WITTGENSTEIN ON ETHICS

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"Whereof we cannot speak, thereof we must be silent"

The genesis of this paper was the following thought: Wittgenstein was a prolific, compulsive philosopher, and a very wide ranging one. Yet, so far as I was aware, he neither wrote himself, nor dictated notes, nor gave lectures on — he barely mentions — Ethics, after the Cambridge lectures of 1930-32. By 1933 Wittgenstein had abandoned Positivism for he then gave the lectures recorded in the Blue Book. These mark the beginning of his last mature philosophy which reached its apotheosis in the *Philosophical Investigations*, Part One of which we are told had been completed by 1945 and which Wittgenstein may have intended to publish. Apart from some conversations with and

1. I do not distinguish ethics and morals but endeavour to use 'Ethics' for the philosophical study of, and claims about, ethics or morals. However, it is part of my position and critique of Wittgenstein that this distinction cannot always be made. Wittgenstein uses 'Ethics' for ethics in his 1930 lecture.


3. 'The verification is not one token of the truth, it is the sense of the proposition.' *Philosophical Remarks*, ed. R. Rhees, (trans. 1975), p. 200. This was prepared in the summer of 1930 from material Wittgenstein had written between the beginning of February 1929 and the beginning of May 1930. Or again, 'If there is no test to decide between two statements then they mean the same.' Lee, op. cit., 82. Delivered 1931-32.

4. These preliminary studies for the *Philosophical Investigations* were published as *The Blue and Brown Books* (1958).

recorded by Rush Rhees⁶ all that I could find in this, his mature period that was explicitly about Ethics was contained in the parenthetical remark in § 77 of the *Investigations*, “‘Anything — and nothing — is right.' — And this is the position you are in if you look for definitions corresponding to our concepts in aesthetics or ethics.” But there is nothing else in the *Investigations*, nothing in *Zettel*, nothing else surprisingly perhaps in *On Certainty* or in *On Colour*, nothing in his pupils’ lecture notes that were published as *Lectures and Conversations*, though he there talked about Aesthetics and Religious Belief, both of which he always seems to have seen as being — in different ways — closely linked to Ethics. There seemed to be nothing else on Ethics from this period published or remaining in the *Nachlass.*⁷

In 1977 Wittgenstein and Ethics was a topic for the Annual Wittgenstein Conference in Austria. There were six contributors. None of them refers to anything written after the Lecture (which we now know was delivered in November 1930⁸), apart from fragments of letters and conversations, usually dealing with religious matters, some with ethical problems, but none with the philosophy of ethics, Ethics.

Theodore Redpath, who knew Wittgenstein well, writes⁹ that after 1930 Wittgenstein said and wrote little on Ethics. So, I concluded, Wittgenstein seemed to have gone silent about Ethics shortly after 1930 — though of course he was personally always an intensely moral, ascetic man and indeed a highly judgemental one.

Why this philosophical silence? (That, at last, is my question.)

The silence might be explained in terms of the *Tractatus*, thus emphasising the continuity of Wittgenstein’s Ethics — and certainly, as we have noticed, Wittgenstein’s intense moral character and attitudes seemed to have changed little throughout his life. The difficulty here is twofold. Wittgenstein’s Tractarian views on Ethics


