The Transcendentality of Wittgenstein’s Ethics

Neşe Aksoy
Mimar Sinan Fine Arts University Philosophy Department
(PHD Student)
aksoynesee@gmail.com

Abstract: Ludwig Wittgenstein bluntly suggests that the ethical propositions are nonsensical.
This argument of Wittgenstein is widely interpreted by the logical positivists in the way that ethics for Wittgenstein is a meaningless phenomenon altogether which cannot be talked about.

However, this paper opposes the view that Wittgenstein denounces ethics as a meaningless subject.

On the contrary, it puts stress on the fact that although Wittgenstein sees that ethics is nonsensical within the boundaries of propositional expression, he claims that it has a transcendental form of truth and meaning which discloses itself in the way the subject introduces it into the world and manifests it in a good and fulfilled life.

In other words, I argue that even though ethics is nonsensical within the scope of propositional expression for Wittgenstein, it has a meaning as a transcendental truth that shows itself through the ethical life of the subject.

Key Words: nonsensical, ethics, Wittgenstein, proposition, transcendental, truth.
A) Introduction

In “A Lecture on Ethics” Ludwig Wittgenstein sets out by remarking that, “Ethics is an enquiry into what is valuable, or, into what is really important, or I could have said Ethics is the enquiry into the meaning of life, or into what makes life worth living, or into the right way of living.” (Wittgenstein, 1965, p. 5) Similarly, in Notebooks 1914-1916, Wittgenstein utters that “the good and evil are somehow connected with the meaning of the world” (Wittgenstein, 1961, p. 73). Hence, Wittgenstein regards ethics as a highly essential human activity: an enquiry into the meaning of life and the world. However, this idea of ethics as a highly meaningful activity of human being is interrupted by the suggestion of Wittgenstein which says that ethics is nonsensical in the sense that it is impossible to formulate ethical propositions. As Wittgenstein writes in “A Lecture on Ethics”:

That is to say: I see now that 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 (Wittgenstein, 1965, p. 11-12).

By this means, Wittgenstein seems to be offering a controversial account of ethics by holding that ethics which is
envisaged as a highly meaningful human activity at the outset is then denounced to have any sense and significance. First, I should say that this idea of nonsensicality of ethics in Wittgenstein is commonly reduced to a positivistic reading which entails that ethics is a meaningless subject that cannot be talked about. According to the positivistic account, ethics is a supernatural and mystical phenomenon which cannot be systematically and scientifically articulated through propositions. It is basically assumed that ethics is not a logically valid subject to be talked about. Therefore the mystical nature of ethics is reduced to triviality and meaninglessness of ethics as such. Nonetheless, if we read Wittgenstein from a non-positivistic perspective, we uncover that the inexpressibility of ethics in Wittgenstein, namely the fact that we cannot formulate ethical propositions, does not necessarily mean that ethics is a meaningless and trivially mystical subject. On the contrary we shall argue that ethics in Wittgenstein is attributed such a transcendental and elevated form of truth that it extends beyond the boundaries of propositional expression. In other words, it can be held that the nonsensicality of ethics is essentially because of its being a transcendental and higher form of truth that cannot be limited to the scope of propositions. In *Tractatus* Wittgenstein says, “6. 42: So too it is impossible for there to be propositions of ethics. Propositions can express nothing that is higher” (Wittgenstein, 1974, p. 86). And he adds, “6. 522: There are, indeed, things that cannot be put into words. They make themselves manifest. They are what is mystical” (Wittgenstein, 1974, p. 89). In these remarks, Wittgenstein hints that ethics is a mystical and high subject which cannot be put into words but which expresses itself in the way it shows/manifests itself. This suggests that ethics for Wittgenstein is not necessarily a meaningless activity altogether. Rather it is a transcendental form of truth which cannot be articulated in propositional expression but which discloses its existence in the way it shows/manifests itself.
To make my argument more clear, I would like to go back to “A Lecture on Ethics” where Wittgenstein distinguishes between the relative sense and absolute/ethical sense of facts (Wittgenstein, 1965, p. 5-7). In this article Wittgenstein proposes that in the relative sense of facts and propositions which are expressible through propositions, the facts are arbitrarily determined. Yet, in the absolute/ethical sense of the facts which are ineffable through propositions, there is a logical necessity that binds the facts. To clarify this distinction, Wittgenstein gives an example of a right road in relative sense and a right road in absolute sense (Wittgenstein, 1965, p. 7). He utters that the right road in relative sense is the road which leads to the arbitrarily predetermined end; the right road in absolute sense, on the other hand, is the road which would be taken by a logical necessity by everybody and people would be ashamed if they do not take it. In other words, while the right road in a relative sense is to be taken arbitrarily, the right road in an absolute sense is to be taken necessarily. At this juncture, drawing a parallel between the absolutely right road and absolute/ethical good Wittgenstein describes the absolute/ethical good as follows: “[absolute/ethical good] would be one which everybody, independent of his tastes and inclinations, would necessarily bring about or feel guilty for not bringing about” (Wittgenstein, 1965, p. 7). In that sense, Wittgenstein suggests that the absolute or ethical good is a logically necessary concept which cannot be dismissed. He basically puts forward that although the absolute good is inexpressible and nonsensical within the confines of the propositional expression it has a logical necessity in itself. Hence, in this paper it will be argued that the nonsensicality of ethics within the confines of propositional expression does not necessarily render ethics a trivial and contingent concept in Wittgenstein. On the contrary, it will be argued that the nonsensicality of ethics within the boundaries of propositional expression is acknowledged by Wittgenstein to be
caused by its high and transcendental\textsuperscript{59} form of truth which can only be expressed in the way it shows/manifests itself.

