

Correspondence to Reality in Ethics

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This paper examines the view of ethical language that Wittgenstein took in later years. It argues that according to this view, ethics falls into place as a part of our natural history, while every sense of the mystical or supernatural that once surrounded it is irrevocably lost. Moreover, Wittgenstein argues that ethical language does not correspond to reality “in the way” in which a physical theory does. I propose an interpretation of this claim that shows how it sets his view apart from a “realist” theory of ethics. The reality of which he speaks is the reality of human life.

1. A Puzzle

As Peter Hacker observes, after the “Lecture on Ethics” of 1929 “Wittgenstein wrote nothing further on ethics, save for occasional asides”.¹ This raises the question of what view of ethics, if any, Wittgenstein held after that date. The question is made more intriguing by the fact that in his early work, Wittgenstein had resolutely excluded the ethical from the realm of significant language. As early as 1916, Wittgenstein wrote in his notebook: “*It is clear that ethics can-*

¹ Hacker (2001: 167).

not be expressed!”² This became a prominent theme of the *Tractatus* in 1921, and it informed the “Lecture on Ethics” that Wittgenstein gave in 1929.³

On the face of it, it is hard to believe that he held on to this view. When Wittgenstein returned to Cambridge and to philosophy in 1929, he quickly dismantled the framework of the *Tractatus*. In the process, he abandoned its conception of reality, language and representation. Without that conception, the claim that “ethics cannot be expressed” lacked its former rationale; and in the light of the later conception of language that slowly emerged, it is hard to see what a new rationale could be. There is no reason to think that ethics “cannot be put into words”, or that it is “mystical”.⁴

So there is every reason to expect significant changes. At the same time, it is not easy to pin down their nature or extent. As Hacker points out, sources are scarce and elusive. Consequently, their interpretation is a matter of dispute.⁵

Still, there are continuities, and there are a handful of documents on which a careful attempt at reconstruction can rely. First, it is clear that the question of how to conceive of reality, language and the relation between the two continued to occupy Wittgenstein. As he had seen from the very beginning, it presents itself in logic, mathematics and aesthetics no less than in ethics. Second, one remark in later years explicitly addresses the question of how to conceive of that relation with respect to ethics. In that remark, Wittgenstein draws an impor-

² Wittgenstein (1979: 78), entry of 30 July 1916; cf. Wittgenstein (1961: 6.421).

³ It is of course a matter of controversy whether a view of the *Tractatus* as being committed to something “ineffable”, “higher” or “mystical” is correct. With respect to ethics, this has recently been denied by Christensen (2011), Iczkovits (2012), and other “resolute” readers. Here, I merely note that in my view, the evidence still points firmly in the direction of the traditional interpretation.

⁴ Wittgenstein (1961: 6.421 and 6.522).

⁵ Substantial contributions in addition to those mentioned in note 3 include Barrett (1991), Blackburn (1990), Edwards (1982) and Johnston (1989).

tant, but underdeveloped distinction between physical theory and ethics that can help to clarify his view of ethics in later years.

The distinction in question is one between different kinds of correspondence: In conversation with Rush Rhees in 1945, Wittgenstein says about ethical language that the “way in which some reality corresponds – or conflicts – with a physical theory has no counterpart here”.⁶ The question is what that distinction amounts to. What contrast is being drawn?

Even at first glance, the passage raises a number of difficult questions. Apart from the general question of how much weight we can put on such a note of conversations, more concrete questions remain. What is being said? Is the claim merely negative? Is there *any* reality that corresponds to ethical language? Or is the point of the passage that there is *none*? Alternatively, is the point of the passage that we must distinguish between *different ways* in which “some reality” can correspond to a sentence or theory, and that the model of physics should not be applied to our understanding of ethics? If so, what could the relevant “kinds of reality” be? How are they related, and how are the various “kinds of correspondence” to be understood? In what follows, I will try to clarify and answer these questions.

2. Ethical Truth

As Rush Rhees reports, Wittgenstein discussed the subject matter of ethics with him on several occasions. Being notes of conversations, these accounts clearly have to be handled with

⁶ Rhees (1965: 24).

care. With that proviso, they are a reliable source. We know that notes by Rhees are fairly accurate and faithful, as his numerous transcriptions of lectures and other exchanges show.

In conversations they had in 1942, Rhees brings 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. He also says, presumably intending to be consistent with this, that for such a man, there need not even be *a problem*.

How can that be?

As Wittgenstein explains, expressions like “a problem” signal inner conflict and the need for resolution. But even in a situation like the one described, there need not be an inner conflict, in which case no need for resolution will arise. Consider two different men, distinguished by two different sets of ethical commitments, in the scenario that Rhees describes. Wittgenstein continues: “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”.⁷ Accordingly, the question “Should I leave her or not?” “is not a problem here”.⁸

By contrast, if the man is less committed to his marriage, while his passion for research is strong, the question takes on a different character; now, it may very well present something worth calling “a problem” for him. A tragic dilemma would be the result of two opposing categorical commitments, neither of which yields to the other in deliberation.

On this account of the matter, 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 man’s attitudes and commitments. Moreover, Wittgenstein thinks that how things turn out as a result of

⁷ Rhees (1965: 23).

⁸ *Ibid.*

his action will affect the man's attitude towards his decision: "He may say, 'Well, thank God I left her: it was better all around.' Or maybe, 'Thank God I stuck to her.' Or he may not be able to say 'thank God' at all, but just the opposite".⁹ So Wittgenstein seems to accept that there can be "moral luck", insofar as outcome may affect the ethical assessment of what has been done.¹⁰

At this point, a familiar objectivist impulse sets in. Surely what the man *should do* is not simply up to him? Surely whether or not he *is justified* in his decision is not a question of how he happens to feel, or of what happens as a result of his actions? More generally, how can *the truth* in ethical matters depend on our volatile attitudes and our commitments, or even chance future events? About a dozen years ago, Wittgenstein himself had firmly rejected the Hamletian thought that "nothing is either good or bad, but thinking makes it so".¹¹ Now it seems that this, in letter or in spirit, is all that there is left to say.

