under ambiguities of language*" (Sidgwick 1874: 12). According to him, it is the business of the philosophers to harmonising the different methods, after an impartial and rigorous investigation of the conclusions to which their various claims logically lead. On the other hand, an adequate analysis of moral fundamental notions as "good", "ought", "right", etc, would help to dissipate the confusion in common moral reasoning. This is the focus of investigation of Sidgwick and Moore[xi] as



well. These philosophers make a very clear distinction between an ethical sense and a common sense of these notions. In the common sense these notions are used by the majority of people as meaning merely “conformed” to the standard of moral rules of current opinion. But it is still possible to ask if these moral rules are good or right in the philosophical sense. And, in Moore and Sidgwick’s perspectives, it is precisely this genuine philosophical or ethical sense of the main moral notions that is indefinable. But this is not an obstacle to built up their ethical theories and to extract important claims against ethical subjectivism and other ethical naturalistic theories as utilitarianism.

#### 4. Conclusion

The purpose of this paper has been to examine Wittgenstein’s view on ethics in the light of Sidgwick and Moore’s intuitionism. These three philosophers believed that ethics cannot be reduced to natural science, i.e., that ethical properties must not be confounded with natural properties. Moore used the distinction natural/supernatural, and Wittgenstein as well. The term “natural” refers to material facts that happen in the world. For that reason, when we read in the *Tractatus* that “Ethics is transcendental” [xii] we should understand that it makes sense to speak about Ethics out of the sphere of facts of the world. In fact, Wittgenstein’s purpose was to distinguish ethics from natural science and from logic. I think we should not deduce, from a first reading of the *Tractatus*, that what Wittgenstein claims is a complete refusal of ethics. His whole business was to limit (to set bounds to) the ethical space and, in order to do this, he used a negative way of speaking about Ethics, telling us what it is not. And what it is not is science.

Finally, I want to make a comment about the relation between Wittgenstein’s conception of language and his view on ethics. According to him, the *Tractatus* covers all the main philosophical questions and each answer is like a piece of a puzzle. For that reason, some people believe that Wittgenstein’s ideas about ethics are a logical and natural consequence of his view about language. In fact, one can infer from the notion of proposition that appears in the *Tractatus* the statement that there cannot be ethical propositions. This is right, but the order of the book does not reveal the real thought of Wittgenstein [xiii]. Wittgenstein thought that he had discovered the true solutions to the crucial philosophical problems, because the theoretical system which he built up suits well to his previous ideas about ethics and religion, as well about other presumptions like

the isomorphy between language, thought and world.

In my viewpoint, we can connect his rejection of realism about ethics with his figurative conception of language and with his atomistic logic. We can say with Cora Diamond that *“The Tractatus approach to ethics is shaped by a general conception of language”* (1996: 254), but we cannot support that his whole view on ethics depends absolutely on that conception, because in Wittgenstein’s mind ethics and the ethical sense of the book played a role much more important than the role of the figurative conception of language. If we read his *Notebooks* and letters we can find statements where he put logic and his notion of proposition at the service of the ethical sense of his project.

## NOTES

**[i]** This research is supported by a research grant PB98-0250 from the Spanish Secretary of State of Education and Culture.

**[ii]** It could not been forgotten the fact that the whole book’s intention is ethical, as Wittgenstein himself stated, although only a little part of the book is explicitly about ethics. However, for the present purposes I have just considered that little part of the book.

**[iii]** In fact, Wittgenstein used logical and philosophical tools to investigate ethical expresions.

**[iv]** It has been discussed whether for Frege sense is an objeive property of language or it is an objective property of extralinguistic reality. What Frege made clear was his antipsychological view on that. According to him, sense was not the “mental ideas” which Fodor claimed, considering it, on the contrary, as something in an ideal Platonic world.

**[v]** Although Wittgenstein follows Frege in his conception of “sense”, we should be careful to add that Wittgenstein had different theses about it: according to him names had no sense, but only reference, and propositions did not have reference but only sense. (See Anscombe, 1996: 17)

**[vi]** In some way this distinction between what can be shown and what can be said and the introduction of the ethical language in the former is reflected in the ethical doctrine of emotivism, since its main thesis is that a moral judgment “evinces” (does not enunciate) a subjective attitude of approval o disapproval toward an action, a person, etc. Some authors believe that Wittgenstein is very near from emotivism, but I think that there are important differences between them, even if they share a common important distinction between values and

facts. This comment allows me the opportunity to separate emotivism from Wittgenstein's reflections on ethics, since emotivism is concerned, among other things, with a psychological point of view, which is against Wittgenstein's Fregean position.

**[vii]** This human and hopeless tendency that runs against the boundaries of language recalls the Kantian view that philosophical task runs against the boundaries of reason. I think that Wittgenstein and Kant share a critical spirit: Kant applied it to delimit the boundaries of Reason, Wittgenstein, to delimit the boundaries of language. Moreover, Kant is another important case of "purification of ethics" in the history of ethical theory: with his formulation of the categorical imperative he stripped ethics from all considerations about God (Religion) and Happiness (Aristotelian and utilitarian ethics), putting Reason as the ultimate instance that dictates unconditionally moral rules.

**[viii]** In the first example that Wittgenstein offers us in his Lecture on Ethics "I wonder at the existence of the world", there is a misuse of the word "wondering", because we use generally the term "wonder" when we say that we wonder at something that we can imagine it not to be the case. This instance clarifies the fact that ethical expressions can be non-sensical and at the same time can be understood, without any problem, by an ordinary person.

**[ix]** I will not take part in the discussion about the validity of the arguments offered by Moore in favour of his intuitionist view about "good". I only want to say that the analogical argument Moore offers has, in my opinion, an illustrative character rather than a demonstrative one. Moore wanted to show the immediate and appropriate character of ethical intuitions, putting them at the same level with the sensory perception of a colour like yellow.

**[x]** There are, of course, some important differences between them. One of them is about the nature of the moral agent. In Sidgwick and Moore's views it is the individual who apprehends intuitively the moral qualities of the reality. On the contrary, for Wittgenstein the moral agent is the philosophical or metaphysical individual, something like a Kantian transcendental will (See 1921: 6.423). Wittgenstein distinguished clearly Ethics from Knowledge Theory and Epistemology: "What ethics says does not add to our knowledge in any sense" (Wittgenstein, 1965: 12).

**[xi]** Moore's analysis is basically about the notion of "good".

**[xii]** The same is said in Lecture on Ethics : "Ethics, if it is anything, is supernatural and our words will only express facts; as a teacup will only hold a teacup full of water and if I were to pour out a gallon over it" (p. 7).

**[xiii]** As Isidoro Reguera claims in his preface to the *Tractatus* (1995), the genealogical order (the real order of the matters that Wittgenstein worried about) and the discursive order of the *Tractatus* (the order as it appears in the reading of the book) are not the same. In fact, the way that Wittgenstein took is the following one: from logic to language and world and not as the lineal reading of the *Tractatus* suggests.

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