**B) The Boundaries of Propositional Expression**

One of the fundamental concerns of Ludwig Wittgenstein in his canonical work *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*\textsuperscript{60} is to demarcate what is expressible/sayable through propositions and what is not. To put it another way, Wittgenstein points to the fact that there is a limitation on what is expressible within the realm of propositional expression. Initially, he suggests that one can legitimately talk about only what is logical. The illogical concepts or facts, on the other hand, are held to be inexpressible. In *Tractatus* he writes,

3.032: It is as impossible to represent in language anything that ‘contradicts logic’ as it is in geometry to represent by its co-ordinates a figure that contradicts the laws of space, or to give the co-ordinates of a point that does not exist (Wittgenstein, 1974, p. 13).

As Wittgenstein puts it above, anything that is illogical has no correspondence in propositional expression. Hence, Wittgenstein adopts the view that logicality is the grounding principle to determine what is expressible/sayable and what is inexpressible/unsayable in language.

The idea behind the fact that the language can express only what is logical is because logic is directly linked to reality in Wittgenstein. So, the second phenomenon that demarcates the boundaries of propositional expression is the reality. In *Tractatus* Wittgenstein hints that logic is basic to our understanding and construction of the reality (world). He basically says that the

\textsuperscript{59} For Wittgenstein the term ‘transcendental’ means to be outside of the world and to be a condition for the world.

\textsuperscript{60} In the article this book will be shortened as *Tractacus*. 

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whole reality (world) is constituted by the states of affairs (facts) that emerge on the logical space:

1.13: The facts in logical space are the world (Wittgenstein, 1974, p. 5).

2: What is the case—a fact—is the existence of states of Affairs (Wittgenstein, 1974, p. 5)

2.04: The totality of existing states of affairs is the world (Wittgenstein, 1974, p. 12).

2.06: The existence and non-existence of states of affairs is Reality (Wittgenstein, 1974, p. 12).

2.063: The sum-total of reality is the world (Wittgenstein, 1974, p. 8).