If *thinking* does not make things good or bad, what does? Wittgenstein concentrates on the reaction that many find natural, even inevitable, when they contemplate this case. It is a most natural thought that one of the choices facing the man must be *right*. Equally, it is a most natural thought that one of the attitudes that he might take must be *right*, must be *appropriate*, must be *the one he should take*. Is the answer of Christian ethics the right one? Or would it be right for the man to refer to, say, Nietzsche instead?

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ In this respect, there is a close resemblance between Wittgenstein's analysis of the example and Bernard Williams's discussion of retrospective justification; see Williams (1981). For a thorough exploration of the issues, see Wallace (2013).

¹¹ Wittgenstein (2007: 223). The original reads: "Why then 'tis none to you, for there is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so" (*Hamlet*, Act 2, Scene 2, 239-240).

Now Wittgenstein says very pointedly “that this question does not make sense”.¹² As he goes on to explain, “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”.¹³ Wittgenstein seems to imply that in a sense, we think we know better what a person asking the question about Christian ethics is after, but that in fact, and less obviously, this question has no answer either.

We are, of course, faced with two different questions. On the one hand, there is the question which one of the two ethical outlooks, if any, is the *right* one. On the other hand, there is the question whether it is possible either for us or for the man to *decide* which one is the right one, and *how* that decision could be justified. In principle, there may well *be* a right answer, even if we cannot *determine* it.

While this is an important distinction, Wittgenstein seems to ignore it, and that suggests that his point is different, and more fundamental. The reason why we have no clear idea of how to decide between different ethical outlooks might be that we have no clear idea of the appropriate method that would help us to determine the truth. But the reason might also be that there is no truth of this kind to be determined. That the latter interpretation is more appropriate is suggested by the fact that Wittgenstein rejects the analogous question concerning the right “standard of accuracy” as *unintelligible*. It is not merely *unanswerable*, if that means that there is a right answer that cannot be known.

¹² Rhees (1965: 23).

¹³ *Ibid.*

So in the light of my interpretation, Wittgenstein's claim can be expanded as follows: The question of which choice, of which ethical outlook is *right*, when asked in a philosophical tone of voice, does not make sense; the reason why it does not make sense is that it has no answer; and the reason why it has no answer is that there is no truth, no fact of the matter, no view from nowhere in fundamental ethical orientation. On Wittgenstein's view, we cannot divide ethical outlooks into the true and the false, where this would involve any reference to some supposed objective, impersonal standard.

At the same time, and in a different sense, ethical outlooks certainly *can* be divided into the true and the false. They can be so divided *by us*, given our ethical outlook, in the light of our attitudes and our commitments. What the man takes to be right or wrong may be expressed by his choice, by his feelings and reactions, and it is of course a proper object of his conversation and his thought. There is a language game that takes that form, making use of the words "right" and "wrong", "true" and "false" and a great many others, and it allows the man facing the choice, as it allows us, to pass judgment on a given piece of advice or an ethical outlook. This includes judgments concerning the choice between a "Christian" or a "Nietzschean" attitude to marriage.

There is that possibility because truth itself is not *deep*: As Wittgenstein says in conversations in 1945, to call a system of ethics "true" is to adopt it.¹⁴ So there is a use for "true" and "false" even with respect to the highly general question of whether the Christian or Nietzschean ethical outlook is right. That goes some way towards understanding why we find it natural, even inevitable, to think of answers to fundamental ethical questions as true and of others as false. But as Wittgenstein sees it, that use of "true" and "false" does not transcend our personal ethical orientation.

¹⁴ Rhees (1965: 24).

Now someone may try to bring back the idea of objective, impersonal ethical truth by saying: “Any ethical judgment in whatever system may be true or false”.¹⁵ Again, and characteristically, Wittgenstein does not object. His response is to deflate the force of the objection: “Remember that ‘*p* is true’ means simply ‘*p*’”.¹⁶ This is consistent with other discussions of truth in the later work, and it embodies what is now known as a deflationary conception of truth.¹⁷

So Wittgenstein also accepts the idea that an ethical judgment may justly be called true or false. Moreover, he accepts it in a sense that goes beyond a “relative” sense that merely fits a given ethical judgment into a given ethical outlook, using standards of coherence.¹⁸ But as it stands, this concession is worthless for the objectivist. He wants – and needs – something more substantial than that.

So it is fair to conclude that the passage shows a strong deflationary drift. At the same time, Wittgenstein does not suggest any specific analysis of ethical judgments; and by itself, the reminder that “*p* is true” simply means “*p*” does not commit him to *any* view of what it is to affirm or deny that *p*, where *p* is an ethical judgment.

Therefore, we must bear in mind that his reminder does not by itself rule out the idea that ethical truth may involve something more substantial. In particular, it does not by itself rule out the idea that there is an objective reality of one kind or another to which a given true

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Cf. Wittgenstein (2009: §136); Wittgenstein (1978: III-6); Wittgenstein (1976: 68, 188). Here, Wittgenstein evidently anticipates a strategy that has been widely employed by expressivists; see, e.g., Stevenson (1963: 214-220); Blackburn (1998: 68-83, 294-298) and Gibbard (2003: 60-63, 180-184).

¹⁸ In the *Lecture on Ethics*, Wittgenstein discusses a ‘relative’ sense of ethical words and distinguishes this from an ‘absolute’ sense, supposedly found in ethics. One aspect of that ‘relative’ sense is its relativity to some ‘predetermined purpose’ or ‘standard’ (Wittgenstein (2007: 225-231)).

proposition corresponds. But *if* a reality comes into play in this way, that will be a consequence of the interpretation of “ p ”, as opposed to being a consequence of, specifically, “ p is true”; that is a further consequence of the fact that “ p is true” simply means “ p ”. And as I shall now argue, it is clear that Wittgenstein does not believe that in ethics, reality comes into play in this way.

