THE THRUST AGAINST LANGUAGE: 
A CRITICAL COMMENT ON WITTGENSTEIN'S ETHICS

NATHAN ROTENSTREICH

If we take in our hand any volume: of divinity or school metaphysics, for instance; let us ask, Does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number? No. Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence? No. Commit it then to the flames; for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion.

Hume

I can only describe my feeling by the metaphor, that, if a man could write a book on Ethics which really was a book on Ethics, this book would, with an explosion, destroy all the other books in the world.

Wittgenstein

The present analysis is concerned with an examination of Wittgenstein's "Lecture on Ethics" ¹ and the subsidiary material related to it. It is not an exercise in the exploration of Wittgenstein's development, but an attempt to discern some systematic aspects of his torso on Ethics with the view to place it in the context of philosophical thought at large and with the objective to show (both in Wittgenstein's sense of the term as well as in its common usage) the fundamental limitation of this position as contemplative metaphysics in ethical disguise. This analysis presupposes the analysis of my colleague Eddy M. Zemach, in "Wittgenstein's Philosophy of the Mystical," ² though it does not fully coincide with it: Dr. Zemach does not refer to the "Lecture on Ethics."

A. Distinction between Types of Good

In the "Lecture on Ethics" Wittgenstein starts from a fundamental distinction in the notion of good, namely the difference between good in its trivial or relative sense and good in its ethical or absolute sense. Good in its trivial or relative sense is referred to in a statement about a chair as an epithet designed to describe the chair as serving a certain predetermined purpose – in this case the purpose of being a comfortable place to sit upon. The expression "the right road" implies the notion of good in the same meaning,

namely that the road is the right one relative to a certain place. As against
this meaning of “good,” good in the ethical or absolute sense connotes that
which makes life worth living, or that which directs the right way of living.
Hence Ethics is an inquiry into that which is valuable or really important; it
is an inquiry into the meaning of life. ³

It is not only for the sake of placing Wittgenstein’s distinction in a historical
setting with the view of tracing the nuances put forward in the history of
philosophy that it seems appropriate to refer here to some ideas which
emerged in the history of philosophy. It seems that a critical understanding
of Wittgenstein’s position might profit from a glimpse into some distinctions
to be found in major philosophical trends.

The most commonly known distinction is that introduced by Plato,
namely the distinction between the good chosen for the effect it produces
and that which we cherish because of itself – like joy. There is also the kind
of good we cherish both because of its results and because of its own merits,
like reason, seeing and health. ⁴ The distinction suggested by Plato is clearly
the origin of that formulated in our own time between instrumental and
intrinsic values. Wittgenstein is anxious to limit the employment of the term
“value” only to intrinsic values i.e. not with consequences of an action. ⁵

The aspect of absoluteness as against that of relativity, as understood by
Wittgenstein, emerges even more clearly in the Stoa. Wittgenstein’s in-
debtedness to the Stoa – most probably an indebtedness of which he was
unaware – is a problem to which we shall come back in a subsequent part
of this analysis. Here we refer to the distinction between unconditioned
duties and conditioned duties. Conditioned duties refer to that which is
profitable, to utilities. Clearly the good, because of its results and the con-
ditioned duty to perform an act because of its utility or, in other words, the
Plantonic and the Stoic distinction, coincide. Cicero followed this line by
distinguishing between the ethical proper, i.e. the honestum, and that which
has an ethical bearing because of the circumstances. The latter is the suitable,
the decorum. ⁶

These classical distinctions placed the two aspects of the good within the
broad scope of ethics. In dealing with this problem Kant placed the result-
producing good or the deed suitable to circumstances beyond the sphere
of ethics, thus no longer sharpening the classical distinction in terms of
the characteristic features of their respective content.

Kant speaks explicitly about the ambiguity of the term “good”; Wittgen-
genstein speaks of two very different meanings: there is either the good-in-itself,
the unconditioned one, which is the opposite of evil-in-itself, or there is the
only conditioned good which has a comparative meaning ⁷ (p. 5).

³ “A Lecture on Ethics,” pp. 5-6.
⁴ Republic 367A.
⁵ Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus 6.422.
⁶ Consult the instructive analysis of Chr. A. Brandis in Handbuch der Geschichte der
echisch-römischen Philosophie (Berlin, 1866), Th. III, Abt. 2, pp. 150 ff.
⁷ Page references in parentheses are to the “Lecture on Ethics”, ed. cit. (above, n.1).