In this regard, Wittgenstein holds that the logical space is the necessary ground on which the world (reality) as the totality of states of affairs (facts) is constructed. In other words, Wittgenstein observes that the reality unfolds itself through the logical form. Moreover, it is suggested that the logical form is the ground on which we picture the reality (world). Wittgenstein utters,

2.1: We picture facts to ourselves (Wittgenstein, 1974, p. 9).

2.182: Every picture is at the same time a logical one. (On the other hand, not every picture is, for example, a spatial one.)

2.19: Logical pictures can depict the world (Wittgenstein, 1974, p. 11).

Hence, Wittgenstein admits that the logical form is the way we understand and represent the world (reality.) Accordingly, in Wittgenstein’s view, our logical pictures with regard to the world (reality) are acknowledged to be the true depictions of the reality whereas the illogical pictures are acknowledged to be false and nonsensical. Thus, turning to our previous discussion about the
relationship between logic, reality and propositional expression, we shall suggest that our propositions can express only what is logical because it is what exists in reality. Anything outside of the logical form, on the other hand, is acknowledged to be inexpressible in language because it does not exist in reality. Hence, the Wittgensteinian theory of language does basically hold that the propositional expression is a mirror of the reality (world) which unfolds itself through logic. Joachim Shulte expresses this direct relationship between language, logic and reality in Wittgenstein by saying that the application of logic determines the elementary propositions which in consequence determines the state of affairs as the fact of the world. Therefore he says that the structure of language through using the logic determines the structure of the world (reality) (Schulte, 1992, p. 64).

According to Wittgenstein, another phenomenon that demarcates the scope of language is the scientificity. This being so, Wittgenstein offers that we can formulate propositions only about the scientific facts whereas we cannot represent in language anything that is unscientific. At 4.11 in Tractatus he says: “The totality of true propositions is the whole of natural science (or the whole corpus of the natural sciences)” (Wittgenstein, 1974, p. 29). Here Wittgenstein claims that the reality (world) is constituted by the scientific facts and our propositions can express them as they are. Similarly, in “A Lecture on Ethics” he utters the following: “Our words used as we use them in science, are vessels capable only of containing and conveying meaning and sense, natural meaning and sense” (Wittgenstein, 1965, p. 7). In here Wittgenstein suggests that only the scientific propositions do have sense and significance in language. He therefore hints that something unscientific has no sense and significance within the scope of language. With regards, Piergiorgio Donatelli in his article “Reshaping Ethics After Wittgenstein” says that “the space of science is the space of what we can say” (Donatelli, 2014, p. 2).
In sum, the boundaries of propositional expression in Wittgenstein is shaped by the logicality, reality and scientificity in that we can formulate propositions only about what is logical, real and scientific.

C) Ethics and the Boundaries of Propositional Expression

Based on the basic assumption of Wittgenstein which suggests that we can formulate propositions only about what is real, logical and scientific, I think it is possible to draw a conclusion that ethics is an unreal, illogical and unscientific phenomenon in Wittgenstein as he bluntly claims that ethical propositions are nonsensical. This is utterly the conclusion that the logical positivists reach with regard to the Wittgensteinian ethics. They basically argue that ethic is a trivially metaphysical subject in Wittgenstein about which one cannot offer any proposition. But before we proceed to discussing the logical positivistic view of the Wittgensteinian ethics, I think we should first go over the nonsensicality of ethics in Wittgenstein. As I noted in the introduction, Wittgenstein bluntly utters that the ethical propositions have no sense and significance within the confines of propositions. To put it shortly, he says that ethics cannot be put into words. In “A Lecture on Ethics” he writes,