3. Ethical Facts

With this conception of ethical truth, we also obtain a conception of ethical facts. Instead of saying that p is true, we can also say that it is a fact that p ; the concepts “truth” and “fact” were made for each other.¹⁹ As Wittgenstein puts it in *Philosophical Investigations*, when we say that something is the case, we do not “stop anywhere short of the fact”.²⁰ Accordingly, we can assume that by now, Wittgenstein has given up his earlier claim that there are no ethical facts. Wittgenstein no longer thinks that all significant language pictures the facts; and he also no longer thinks that there simply are no ethical facts. Rather, he thinks that the use of a word such as “fact” must be understood in a different way than he had understood it when he composed the *Tractatus*. Like talk of truth, talk of facts has no metaphysical depth.

Further evidence for this interpretation comes from the softening of his resistance to the related idea that there are logical or mathematical facts. Evidently, expressions like “ $2 + 2 = 4$ ” and “ $\neg\neg p \rightarrow p$ ” have the grammatical form of a declarative sentence. Accordingly, they can be used to express a proposition; and propositions can be either true or false. In this re-

¹⁹ Cf. Strawson (1971: 197): “Of course, statements and facts fit. They were made for each other”.

²⁰ Wittgenstein (2009: § 95).

spect, ethical, logical and mathematical sentences are on a par with “snow is white” or “it is raining”.

The point that Wittgenstein is anxious to make is that this tells us nothing about the particular *roles* that these various kinds of expression can play in our lives. Therefore, *what it is* for such an expression to be true or false can be very different from case to case. As a consequence, there is no single, overarching “theory” of facts. All the same, if there are truths, there are facts, and with truths and facts there can be doubt, belief and knowledge.²¹ But as before, these concessions have no metaphysical depth. So by themselves, they cannot give objectivists what they require.

Again, one can say with respect to some question of ethical value, “although I believe that so and so is good, I may be wrong”.²² While this can sound like a commitment to ethical truth that transcends any personal standpoint, Wittgenstein takes a different view. He holds that there is a good use for the expression, but that so used, “this says no more than that what I assert may be denied”.²³ It is an expression for a particular ethical stance, marked, perhaps, by an openness for disagreement and further debate, as opposed to a theoretical statement about it. Again, if you say that “there are various systems of ethics”, Wittgenstein insists that you are not saying that “they are all equally right”. He scoffs: “That means nothing”.²⁴ Equally, it would mean nothing to say that “each was right from his own standpoint”. That,

²¹ Cf. Wittgenstein (1977: III-311 f): “‘I know that he arrived yesterday’ — ‘I know that $2 \times 2 = 4$ ’ — ‘I know that he was in pain’ — ‘I know that a table is standing there.’ In each case I know, only something different every time? *Of course* — but the language games are far more different than we are conscious of when we consider these sentences”.

²² Rhees (1965: 24).

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

Wittgenstein explains, “could only mean that each judges as he does”.²⁵ Again, a powerful deflationist tendency comes to the fore.

4. Judgments of Fact and Judgments of Value

These observations suggest a particular way of understanding the uses of “true” and “false”, “right” and “wrong”, and related notions in the context of ethical language. Suppose someone says that the Christian ethics is the right one. Wittgenstein holds that in saying this, the person is “making a judgment of value”.²⁶ At first, this may sound clear, even trivial. But we immediately notice an emphasis on the word “value” that seems to implicitly set it apart from some more substantial notion of “fact”, and with that emphasis, the question of the relation between the ethical judgment and reality arises again. Moreover, it soon becomes clear that what Wittgenstein calls a “judgment of value” is unlike a “judgment of fact” in that it raises the question of a correspondence between what is said and reality in an entirely different way.

To get clear about this, we must ask how we should understand this idea of a “judgment of value” in the light of the implied contrast to a “judgment of fact”. Is Wittgenstein committed to a problematic distinction between “fact” and “value”? If not, how is the implied contrast between a “judgment of value” and a “judgment of fact” to be understood?

Given the interpretation of “ethical truth” and “ethical fact” developed above, we should expect that there is a distinction between “judgments of value” and “judgments of fact”, but that this distinction is not one between judgments that describe “the facts” and

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

judgments that have an altogether different purpose. *Both* can be described as judgments of fact, and the interesting *further* question is *how* reference to some “reality” enters the picture.

This marks the place where Wittgenstein draws his distinction between “judgments of value” and “judgments of fact”. It is also the place where his deflationist view of “truth” and “fact” comes to the fore. Consider the following question: What happens when someone says in response to the choice that the man faces that the answer of Christian ethics is right? Wittgenstein offers the following as a response: It amounts to “*adopting* Christian ethics”.²⁷ Just as to say “*p* is true” is in effect to say “*p*”, to say that the Christian ethics is right is to avow, to accept, to take up that ethical stance. By contrast, there is no question of truth as correspondence between such an ethical judgment and some independent *reality* called “the ethical facts”. Equally, there is no question of truth as correspondence to some distinctly ethical sphere, either within the world or beyond it. Wittgenstein makes that critical edge of his claim quite clear.

Or does he? Having said that to judge that the Christian ethics is right is to adopt it, he adds something by way of clarification: “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”.²⁸ But what is *that* supposed to mean? It does not *seem* to mean that there is simply *no* reality that corresponds to Christian ethics. But if there is, what could that reality be? And what would it be for it to “correspond” to Christian ethics?

5. What Is the Point of the Distinction?

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*

Let us backtrack a little. On my interpretation, Wittgenstein does not deny that there is a sense in which questions of truth *can* involve further questions of correspondence. In particular, they can involve questions of correspondence to “some reality” that may or may not exist, and that, if it exists, may or may not be as a particular theory says it is. This is the immediate consequence of what he says.

Physical theory is an example where such correspondence is found. Moreover, this is not the formal, essentially empty sense in which “a truth” corresponds to “a fact”. This is clear from the point that the formal and empty sense fails to yield the distinction that Wittgenstein draws. After all, in that formal and empty sense, ethical, physical, logical and mathematical truths all have at least one thing in common: They “correspond to the facts”. It follows that if he distinguishes different ways in which “some reality corresponds – or conflicts” with what is said, Wittgenstein must have something different in mind.

