ABSTRACT. In his last papers about deontic logic, von Wright sustained that there is no genuine logic of norms. We argue in this paper that this striking statement by the father of deontic logic should not be understood as a death sentence to the subject. Rather, it indicates a profound change in von Wright’s understanding about the epistemic and ontological role of logic in the field of norms. Instead of a logical constructivism of deontic systems revealing a necessary structure of prescriptive discourse, which marked his earlier efforts, he adopted the view that such systems should be seen as mere objects of comparison, i.e. as providing practical standards of rationality for norm-giving activity. Within such view he proposed an interpretation of standard deontic logic in such a way to free deontic logicians from the philosophical difficulties related to the so-called Jørgensen’s dilemma and deontic paradoxes. This effort, as we claim in the present paper, is an application of Wittgenstein’s therapeutic method to dissolve philosophical difficulties caused by the use of logical tools to model relations between norms.

I. INTRODUCTION

Georg Henrik von Wright is acknowledged as the most independent-minded of Wittgenstein’s pupils. His work departs both from the style, themes and jargons of his celebrated master. Nevertheless, von Wright points out Wittgenstein as the philosopher who has most influenced his thought. This

1 Such observation is stressed by Hacker (see Hacker, P.M.S., Wittgenstein’s Place in Twentieth Century Analytic Philosophy, Blackwell, Oxford, 1996, p. 143) and Habermas (see Habermas, Jürgen, Zwischen den Traditionen: Laudatio auf Georg Henrik von Wright, Universität Leipzig, 1997).

influence lies on Wittgenstein’s conception of philosophy, which generally guided von Wright on what philosophy is, of what he was doing as a philosopher. The guiding principle of such philosophy is expressed by Hertz’s remark in Principles of Mechanics, according to which the mental vexation caused by a philosophical problem will vanish when a concealed contradiction embedded in it has been exposed. Commenting it, von Wright remarks that “The idea always appealed to me—and I think that some of my own efforts to rid myself from philosophical puzzlement have been in its spirit.”

von Wright does not specify which of his works or arguments are instances of such efforts, but he does specify those which are not. His influential work on philosophical logic with the creation of systems of deontic logic, logic of action, logic of preferences, etc. are examples of efforts imbued of a “logical constructivism”, which von Wright considers “uncongenial” both to the early and the late Wittgenstein. But his remark that his systems are to be seen “as objects of comparison” suggests an influence of Wittgenstein’s views on the role of logic in philosophical activity.

In particular, in deontic logic or the logic of norms, a field he (re)created, von Wright has proposed several systems to overcome a series of philosophical, logical and ontological difficulties. This “pilgrim progress” contains very different proposals: systems of monadic and dyadic deontic logic; systems with