That is to say: I see now that 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 (Wittgenstein, 1965, p. 11-12).
In the passage above, Wittgenstein points out that the formulation of ethical propositions means to go beyond the limits of language which he finds to be an impossible attempt. To put it more clearly, Wittgenstein admits that ethics is inexpressible through our propositions because it is beyond the world (reality) and language. He also claims that ethics is a supernatural phenomenon that cannot be grasped scientifically. In “A Lecture on Ethics” he says, “Our words used as we use them in science, are vessels capable only of containing and conveying meaning and sense, natural meaning and sense. 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” (Wittgenstein, 1965, p. 7). This being so, Wittgenstein puts that ethics is outside of the limits of the sense and significance of language and science. Put it another way, because Wittgenstein admits that only the scientific and natural facts have sense and significance within the boundaries of propositions, he claims that ethics is outside of this realm. In this regard, Jens Kertscher in his article “Sense of Ethics and Ethical Sense” says that the ethics in Wittgensteinian sense is not a subject to be studied by the traditional methods of a normative and rational science (Arnswald, 2009, p. 89).

The Wittgensteinian idea that ethics has no sense and significance within the confines of the propositional expression leads the logical positivists to conclude that ethics is a trivially metaphysical and illogical concept in Wittgenstein. In this regard, the verifiability theory of the logical positivists assumes that Wittgenstein’s theory of ethics attempts to eliminate any proposition on ethics by admitting it as an unscientific and illogical subject. Stuart Greenstreet in his article “Wittgenstein, Tolstoy and the Folly of Logical Positivism” says the following:
So the principle of verification was supposed to be a criterion to determine whether or not a sentence is literally meaningful: and the criterion was that the user must know the conditions under which the sentence’s assertions are verifiable… Their principle of verification meant that only propositions concerned with matters of empirically-verifiable fact (‘It is still raining’), or the logical relationship between concepts (‘A downpour is heavier than a shower’) are meaningful. Propositions that fall into neither of these camps fail to satisfy the principle, they argued, and consequently lack sense. It follows, therefore, that the propositions of ethics, aesthetics, and religion, are meaningless (Greenstreet, 2014).

Above, Stuart Greenstreet argues that the verifiability theory of logical positivists regards ethics in Wittgenstein as a meaningless (senseless) subject because it cannot be verified through an empirical fact. Moreover, Aviashai Margalit in *Wittgenstein and Analytic Philosophy* explains Rudolph Carnap’s view about the Wittgensteinian impact on the logical positivism in the following way: “On Carnap’s testimony, Wittgenstein influenced the anti-metaphysical move by introducing what he calls ‘Wittgenstein’s principle of verifiability’. This principle was adopted by the Vienna Circle as a tool for disqualifying metaphysical sentences as ‘meaningless’ in not being verifiable in principle. Verification is what gives a sentence its meaning” (Glock-Hyman, 2009, p. 11). So, the logical positivists commonly receive Wittgenstein as an anti-metaphysical philosopher who finds the metaphysical concepts utterly nonsensical.

However, as Stuart Greenstreet points out in his article, I believe that the logical positivists’ way of reading the Wittgensteinian metaphysics is quite limited. To me, this way of reading misses the point that Wittgenstein does not limit truth to what is expressible through propositions but hints to the transcendental and metaphysical realities which disclose themselves in the way they
show themselves (Greenstreet, 2014). Similarly, B. R. Tilghman in *Wittgenstein, Ethics and Aesthetic* says that the logical positivists have so badly misunderstood Wittgenstein by assimilating his distinction between the meaningfulness and meaninglessness to their verifiability theory (Tilghman, 1991, p. 44). According to Tilghman, by making the distinction between what can be said and what cannot be said, Wittgenstein does not necessarily denounce the metaphysical concepts like the questions about the human value and the meaning of human life etc. altogether as the logical positivists suggest. To Tilghman, what Wittgenstein simply does is to separate the realm of metaphysical concepts from the realm of scientific questions. Hence, Wittgenstein identifies the realm of science as an expressible/sayable phenomenon, whereas he identifies the realm of metaphysics as an unsayable phenomenon. The unsayability of metaphysics for Wittgenstein, however, does not reduce it into a nonsense because it has its own way of truth and expression. It is transcendental and it expresses itself by showing/manifesting itself. In this regard, in line with Greenstreet and Tilghman, I believe that Wittgenstein does not disregard metaphysics altogether but he points out that it has a different form of truth in itself. Therefore, I think even though ethics for Wittgenstein is inexpressible through propositions, it has a transcendental form of truth which discloses its existence in the way it shows/manifests itself.