Indeed he does, and in outline, it is easy enough to see what that is. In the case of a physical theory, there is a relatively clear and familiar sense in which the world either is, or is not, as the theory portrays it to be. The former case yields correspondence, the latter conflict. Thus, if a physical theory claims that gold has better conductivity than silver, then it conflicts with reality. The truth is that silver has lower resistance than gold. In fact, it has lower resistance than all other metals. Therefore it has better conductivity. Gold and silver are real, and so are these differences in their behaviour when put in touch with electrical current. That is what we call “the reality that corresponds to the theory” in this particular case.

Of course, that reality is not necessarily something that we can touch or see. It is also not necessarily known just by looking. But in a case like this, it can be measured, modelled, and explained in the appropriate ways. Metals like silver and gold have different causal prop-

erties, and what the true theory says fits in well with observations, inferences concerning causes and effects, and other parts of the framework of physical theory. In short, this theory represents the way things *really are* with respect to conductivity. So that theory is the right one.

Now Wittgenstein says with respect to ethical judgment: “The way in which some reality corresponds – or conflicts – with a physical theory has no counterpart here”. At the very least, that must mean this: The very idea of looking for *something* that would be both real and could be used to substantiate truth of an ethical judgment *by being just as the judgment says it is* is mistaken. That picture has applications, but ethics is not among them.

It is therefore natural to read this passage as deflationary in spirit, as Simon Blackburn has done.²⁹ In my view, this way of reading it captures a salient truth. However, it also omits something important. And both claims need further argument and explanation.

First of all, it is important to ask why Wittgenstein puts the point that he intends to make in this way. For having read the passage, we may still be in doubt: Is there, on his view, room for the idea of a correspondence between “some reality” and “ethical judgment”? Is he concerned to distinguish between different *kinds* of correspondence? Is he concerned to distinguish between different kinds of *reality* that correspond? Or is there *no* correspondence in ethics, no reality to which a given ethical judgment could, rightly or wrongly, be said to correspond? And what would either of those answers entail for the interpretation of ethical judgment?

When we read his words carefully, Wittgenstein does not seem to want to simply *deny* that there can be a correspondence between some ethical judgment and some reality. He uses the guarded – and slightly cumbersome – phrase, “the way in which some reality corresponds

²⁹ Blackburn (1990); (1998: 78); (2005: 129-136). Hacker (2001: 167 f.) notes a corresponding “deflationary” tendency in the later work on aesthetics.

– or conflicts – with a physical theory has no counterpart here”. Why does he do that, and what could it mean?

Paul Johnston is one of the few who have addressed the issue. He claims that the point of the contrast “is not that as a matter of fact nothing corresponds to ethics, but rather that the notion of correspondence here makes no sense in principle”.³⁰ This would entail both the claim that it is futile to set out to find any such correspondence, and the claim that it is nonsense to think that this is what one has found.

In my view, this gets things exactly the wrong way around. The point that Wittgenstein alludes to is precisely the opposite: *There is* a kind of correspondence in the case of ethics, too. The notion of correspondence applies; but it must not be confused with the *kind* of correspondence that we find in physics, where *something* can be said to *be* as the theory portrays it to be.

Put in this way, what Wittgenstein says clearly invites the thought that in ethics no less than in physics, *there is* room for the idea of correspondence to a reality. If so, it must certainly be a different *kind* of correspondence than the one that we find in the case of a physical theory and the reality that it describes. But that would be hardly surprising; and it could still be an interesting and important kind of correspondence. That, in turn, invites the thought that what Wittgenstein says is not as uniformly deflationist as it may seem.

6. Invention and Discovery

³⁰ Johnston (1989: 142).

Before we can go any further, we have to remember again that these are reports of conversations, written down some hours after these had taken place, and that their author does not claim that these reports are true to every word or sentence spoken.³¹ But as I will now try to show, there is every reason to think that with respect to correspondence, Rhees gives an accurate representation of what Wittgenstein said. For our purposes, we can trust the following hermeneutical maxim: If there is an interpretation that makes good sense of the passage as it is reported, if that interpretation puts the passage in line with what Wittgenstein says elsewhere, and if no better, rival account of it is available, then we are entitled to treat the report as a faithful representation of Wittgenstein's thought. I believe not only that such an interpretation is available, but that it shows that Wittgenstein chose his words carefully, with a particular purpose in mind.

In particular, I suggest that the key to the puzzling expression about correspondence is found in the *Lectures on the Foundations of Mathematics* that Wittgenstein gave in Cambridge in 1939. If that conjecture is correct, it establishes that when Wittgenstein came to discuss ethical language with Rhees a few years later in 1945, he had a familiar expression to hand. (In fact, Rhees also attended the 1939 lectures on mathematics, and their transcription is partly based on his notes.)

The lectures that came to be published as *Lectures on the Foundations of Mathematics* were given twice a week over a period of two terms.³² While they cover a wide range of topics, one recurrent theme is the temptation to Platonist views, and related questions of truth in mathematics and logic. This is where Wittgenstein also discusses the difficult question of the relation between language and reality.

³¹ Rhees (1965: 22, note).

³² Wittgenstein (1976: 7).

With respect to the language of mathematics and logic, this question seems equally puzzling. On the one hand, it is not at all obvious *how* that language relates to reality, and to *what* reality it could be said to relate. On the other hand, there is a powerful and persistent temptation to think that there *must be* such a relation, a reality to which a given set of mathematical or logical judgments either corresponds or fails to correspond. As we saw in the case of a physical theory, words like ‘truth’, ‘correspondence’ and ‘fact’ readily present themselves to describe that relation. But it is unclear how they apply, and we have already seen that their use can be highly misleading. Thus, we find Wittgenstein asking over and over again what “correspondence to a reality” might mean in a logical or mathematical context.