**D) The Transcendentality of Ethics**

For Wittgenstein there are some transcendental truths which are not scientific, logically explicable, and sensical in propositional sense: logical form, philosophy, aesthetic and ethics. Before I proceed to discussing ethics as a transcendental form of truth in particular, I shall go over the logical form, philosophy and aesthetics to see the connection between them as forms of truth which cannot be expressed through propositions but which show
themselves as such. Regarding the logical form, Wittgenstein remarks in *Tractatus* that although every state of affair (fact) in logical space is expressible through propositions, the logical form itself cannot be expressed. At 4.12 he says, “*Propositions can represent the whole of reality, but they cannot represent what they must have in common with reality in order to be able to represent it—logical form. In order to be able to represent logical form, we should have to be able to station ourselves with propositions somewhere outside logic, that is to say outside the world*” (Wittgenstein, 1974, p. 30-31). In the quotation, Wittgenstein discusses that logical form is the source of any kind of propositional expression but it cannot be expressed through propositions itself. He puts that logical form is on the boundary of the world (reality) and therefore formulating propositions about logical form would mean to jump out of the boundaries of the world (reality). In that sense, Wittgenstein hints that the logical form is a transcendental phenomenon to what is expressible in language in that it cannot be expressed through propositions. The inexpressibility of the logical form might suggest that the logical form is an unscientific and unreal phenomenon because, as we handled before, there is a direct link between the propositional expression, reality and scientificity. However, it is clear that the point that Wittgenstein makes by putting the logical form outside of the world (reality) is not that simple. It is obvious that Wittgenstein does not simply argue that the logical form is an inexpressible and nonsensical phenomenon. Indeed, when we proceed in *Tractatus*, we see that Wittgenstein attributes a fundamental place to the logical form in his ontology. He says,

5.552: The ‘experience’ that we need in order to understand logic is not that something or other is the state of things, but that something *is*: that, however, is *not* an experience. Logic *is prior* to every experience—that something *is so* (Wittgenstein, 1974,
5.61: Logic pervades the world: the limits of the world are also its limits (Wittgenstein, 1974, p. 68).

6.13: Logic is not a body of doctrine, but a mirror-image of the world. Logic is transcendental (Wittgenstein, 1974, p. 78).

Here Wittgenstein basically argues that logical form is a transcendental phenomenon that is not immanent in the world as part of the states of affairs but it is what pervades and grounds it. In this sense, the fact that Wittgenstein envisages logical form as a concept that is outside of the world (reality) does not necessarily mean that the logic is an unreal phenomenon. Instead, Wittgenstein points to the fact that logical form is a fundamental phenomenon for the state of affairs in the world (reality) as it is what ultimately guarantees their existence. Furthermore at 4.121 he suggests that the logical form is not completely inexpressible. Rather he puts forward that although the logical form cannot be expressed in the propositional way, it expresses itself by showing/displaying itself.

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 (Wittgenstein, 1974, p. 31).

Above, Wittgenstein asserts that even though logical form cannot be put into words via propositions, it is mirrored in them (Schulte, 1992, p. 56). More specifically, he proposes that the logical form cannot be talked about in propositional language but it shows/displays itself in language in its own right. In that sense, Wittgenstein is of the opinion that the logical form has no sense and significance within the boundaries of propositional
expression, but it discloses its existence and meaning in the way it shows/displays itself.

Wittgenstein’s idea of logical form as a transcendental truth that cannot be expressed in propositional sense is very much akin to his notion of philosophy. In *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein utters that philosophy is not a propositional activity in itself:

4.11: The totality of true propositions is the whole of natural science (or the whole corpus of the natural sciences).

4.111: Philosophy is not one of the natural sciences. (The word ‘philosophy’ must mean something whose place is above or below the natural sciences, not beside them.) (Wittgenstein, 1974, p. 29).

Distinguishing philosophy from the natural sciences, Wittgenstein asserts that philosophy is not a propositional way of understanding or seeing the world (reality). He basically believes that philosophy does not aim to come up with philosophical propositions. He rather describes philosophy as an activity of clarification:

4.112: Philosophy aims at the logical clarification of thoughts. Philosophy is not a body of doctrine but an activity. A philosophical work consists essentially of elucidations. Philosophy does not result in ‘philosophical propositions’, but rather in the clarification of propositions. Without philosophy thoughts are, as it were, cloudy and indistinct: its task is to make them clear and to give them sharp boundaries (Wittgenstein, 1974, p. 29-30).

Here it is argued that philosophy is not a doctrine of propositions but an activity of clarification of thoughts and opinion. In *Wittgenstein and Analytic Philosophy* Avishai Margalit says: “[Wittgenstein] calls for a sharp division of labor: science
is the realm of explanation and causality, whereas philosophy is the realm of elucidation and understanding” (Glock-Hyman, 2009, p. 2). By this, Margalit means that sciences and philosophy in Wittgenstein belong to different realms: one is explanatory and propositional whereas the other is elucidative and non-propositional. The non-propositionality of philosophy suggests that it is outside of the boundaries of logic and world (reality). It is therefore envisaged to be a meta-activity of clarifying the thoughts and opinions about the world (reality). Wittgenstein basically holds that the true method in philosophy would be to talk about what can be said but keep silent about what cannot be said (Wittgenstein, 1974, p. 89). In this regard, I think that philosophy in Wittgenstein is a transcendental activity of talking about the world (reality) from an eternal (sub aeternitatis) perspective. In other words, a philosopher for Wittgenstein is not the one who describes the world (reality) as natural scientists do but he is the one who is engaged with the activity of identifying what is sayable and what is unsayable from an eternal perspective. Piergiorgio Donatelli in his article “Reshaping Ethics After Wittgenstein” describes the philosophical activity as “an activity that leads us to the world and language.” He says that philosophy is “an activity that results in our being able to go on speaking and responding to the world, in the liberation from the condition of being imprisoned in our own way of expressing ourselves” (Donatelli, 2014, p. 212). So, Donatelli suggests that philosophy is a liberating activity that frees the subject from the limitations of the propositional expression but enables him to express and understand the world (reality) from a larger perspective.

Similar to the logical form and philosophy, Wittgenstein thinks that ethics and aesthetic are transcendental forms of truth which extend beyond the boundaries of propositions.
6.41: The sense of the world must lie outside the world. In the world everything is as it is, and everything happens as it does happen: in it no value exists—and if it did exist, it would have no value.

6.42: So too it is impossible for there to be propositions of ethics. Propositions can express nothing that is higher.

6.421: It is clear that ethics cannot be put into words. Ethics is transcendental. (Ethics and aesthetic are one and the same.) (Wittgenstein, 1974, p. 86).

In the above quotation, Wittgenstein puts forward that the world (reality) as the totality of states of affairs have no aesthetic or moral values and principles in itself. It is rather a body of facts (states of affairs) that occur due to a logical necessity. Denying aesthetic and ethics as world phenomena, Wittgenstein points out that it is impossible to formulate aesthetic and ethical propositions. In *Tractatus* he holds that one should keep silent about these concepts by saying, "What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence" (Wittgenstein, 1974, s. 89). Remembering our previous discussion about the direct link between reality (world), logic and language, the inexpressibility of ethics would suggest that ethics is an unreal and meaningless phenomenon. As I have argued in the third section, this is the argument that the logical positivists have with regard to the Wittgensteinian ethics.