Platonists like G. H. Hardy, a colleague and friend at Trinity, had a ready answer to that question. As Hardy puts it in a famous essay from that time, “317 is a prime, not because we think so, or because our minds are shaped in one way rather than another, *but because it is so*, because mathematical reality is built that way”.³³ Similar views are expressed in his article “Mathematical Proof” of 1929, to which Wittgenstein frequently refers in the lectures.

In that article, Hardy asserts that mathematical theorems “are true or false”, that their truth or falsity “is absolute and independent of our knowledge of them”, and that “in *some* sense, mathematical truth is part of objective reality”.³⁴ Given that this “objective reality” is supposed to consist of abstract objects like numbers, functions, or sets, these are the hallmarks of a platonist view. Wittgenstein adds, characteristically: “The fact that he said it does not matter; what is important is that it is a thing which lots of people would like to say”.³⁵ What

³³ Hardy (1940: 130).

³⁴ Hardy (1929: 4).

³⁵ Wittgenstein (1976: 239).

interests Wittgenstein most is the suggestive power of language, the pictures that it conjures up in our imagination, and the resulting confusion.³⁶

On Hardy's view, there is a close analogy between physical and mathematical theory. Even though the objects and relations that are investigated by physics and mathematics are different, both disciplines are in the business of investigating objects and relations. In fact, Hardy claims that "there is probably less difference between the positions of a mathematician and a physicist than is generally supposed".³⁷ He even thinks, somewhat paradoxically, that the mathematician is in much more *direct* contact with his reality than the physicist could ever be. The reason is that, unlike physical objects, mathematical objects "are so much more what they seem".³⁸ Presumably, he thinks that physics reveals a reality that is surprisingly different from what we untutoredly take it to be. Mathematical reality, by contrast, is by and large what it appears to be to those who master mathematics.

Moreover, Hardy maintains that this reality is as robust as that of any physical object. Accordingly, he believes "that mathematical reality lies outside us, that our function is to discover or *observe* it, and that the theorems which we prove, and which we describe grandiloquently as our 'creations', are simply our notes of our observations".³⁹ So Wittgenstein is right when he observes that "it is obvious what Hardy compares mathematical propositions with: namely physics".⁴⁰ Hardy turns the idea of a concrete physical object into the idea of an abstract one, maintaining that both exist, that we can observe them, and that they are as they

³⁶ Compare the helpful discussion in Conant (1997: 213-218).

³⁷ Hardy (1940: 128).

³⁸ Hardy (1940: 130).

³⁹ Hardy (1940: 123 f.).

⁴⁰ Wittgenstein (1976: 240).

are independently of our observations. Wittgenstein adds that “this comparison is extremely misleading”.⁴¹ I think we should agree with that as well.

Now given the platonist view, there is a straightforward relation between mathematical language and the reality to which that language refers. Like physical language, its use is to capture the truth about objects or facts that exist in the world that surrounds us. In this respect, numbers like 317 or the fact that it is prime are like silver and gold and the fact that silver has lower resistance than gold. These objects and their properties are independent of us. They transcend our knowledge and our practices of using of language. On this view of the matter, the main difference between them is that mathematical objects and their relations are not physical, so our relation to them is not physical either. As abstract objects or relations, they have no location in space or time; nor do they have causal powers.

Still, on the platonist view, mathematical truth and truth in physical theory have a similar structure. The physical theory that claims that silver has a lower resistance than gold describes the physical reality that corresponds to our judgment correctly. That is what makes that particular theory true. Similarly, the judgment that “317 is prime” describes the mathematical reality that corresponds to the judgment correctly. More generally, if mathematics describes the mathematical reality that corresponds to our language correctly, then the result is mathematical truth. That reality makes the theorem true. Neither reality nor the truth of the theory is our creation.

It is well known that Wittgenstein had no sympathy for these ideas. His first and most general objection to it is that even if there were some “Euclidean heaven” of geometrical objects, it would be quite useless. The reason is that there are different geometries, and we would still face the choice between different systems. To put it bluntly, if $25 \times 25 = 625$, then

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

it is equally 624, 623 or “any damn thing – for any mathematical system you like”.⁴² At first sight, the idea of some “Euclidean heaven” seems to be useful, albeit obscure. But if there is an infinity of such “shadowy worlds”, then the utility of the idea “breaks down”.⁴³ In any case, it is quite hard to make sense of the idea that there are mathematical objects, and that we have any knowledge of them, if we think of them as “shadowy” things in a “shadowy” world.⁴⁴ This kind of picture misleads us.

In response, Wittgenstein works out a different way of accounting for logical and mathematical language. On his view, it does not *describe* some elusive reality of mathematical objects. Instead, it is best understood as a set of rules that also license inferences in other contexts than “pure” mathematics. These rules are useful, and they are of fundamental importance in our lives. “Pure” mathematics is an extension of the rules of that practice. So at bottom, the mathematician “is an inventor, not a discoverer”.⁴⁵ He follows, extends and establishes rules, which are then put in the archives.⁴⁶

Of course, this is not at all how it seems, and Wittgenstein is well aware of that fact. Consider a proposition like “fractions cannot be arranged in an order of magnitude”.⁴⁷ Wittgenstein says that it *seems* to “concern as it were the natural history of mathematical ob-

⁴² Wittgenstein (1976: 145).

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ One important and influential challenge is Benacerraf (1973); for a contemporary formulation, see Kitcher (2012).

⁴⁵ Wittgenstein (1978: I-168); *cf. ibid.* II-2, II-38, V-9, VII-5, where the contrast between ‘discovery’ and ‘invention’ is employed again.

⁴⁶ *Cf.* Wittgenstein (1976: 107).

⁴⁷ Wittgenstein (1978: II-40). As the context makes clear, Wittgenstein does not mean to deny that *given sets* of fractions can be arranged in an order of magnitude. Obviously, they can. Rather, the point must be that *between* any two given fractions, there are infinitely many others. Therefore, there is no such thing as ‘the next fraction to this in order of magnitude’ *simpliciter*.

jects themselves”.⁴⁸ In that mood, one would like to say of it, for example, that “it introduces us to the mysteries of the mathematical world”.⁴⁹ As one would expect, Wittgenstein gives a robust response to that idea: “*This* is the aspect against which I want to give a warning”.⁵⁰ Elsewhere, he compares our picture of arithmetic with a “mineralogy” of numbers.⁵¹ While Wittgenstein concedes that we do not talk about arithmetic in such a way, he maintains that “our whole thinking is penetrated with this idea”.⁵² The comparison of mathematics with science is powerful and seductive. But it does not advance our understanding of either.

7. Two Kinds of Correspondence

Having exposed the illusion, Wittgenstein goes on to give an account of its persistent allure. His therapeutical task is to uncover the various pictures, assumptions and fragments of theory that encourage the platonist interpretation.⁵³ This is where a different idea of “a correspondence” or “responsibility” to “a reality” comes into view.

In a typical move, Wittgenstein does not begin by taking sides. In particular, he does not set out to argue either for or against the idea *that there is* such a correspondence. Instead,

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, IV-11. At (1976: 140) Wittgenstein varies the comparison to “propositions about exotic animals, which have a certain charm”.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ As he puts it in *Philosophical Investigations*, “what a mathematician is inclined to say about the objectivity and reality of mathematical facts, is not a philosophy of mathematics, but something for philosophical *treatment*” (§254).

he asks what such a claim, and such a question, could possibly mean. It soon emerges that there is a sense in which it is perfectly true and important that something real corresponds to our logical and mathematical language. It also emerges, however, that this reality is not what a platonist might expect. Indeed, it emerges that the attempt to establish substantial analogies between mathematics and physics is bound to fail.

First of all, there is a harmless way in which the phrase “a reality corresponds” can be used. As Wittgenstein points out, if we simply translate the words “it is true ...” by “a reality corresponds to ...”, then we can certainly say that a reality corresponds to “ $2 + 2 = 4$ ”.⁵⁴ All *that* would mean is that “ $2 + 2 = 4$ ” is true; and as Wittgenstein sees it, that would amount to affirming, endorsing, commending the rule “ $2 + 2 = 4$ ”. But this is clearly not what Hardy has in mind. It would be trivial: “If this is all that is meant by saying that a reality corresponds to mathematical propositions, it would come to saying nothing at all, a mere truism: if we leave out the question of *how* it corresponds, or in what sense it corresponds”.⁵⁵ Once more, the important question is how “correspondence to reality” is to be understood. Consequently, it is not clear that we should simply say that *no* reality corresponds to “ $2 + 2 = 4$ ”.

The point applies straightforwardly to ethics. We have truth and falsity, and in that empty, formal sense, we have “correspondence to reality”. The question is *what* “a reality corresponds to $2 + 2 = 4$ ” might mean, given that it means more than “it is true that $2 + 2 = 4$ ”.

Now the picture that guides the platonist gives the phrase a more specific sense. As we saw, that sense exploits the supposed analogy with natural objects, modelling “correspondence to a reality” on correspondence to objects that are locatable in space in time. Reality, as we

⁵⁴ Wittgenstein (1976: 239).

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

tend to think of it, is something “we can *point* to”; it is “*this, that*”.⁵⁶ But given that understanding of reality, what would it be to assert, or to deny, that there is not merely empty, formal correspondence, but also correspondence of some other, more substantial kind?

In response to this question, Wittgenstein rightly issues a note of caution: “Taken literally, this seems to mean nothing at all – *what* reality? I don’t know what this means”.⁵⁷ This is a rejection of platonist views on the grounds that the analogy that they employ is unintelligible. The question is: Do we really have a firm enough hold on the idea that there is a “realm” of mathematical objects like numbers and sets, or some “Euclidean heaven” of angles and lines? Do we have any use for that idea? Does it have any informative content apart from being a powerful picture? The answer to all of those questions seems to be “no”. Wittgenstein is surely right about that.⁵⁸

The important point is that despite appearances, this rejection is not the end of the appeal to correspondence. Rather, it reinvites the question: What else could “correspondence to a reality” mean? And that invites a further question: What other, more substantial kind of correspondence could there be in logic and in mathematics? Perhaps surprisingly, Wittgenstein does not reject the idea of correspondence *even if* we understand reality as something “we can *point* to”, as “*this, that*”. Instead, he suggests that a reality corresponds not only to propositions if they are true, but also to *words* such as “two”, “red”, “rain” or “perhaps”. As we shall see, this suggestion extends to ethics.

Again, the important step is the first. Initially, it seems that propositions are the only candidates for correspondence. This is not surprising; after all, a proposition is the kind of

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 240.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 239.

⁵⁸ For a defence of these claims from a contemporary naturalistic perspective, see Leng (2010).

thing that can be either true or false, and the distinction between true and false is what seems to have correspondence in tow. But this is not how Wittgenstein describes the situation. His next move is to introduce two kinds of correspondence, one of which applies to propositions, while the other one does not. On this view, a reality corresponds to “it rains” if that proposition is true and we can assert it – that is to say, if it rains.⁵⁹ By contrast, to say that a reality corresponds to words like “two” and “perhaps” could simply mean that “we have some use for them” – and that is obviously true.⁶⁰

Naturally, these uses differ from the uses of “it rains” and other propositions. All the same, they play important roles in the context of our lives. We count, we add, we measure; we doubt, we guess, we gamble; we see flowers, paint and blood. These and countless other patterns in our lives provide the background for our use of words like “two”, “perhaps”, and “red”; and these patterns in our lives are evidently real. They are examples of “*this, that*”. So it would be misleading to say, “There is *no* reality that corresponds to these words”. That would make their use seem arbitrary in a way in which it is clearly not.

To vary the example, we might ask: Is there a reality that corresponds to negation? The answer is “yes”, but it has nothing to do with a shadowy realm of logical objects or facts. Instead, it refers us back to the obvious – back to ourselves. That we have a use for negation is a basic fact about our lives as human beings. Wittgenstein says that “it’s an ethnological fact – it’s something to do with the way we live. We bar certain things; we don’t let a man in; we exclude certain things; give orders and withdraw them, make exceptions, etc.”.⁶¹ *That* is the kind of reality that corresponds to the word “not”.

⁵⁹ Wittgenstein (1976: 247).

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 249.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

Similar answers apply to “and”, “or”, “if”, and other logical terms. As with mathematics, it is essential to logic “that its signs are also employed in *mufti*”.⁶² As before, their use is not arbitrary, but firmly woven into the tapestry of our lives.

These claims naturally extend to other instances of logical and mathematical language. So Wittgenstein draws a general lesson: “What I want to say is this. If one talks of the reality corresponding to a proposition of mathematics or of logic, it is like speaking of a reality corresponding to these *words* – ‘two’ or ‘perhaps’ – more than it is like talking of a reality corresponding to the *sentence* ‘It rains’”.⁶³ We have seen what this comparison conveys.

A different way of putting the point would be this: What is to count as a “true” proposition of logic or of mathematics is “entirely defined in language”; that is to say, it does not “depend on any external fact at all”.⁶⁴ In this respect, a proposition like “ $2 + 2 = 4$ ” or “ $\neg\neg p \rightarrow p$ ” differs fundamentally from a proposition like “it rains”. The truth of “it rains” is undoubtedly *not* internal to language. It depends on what Wittgenstein calls an “external fact”, namely the fact that it rains.

I think that this sufficiently explains why Wittgenstein does not wish to *deny* that “a reality corresponds” to logical or mathematical language. If we are clear what that means, and do not superimpose any platonist pictures, that claim is true. In fact, Wittgenstein makes his intentions quite clear: “I don’t say: ‘No reality corresponds’”.⁶⁵ Logical and mathematical rules have a use. These uses of words are familiar and important. That is why to say that “a reality corresponds to ‘ $2 + 2 = 4$ ’” is like saying “A reality corresponds to ‘two’”: “It is a useful

⁶² Wittgenstein (1978: V-2).

⁶³ Wittgenstein (1976: 249).

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

rule, *most* useful – we couldn't do without it for a thousand reasons, not just *one*".⁶⁶ Once we get a clear view of that fact, we can learn to resist the temptation exerted by platonist pictures. At the same time, we can accept that there is a reality that corresponds to logical and mathematical language. In a sense, we can even accept that this reality is something "we can *point to*". It is an example of "*this, that*".

8. Ethical Reality

From here, it is a short step back to ethics and the conversations with Rush Rhees in 1945. In the light of his *Lectures on the Foundations of Mathematics*, it seems to me to be very likely that Wittgenstein said what Rhees reports him as saying when the – by now familiar – topic of some "correspondence to reality" came up again. The central idea from the *Lectures* applies directly, and with ease. Ethical words have a use; like logical and mathematical expressions, these words are firmly, and abundantly, woven into the tapestry of our lives. Thus, we ask or demand or wish for certain things of one another; we praise people for what they do or achieve; we promise to do certain things and accept obligations to others; we criticise and we reproach; we lay down and discuss rules for our conduct; we ask ourselves what we should do; we build and revise a conception of how we should live, of what is worth caring about, and of what makes our lives worth living.

All this – and much more could be added – is real. It marks the way we live. It is important to us, marking our relations to ourselves as well as to others. In this way, it provides the framework for our use of ethical language. So as before, it would be misleading to say that

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

no reality corresponds to that language. Ethical language is not a game played merely for entertainment, nor is it some empty formalism without use. The right thing to say is precisely what Wittgenstein says: *The way in which* a reality corresponds – or conflicts – with a physical theory has no counterpart here. As before, we should not say: “No reality corresponds”; and as before, Wittgenstein makes a point of not saying it.

As these examples show, both truth and falsity *and* correspondence to reality have a rightful place in this picture of ethics. The point is that they come into the picture in an entirely different way than many traditional ethical theories encourage us to think they do. Here it would seem that Wittgenstein’s target is not so much Hardy, but an objectivist, realist view of ethical “qualities” such as G. E. Moore’s.⁶⁷

In fact, in a different passage, Wittgenstein says something about Moore that is also relevant here: “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”.⁶⁸ The use of a word such as “beautiful” – and also “good” – can be misleading: “‘Beautiful’ is an adjective, so you are inclined to say: ‘This has a certain quality, that of being beautiful’”.⁶⁹ (It is interesting that according to Rhees, Wittgenstein mentioned “good” in the same sentence as another example.) Once more, of course it is true that a beautiful thing “has a certain quality”, namely that of being beautiful, just as it is true that a good thing “has a certain quality”, namely that of being good. That is harmless because it is empty, and it is empty if it is only a variant of “this is beautiful” and “this is good”. It does not introduce a “quality” as the objectivist

⁶⁷ See Moore (1903), with which Wittgenstein was of course familiar.

⁶⁸ Wittgenstein (1966: 2).

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 1.

conceives of it. But we are constantly tempted to think of such a “quality” as a mysterious entity that has a “shadowy” existence in a “shadowy” part of the world.

Where does this leave ethics? The picture that emerges is one of ethical language and ethical life as something profoundly human, something with its origin and place in the familiar world of human affairs. It is a world shaped by culture and history; a world in which ethical outlooks diverge, but often also have something in common. In this respect, it is a vision akin to that of John Dewey and a pragmatist tradition. In 1932, Dewey wrote: “Moral conceptions and processes grow naturally out of the very conditions of human life”.⁷⁰ That thought fits well with the conception of ethical language that I have ascribed to the later Wittgenstein.

At the same time, ethics remains deeply personal. It is bound up with the deepest concerns and commitments of those who see the world around them from a singular, ethical point of view. In this respect, there is a surprisingly deep continuity between the later work and the *Tractatus*. Regardless of its ties to a social world, ethics is essentially subjective. It is bound to a particular perspective, a point of view towards the world. But whereas the *Tractatus* conceived of this point of view in transcendental terms, as “a condition of the world, like logic”, and therefore as something that lies beyond the limits of sense, the later work radically breaks with these ideas.⁷¹ The reality that corresponds to ethics is the reality of human life. Ethics now falls into place as a part of our natural history.

This conclusion has wider repercussions. First, there is no need to compromise the claim that there is only one sense of “true”, namely the sense in which to say “*p* is true” is in

⁷⁰ Dewey and Tufts (1932: 308). For a contemporary development of the naturalist and pragmatist theme, see Kitcher (2011).

⁷¹ Wittgenstein (1979: 77), entry of 24 July 1916.

effect to say “*p*”. As we saw, that does not by itself rule out the idea of substantial, objective ethical truth. The reason is that depending on *p*, saying “*p*” or “*p* is true” can be to say and to do very different things. But it is clear that as Wittgenstein conceives of it, there is no hope of transcending our personal ethical outlook by means of an appeal to the idea of ethical truth. It is not that such an appeal is in principle impossible, because in ethics, the notions of truth or falsity or correspondence do not apply. Rather, it is that this appeal does not reach as far as the realist hopes to be able to reach.

In particular, there can be no correspondence or conflict between our ethical outlook and ethical truth, because there is no such thing as “the ethical truth” independently of our ethical outlook. If we go on to ask which of these ethical outlooks is right, Wittgenstein answers “that this question does not make sense”.⁷² The reason is that there is no reality that “corresponds” to an ethical outlook in the way in which a reality corresponds to a physical theory that is true. While there is correspondence to reality, there is no reality that would allow us to ask and to answer the question of whether a given ethical outlook is true or false.

Second, the view extends to other normative notions. Wittgenstein mentions our reasons: “In considering a different system of ethics there may be a strong temptation to think that what seems to *us* to express the justification of an action must be what really justifies it there, whereas the real reasons are the reasons that are given. These *are* the reasons for or against the action”.⁷³ This must mean more than that which we cite and accept as a justification is not necessarily that which is *cited* and *accepted* as a justification elsewhere. That much is obvious, and there is no temptation to think anything else.

⁷² Rhees (1965: 23).

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 26.

By contrast, *there is* a very strong temptation to think that when other considerations are cited and accepted, there is an objective standard of the kind to which we ourselves aspire – and that this standard determines the truth about reasons, their respective weights and powers of justification *here* as well as *there*. But this is the mistake of the platonist picture all over again. There is no such divide between our practice of *taking* some considerations as reasons and the facts about our reasons *as they really are*. Especially in ethics, “we have to keep from assuming that reasons must really be of a different sort from what they are seen to be”.⁷⁴ At that fundamental level, reasons are not objectively “given” to all those who can ask the question.⁷⁵

It may be asked what remains of the claim that in ethics, “the way in which some reality corresponds – or conflicts – with a physical theory has no counterpart”, once we abandon the Platonist model. As the examples of Parfit and Scanlon show, realists may insist that there is normative truth, but reject the idea that such normative truth is based on, or explained by, mysterious relations of correspondence between language and some inexplicable “realm” of normative facts, or “queer” metaphysical entities. Would that possibility collapse the challenge that Wittgenstein poses to realist views? Should we go even further and say that it shows that in fact an overly ambitious forms of Platonism, but not realism, is his target?

I do not think that either of these suggestions would do justice to the text. We must remember that Wittgenstein aims to deflate the notion of ethical truth, and that he does this by tying it to a subjective, personal point of view. What the man facing a choice between leaving his wife and abandoning cancer research receives is not an answer of the form, “the an-

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ As this passage shows, Wittgenstein would challenge a prominent view in contemporary ethics and the philosophy of normativity, according to which certain facts simply *are* reasons for action. For a recent defense of this view of reasons, see Parfit (2011) and Scanlon (2014).

swer of Christian ethics, not that of Nietzschean ethics, is correct”. Rather, he receives the answer that the question which of these ethical systems is correct, or more correct, “does not make sense”. The same point could be made with respect to “the truth” about our reasons. Moreover, Wittgenstein says that it is a mistake to think that reasons “are of a different sort from what they are seen to be”. That must mean that fundamentally, they *are* just as they are seen to be, *here* as well as *there*. And that means that, if this is accepted, claims to truth and objectivity that are the hallmark of the realist perspective cannot be maintained.⁷⁶

That claims to objectivity in ethics are his target is confirmed by the conversations with Rush Rhees in 1945. In this exchange, Wittgenstein considers what he calls “ethical theory”, which essentially involves “the idea of finding the true nature of goodness or of duty”.⁷⁷ Presumably, to find the “true nature” of goodness or duty would be to find the criterion by which we could judge what is *really* good, as opposed to merely *apparently* good, or good *from our point of view*. In other words, that criterion would be objective: “Plato wanted to do this – to set ethical inquiry in the direction of finding the true nature of goodness – so as to achieve objectivity and avoid relativity. He thought that relativity must be avoided at all costs, since it would destroy the *imperative* in morality”.⁷⁸ That search was based on an illusion, and it is a further illusion to think that without objectivity, there can be no imperative in ethics.

Wittgenstein never believed that the ethical could be reduced to natural facts or explained by appeal to mysterious ethical “qualities”. But he believed, for a time, that the ethical is “supernatural”, something “higher” or “mystical” that shows itself, something that lies be-

⁷⁶ Most realists accept that claims to truth *and* objectivity are the hallmarks of their view. For a defense of this view, see Shafer-Landau (2003). I think it is also accepted by Parfit and Scanlon.

⁷⁷ Rhees (1965: 23).

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

yond the limits of meaningful language. Once we look back at this picture from the perspective that Wittgenstein reached when he wrote *Philosophical Investigations*, we can see that this, too, was an illusion. The place of ethical language is in the midst of our lives, and our lives are the reality to which it corresponds.

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