However, my point in this section will be in the direction that although Wittgenstein acknowledges aesthetic and ethics as unsayable in propositional sense, he does not necessarily denounce their existence and importance altogether (Burley, 2018, p. 2). On the contrary, I think Wittgenstein attributes a significant place to aesthetic and ethics in his ontology. With regard to ethics, Wittgenstein remarks that it is not part of the world but it is a

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condition of the world: “Ethics does not treat of the world. Ethics must be a condition of the world, like logic” (Wittgenstein, 1961, p. 77). Hence, he clearly attributes a fundamental place to ethics in his ontology as the condition of the world which immediately reminds us of the logical form. Moreover, Wittgenstein argues that although there are no ethical values and principles in the world, they have a transcendental form of truth which is introduced into world through the subject. In Notebooks 1914-1916 he says: “Good and evil enter into the world through the subject. And the subject is not part of the world but a boundary of the world. It would be possible to say (à la Schopenhauer): It is not the world of Idea that is either good or evil, but the willing-subject” (Wittgenstein, 1961, p. 79). Likewise, Wittgenstein utters that the subject is “the bearer of ethics”. He says: “If the will did not exist, neither would there be that center of the world, which we call the I, and which is the bearer of ethics. What is good and evil is essentially the I, not the world. The I, the I is what is deeply mysterious” (Wittgenstein, 1961, p. 80). Hence, Wittgenstein envisages that ethics is not a world phenomenon but something that is mysteriously beyond it which is introduced into the world through the willing-subject. Michael Luntley in Wittgenstein: Meaning and Judgement remarks that ethics in Wittgenstein is not constituted by a body of propositions about the world but it is constituted by the subject’s attitude to the world (Luntley, 2003, p. 32). He says, “Logic and ethics do not belong to the world, they belong to the shape of our attitude to the world” (Luntley, 2003, p. 33). Also, Hans Oberdiek in his article “Wittgenstein’s Ethics” argues that in Wittgenstein the subject is not simply an empirical entity that can be studied by social and physical sciences but it is a living entity who makes a difference in the world as an ethical agent (Glock-Hyman, 2009, p. 190). Moreover, R. B. Tilghman argues that in Wittgenstein the subject introduces an ethical character into the world (Tilghman, 1991, p. 60).
In Notebooks 1914-1916 Wittgenstein holds that the ethical and aesthetic experience of the subject is not a normal way of seeing the world (reality) but seeing it from outside. He describes this special way of seeing the world (reality) as follows: “The work of art is the object seen sub specie aeternitatis, and the good life is the world seen sub specie aeternitatis. This is the connexion between art and ethics. The usual way of looking at things sees objects as it were from the midst of them, the view sub specie aeternitatis from outside. In such a way they have the whole world as background” (Wittgenstein, 1961, p. 83). Hence, Wittgenstein suggests that the aesthetic and ethical experience is a transcendental phenomenon in the sense that it is not a way of experiencing the world inside it but looking at it from the eternity. In Tractatus Wittgenstein reflects further on it in the following way: “6.45: To view the world sub specie aeternie is to view it as a whole—a limited whole. Feeling the world as a limited whole—it is this that is mystical.” (Wittgenstein, 1974, p. 88) Wittgenstein thinks that the ethical and aesthetic experience of the world is a special way of seeing it as a whole which is mystical in itself. Roger Scruton in Modern Philosophy from Descartes to Wittgenstein argues that in Wittgenstein’s view the human way of seeing things is phenomenological per se. He claims that the human being has a particular form of seeing things which is different from the scientific understanding. He says: “We explain human behaviour by giving reasons, not causes. We address ourselves to our future by making decisions, not predictions. We understand the past and present of mankind through our aims, emotions and activity, and not through predictive theories. All these distinctions seem to create the idea, if not of a specifically human world, at least of a specifically human way of seeing things… In other words, despite the attack on the method and metaphysics of phenomenology, Wittgenstein shares with the phenomenologists the sense that there is a mystery in human things that will not yield to scientific
investigation” (Scruton, 2002, p. 278). This being so, according to Scruton Wittgenstein proposes that the subject/human being as an ethical and aesthetic entity has a phenomenological way of seeing things. In that sense, the subject for Wittgenstein is not limited to scientific understanding of the world but it is open to mysteries which can be understood through our emotions and activity. Also, R. B. Tilghim describes the subject’s special way of seeing things under the aspect of eternity (sub aeternitatis) as seeing the essences of things (Tilghim, 1991, p. 53). He holds that a good and ethical life can only be constructed on the basis of this special way of seeing the essences of things.

Furthermore, Wittgenstein suggests that aesthetic and ethics are not entirely inexpressible phenomena, but rather they have a particular form of expression. In Notebooks 1914-1916, Wittgenstein says, “Art is a kind of expression. Good art is complete expression” (Wittgenstein, 1961, 89). And in Tractacus he says, “6. 42: So too it is impossible for there to be propositions of ethics. Propositions can express nothing that is higher (Wittgenstein, 1974, p. 86). Then he adds, “6.522: There are, indeed, things that cannot be put into words. They make themselves manifest. They are what is mystical” (Wittgenstein, 1974, p. 89). Here Wittgenstein hints that aesthetic and ethics which are mystical and transcendental phenomena have a particular way of expressing themselves: showing/manifesting themselves. To me, manifestation of aesthetic and ethics can basically occur through an action. Likewise, in Notebooks 1914-1916 Wittgenstein notes the following: “This is clear: It is impossible to will without already performing the act of the will. The act of the will is not the cause of the action but is the action itself. One cannot will without acting. If the will has to have an object in the world, the object can be the intended action itself” (Wittgenstein, 1961, p. 87). Here in this quotation, Wittgenstein suggests that the willing of the subject manifests itself in action. Hence, I incline
to think that the aesthetic and ethical will of the subject can show/manifest itself through an action. Likewise, Dieter Mersch in her article “There are, indeed, things that cannot be put into words.” (TLP 6.522) Wittgenstein’s Ethics of Showing”, describes the Wittgensteinian ethics as a performative activity: “[Ethics] means the way of being as a whole and of behaving towards the whole. It therefore does not tolerate any instruction; it reaches fulfilment in doing. It is a practice: it shows itself. On that basis, the ethical has its function in the performative. Here, performance means fulfilment in life” (Arnswald, 2009, p. 44). Hence, Merch suggests that the Wittgensteinian ethics is not consisted of a body of rules or propositions but it is a performance of a fulfilled life. In that sense, I would suggest that the Wittgensteinian ethics has a transcendental character in itself which manifests itself in a good and fulfilled life through the performance of the ethical subject.

E) Conclusion

All that said, I’ve argued in this paper that the Wittgensteinian ethics cannot be reduced to a positivistic reading which acknowledges ethics as a trivially and nonsensically metaphysical phenomenon. Rather I’ve shown my inclination to read the Wittgensteinian ethics from a non-positivistic perspective. In this regard, I’ve discussed that Wittgenstein does not necessarily denounce metaphysics altogether, but he draws a line between the realm of the scientific and expressible/sayable and the realm of metaphysics and inexpressible/unsayable. Hence, he proposes that there are some metaphysical truths which cannot be expressed in a propositional way: logical form, philosophy, aesthetic and ethics. By saying in Tractacus that, “What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence” (Wittgenstein, 1974, s. 89), he proposes that one ought to keep silent about those concepts. However, in my opinion, the inexpressibility of the metaphysical truths in Wittgenstein does not reduce them into a nonsense. On the
contrary, Wittgenstein implies that the metaphysical truths have a transcendental form of truth in themselves which disclose their meaning by showing/manifesting themselves. Accordingly, I have basically argued that in Wittgenstein ethics has a transcendental truth and meaning in itself which is manifested through the ethical subject who has a special way of seeing things under the aspect of eternity and performs ethical values in a good and fulfilled life.

Reference:
