

# Is Ethics Nonsense?: The Imagination, and the Spirit against the Limit

Chen, Melvin

2015

Chen, M. (2015). Is Ethics Nonsense?: The Imagination, and the Spirit against the Limit. *Philosophy and Literature*, 39(1), 172-187.

<https://hdl.handle.net/10356/81946>

<https://doi.org/10.1353/phl.2015.0017>

---

© 2015 The Johns Hopkins University Press. This paper was published in *Philosophy and Literature* and is made available as an electronic reprint (preprint) with permission of The Johns Hopkins University Press. The published version is available at: [<http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/phl.2015.0017>]. One print or electronic copy may be made for personal use only. Systematic or multiple reproduction, distribution to multiple locations via electronic or other means, duplication of any material in this paper for a fee or for commercial purposes, or modification of the content of the paper is prohibited and is subject to penalties under law.

*Downloaded on 15 May 2021 20:12:04 SGT*



PROJECT MUSE®

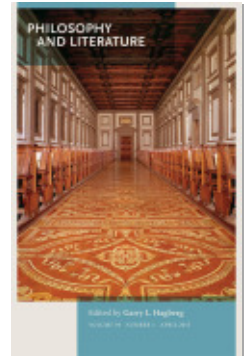
---

## Is Ethics Nonsense?: The Imagination, and the Spirit against the Limit

Melvin Chen

Philosophy and Literature, Volume 39, Number 1, April 2015, pp. 172-187  
(Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press  
DOI: [10.1353/phl.2015.0017](https://doi.org/10.1353/phl.2015.0017)



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/593934>

MELVIN CHEN

## IS ETHICS NONSENSE? THE IMAGINATION, AND THE SPIRIT AGAINST THE LIMIT<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract.** This article examines three exegetical approaches to Wittgenstein: the positivist approach, the ineffability approach, and the resolute approach. After revealing the defects and inconsistencies of the first two exegetical approaches, it adopts the resolute approach and rejects the possibility that a limit may be drawn between garden-variety nonsense and important nonsense. It then proceeds to outline a Wittgensteinian approach to ethics that pertains to the imagination and the spirit. It concludes with an excursus into literary ethics—which is this writer’s main area of interest—and how it might plausibly square with the demands of a Wittgensteinian ethic.

The letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life.  
—2 Corinthians 3:6

IN THE EXEGETICAL TRADITION of Wittgenstein, there have existed three types of readings: the positivist reading, the ineffability reading, and the resolute reading. In this essay, I will be adhering to the resolute reading, whose roots may be traced to James Conant and Cora Diamond. However, the positivist reading of Wittgenstein having been historically prior and still in currency (reports of its demise being, as Conant observes, “greatly exaggerated”), it bears first examining the features of this approach.<sup>2</sup>

Two readings may be regarded as paradigmatic of the approach in question: A. J. Ayer’s *Language, Truth, and Logic* and Rudolf Carnap’s “The Elimination of Metaphysics through Logical Analysis of Language.” The positivist reading understands Wittgenstein to be proceeding with the

aim of drawing the limit to thought, an aim that is stated—with some qualifications that ultimately make the positivist reading untenable—in the preface to the *Tractatus*:

Thus the aim of the book is to draw a limit to thought, or rather—not to thought, but to the expression of thoughts: for in order to be able to draw a limit to thought, we should have to find both sides of the limit thinkable (i.e.: we should have to be able to think what cannot be thought).<sup>3</sup>

The Wittgenstein of Ayer and Carnap posits that ordinary language disguises thought (*TLP*, §4.002). For example, the “is” in Wittgenstein’s “Green is green” or Bertrand Russell’s “The present king of France is bald” may figure either as a copula, as a sign for identity, or as an expression for existence (*TLP*, §3.323). Through the logical analysis of language (or—even better—the invention of a logically perspicacious language of the nature of Gottlob Frege’s *Begriffsschrift* or concept-script), we will attain a better understanding of what has been obscured in the sense of a proposition by ordinary language.

As we will later find out, however, this is not the sort of elucidation that Wittgenstein is after. Nonetheless, allow us for the moment to inhabit the positivist idiom of Ayer and Carnap a little longer. The world of Wittgensteinian sense is bound by tautologies and contradictions, which are senseless (*sinnlos*) rather than nonsensical (*unsinnig*). The positivist, because of his commitment to a methodology for making sense of something, claims of ethical propositions that they cannot be verified, and that they therefore constitute nonsense. In his account, Wittgenstein places, in the realm of nonsense, the propositions of ethics along with those of aesthetics, metaphysics, religion, philosophy, and (eventually) the *Tractatus* itself. The positivist readings of Wittgenstein fail to question why the latter might be the case, and, taking the Tractarian propositions about ethics as nonsense to be true, proceed to delineate their brands of emotivism.

Carnap, appearing to follow closely to the letter of the *Tractatus*, asserts that a logical analysis of language avails us of the conclusion that metaphysical propositions are pseudo-propositions that “do not serve for the description of states of affairs,” but rather as an “expression of the general attitude of a person towards life.”<sup>4</sup> Following what it perceives to be the Tractarian aim of drawing a limit to thought, the positivist reading draws the limit between the cognitive (fact) and the emotive (value). Carnap argues that it is “altogether impossible to make a statement [of fact] that expresses a value judgment” (EMLAL, p. 77).

In his *Wittgenstein*, Ayer reveals that his emotive theory of ethics, put forward in *Language, Truth, and Logic*, was arrived at “under the spell of the *Tractatus* and still more of the Vienna Circle.”<sup>5</sup> Following the positivist limit between cognitive fact and emotive value as drawn by Carnap, Ayer argues that emotivism “exclude[s] purely ethical statements from the domains of statements of fact” (*W*, p. 32). In *Language, Truth, and Logic*, Ayer asserts the following: “We find that ethical philosophy consists simply in saying that ethical concepts are pseudo-concepts and therefore unanalyzable.”<sup>6</sup> For Ayer, adding an ethical symbol to a proposition “adds nothing” to its factual content and functions more like a grammatical mood in expressing the attitude of the speaker (*LTL*, p. 110). In other words, ethical judgments are “pure expressions of feeling” and have “no objective validity” (*LTL*, p. 112).<sup>7</sup>

To summarize, the positivist readings of Ayer and Carnap take ethical propositions to be pseudo-propositions having “no more sense than ‘piggly wiggle tiddle.’”<sup>8</sup> At the same time, Ayer and Carnap, like other members of the Vienna Circle, believed that they had in found in the *Tractatus* their “sacred scripture,” a belief that is not just a “mere historical accident” but also a “tremendous historical irony.”<sup>9</sup> As the resolute reading of Conant and Diamond repeatedly emphasizes, any attempt to draw a limit to thought—an attempt that is mimed in the positivist distinction between fact and value—is bound to lead to logical incoherence. Any theory that seeks to draw a limit to thought (what Ayer and Carnap assume to be the program of the *Tractatus*) commits itself to being able to think both sides of the limit and thus to be able to think what cannot be thought.<sup>10</sup>

The positivist reading trades on what Conant has described as the “departmental conception” of logic and ethics: the fatal (mis)understanding that logic and ethics are discrete, self-standing departments of philosophy, and that the categories of logic and ethics mutually exclude each other (*WETN*, p. 50). The departmental conception of logic and ethics presumes that a useful limit may be drawn between the two, whereas—as Wittgenstein reminds us—the desire to draw limits is bound to lead to paradoxes. Instead, on the resolute reading, the limit should yield to the spirit.

Both logic and ethics pervade all our thought and action, insofar as ethics is newly regarded as a way of looking at or living in the world (*WETN*, pp. 70–72). In place of ethics as discourse (governed by limits), we should yield to ethics—and concomitantly, logic—as spirit: both logic and ethics have “no particular subject matter,” but rather constitute “an

attitude to the world and life” that can “penetrate any thought or talk” (EI, 153). To limit is to define, and to define is to mark the beginning of ethical discourse. Rather, philosophy is not a “body of doctrine” (*Lehre*) but an “activity,” in same way that the *Tractatus* is not a textbook (*Lehrbuch*) from which a body of ethical doctrines may be derived (*TLP*, §4.112).<sup>11</sup> Thus, to treat the *Tractatus* like “sacred scripture” as the positivists had done is to misunderstand the spirit of the *Tractatus*, which requires us to throw away the ladder once we recognize the propositions of the *Tractatus* to be nonsensical (*TLP*, §6.54).

To use the authority of Wittgenstein as a prosthesis for real activity and to regard the mere logical analysis of language as providing elucidation, as the positivists have done, is to—in Diamond’s memorable phrase—“chicken out.” The resolute reading urges that both the positivist and ineffability readings participate in a hallucination of meaning from which the *Tractatus* is trying to free us. Why is such a hallucination of meaning possible in the first place? As Wittgenstein points out in the *Philosophical Investigations*, one feature of our conception of a proposition is that of “sounding like a proposition.”<sup>12</sup> This feature is a necessary, though insufficient, condition of something’s counting as a proposition.<sup>13</sup> The limits that the philosopher places upon a proposition lead to definitions and discourse—a discourse that is a hallucination of meaning for the very reason that Cavell states in *The Claim of Reason*:

The reason that the philosopher’s conclusion constitutes no discovery is that what his conclusions find in the world is something he himself has put there, an invention, and would not exist but for his efforts.<sup>14</sup>

Someone who treats the philosopher’s conclusion as a discovery may be described as “hallucinating” what he or she means, or as “having the illusion of meaning something” (*TCR*, p. 221). Hallucination of meaning occurs under the pressure of philosophy, when the traditional philosopher assumes that meaning can come apart from use.<sup>15</sup> In such an instance, we are prone to imagine we transfer the meaning of an expression where we have “failed to transfer the use” (*WMU*, p. 248). Meaning cannot, however, be divorced from its context or circumstances of use, and to imagine this can be done is to hallucinate, or—as Wittgenstein would say—to speak outside language games. When this happens, language “goes on holiday” (*PI*, §38).

The hallucination of meaning is the presiding illusion that, according to Diamond, “characterizes the practice of philosophy” (EI,

p. 160). Properly understood, the *sub specie aeternitatis* of the traditional philosopher is no point of view, because no context or circumstance of use can be correlated with it. Precisely because the opening proposition of the *Tractatus*—"The world is all that is the case"—takes the view of *sub specie aeternitatis*, it is, like the other propositions of the *Tractatus*, to be finally rejected (*TLP*, §1). Both the positivists and the ineffability theorists, then, are suffering from the illusion or hallucination of meaning in thinking that anything can be said within philosophy as they have conceived of it.

How may one be freed from these illusions or hallucinations of meaning? The only way, as Conant suggests, is to "fully enter into them and explore them from the inside" (*WETN*, p. 53). Diamond appeals to the imaginative capacity of taking nonsense for sense: "Although all nonsense is simply nonsense, there is an imaginative activity of understanding an utterer of nonsense, letting oneself be taken in by the appearance of sense that some nonsense presents to us" (*EI*, p. 165). This imaginative capacity to take nonsense for sense is moral in nature, insofar as it implies a desire to understand the person who "talks nonsense" (*EI*, p. 157). The positivist, assuming the point of view of *sub specie aeternitatis*, fails to transfer the use of the expression, and thus hallucinates. Nothing prevents the resolute reader from imagining himself into the positivist's position, all the while remaining aware that the *sub specie aeternitatis* is really, all things being considered, no real point of view.

Cavell takes a similar route, arguing that ordinary language philosophy appeals to the projective imagination, unlike traditional philosophy. Cavell takes ordinary language philosophy to be a "Wittgensteinian view of language (together with an Austinian practice of it), and of philosophy" (*TCR*, p. 154). Insofar as any philosophical appeal to ordinary language involves "responding to imagined situations," resolute readers of Wittgenstein are greeted with an "invitation to imagine a context" (*TCR*, p. 154). The question posed by Wittgenstein, Austin, and resolute readers of Wittgenstein may be parsed either as "What should we say if ...?" or "Suppose such and such were the case. What would we say?" (*TCR*, p. 148). Through what Cavell calls the "projective imagination," we imagine the background story that allows us to imagine such a question being asked in all seriousness. In answering this question, we would be returning meaning to use.

Cavell makes the further point that the imagination, in its projective aspects, pervades not just ordinary language philosophy but language itself. He provides the example of how we project "feed" from contexts

like “feed the monkey” into contexts like “feed the machine” without any apparent loss of intelligibility (*TCR*, p. 181). Again, just as ordinary language philosophy invites us to imagine a context, Cavell asserts that an object, activity, or event onto or into which a concept is projected “must invite or allow that projection” (*TCR*, p. 183). A degree of intolerance is thus wrought into the tolerance of language: “not just any projection will be acceptable” (*TCR*, p. 182). Concepts neither have nor require “rigid limits” because they can always be projected onto new objects through the projective imagination (*TCR*, p. 188).

The ineffability reading, which later installed itself as the standard reading *pace* the positivist reading, recognizes something that the positivist reading does not: that the *Tractatus* finally declares of its own propositions that they should be regarded as nonsense (*TLP*, §6.54). Two paradigms of the ineffability reading include P. M. S. Hacker’s “Was He Trying to Whistle It?” and Norman Malcolm’s *Wittgenstein: A Religious Point of View?* The ineffability theorist presumes that a limit may be drawn between the effable (what can be said) and the ineffable (what can be shown). He stresses the reiterated theme of Wittgenstein that explanations, reasons, and justifications (the effable) “come to an end.”<sup>16</sup> After explanation has come to an end, there stands the ineffable. The ineffable is traditionally tied to the mystical, the mysterious, and the religious (or at least, something “analogous” to a religious point of view) (*WRPV*, p. 1).

Allow me to further distinguish between the weak and the strong ineffability readings of Wittgenstein. According to the weak ineffability reading, something ineffable takes the form of a truth. Once the ladder has been thrown away, the ineffability theorist is left with some “ineffable truths” about reality that have been gestured toward.<sup>17</sup> Hacker slips here into the weak ineffability reading when he talks about “ineffable truths,” because he really means something else: the strong ineffability reading, which I will come around to in a bit. The ineffability theorist, hankering after ineffable forms of truth, is therefore on guard against the dialectic without final synthesis and deconstructive nature of the resolute reading (*WHTWI*, p. 359).

According to the strong ineffability reading, which I consider to be a real rival of the resolute reading of Wittgenstein, there is something ineffable that does not take the form of a truth. As Hacker represents this position, the ineffability theorist regards philosophy not as an activity in which the temptation to utter nonsense is engaged but rather as a body of doctrine which, *stricto sensu*, “cannot be put into words” (*WHTWI*,



p. 357). What can be shown about senseless propositions is ineffable, but the features of reality are what really constitute the ineffable. In other words, the ineffable cannot be expressed in propositional form. Whereas the resolute readings of Diamond and Conant argue that what you cannot say, you cannot whistle about either, the ineffability theorist claims that Wittgenstein was indeed whistling about the ineffable in such passages as these: “There are, indeed, things that cannot be put into words. They *make themselves manifest*. They are what is mystical” (*TLP*, §6.522). The ineffability theorist is then finally reduced to psychological affects of “marvel” and “wonder” at the existence of the ineffable beyond the limits of language (*WRPV*, pp. 81–82).

The ineffability reading, however, like the positivist reading, maintains a substantialist conception of nonsense: there can be important nonsense to the effect that what cannot be said can still be shown (*TLP*, §4.1212). The strong ineffability reading is keen to maintain a distinction between the ineffable features of reality (important nonsense) and nonsensical propositions (garden-variety nonsense). Furthermore, the ineffability reading shares in common with the positivist reading the discursive intention of drawing limits. As the resolute readers point out, however, to say the ineffable content that a given ethical utterance might be gesturing toward is to say the unsayable, which, quite plainly, “can’t be done” (*WETN*, p. 59). Both the positivist and the ineffability readings, then, being committed to thinking the other side of the limit, are intrinsically unstable, and, when properly articulated, either collapse into each other or into the austere conception of nonsense under the resolute reading (*WETN*, p. 50).

What may be urged against the strong ineffability reading that important nonsense exists in the form of ineffable features of reality? Again, we may go roundabout with the imagination, bearing in mind that more is sayable than is describable. Meaning may be conveyed in other ways than mere description, such that the unutterable is contained in what has been uttered. This is precisely what Wittgenstein says to Paul Engelmann of Ludwig Uhland’s poem “Graf Eberhards Weissdorn”:

The poem by Uhland is magnificent. And this is how it is: if only you do not try to utter what is unutterable then *nothing* gets lost. But the unutterable will be—unutterably—*contained* in what has been uttered!<sup>18</sup>

To recognize that ethical propositions about the nature of moral life are nonsense of the garden variety, while recognizing the ethical spirit

that pervades Uhland's narrative about a crusader who cuts a sprig of hawthorne from Palestine so it can grow into a tree under whose shade he can reminisce in old age, remains a tenable position. Uhland's poem, after all, is neither theory nor description, nor does it pretend to be such. The theorist, whether on the positivist or the ineffability front, conceives of philosophy as dealing with problems the solution to which appears to lie in the "felicitous prosecution of the business of philosophical theorizing" (WETN, p. 39). He is unable to recognize, unlike the resolute reader, that a hallucination of meaning merely results from adopting the view of *sub specie aeternitatis*. To discard the view of *sub specie aeternitatis* in favor of the view of an utterer of nonsense who takes nonsense for sense, and to engage in this imaginative capacity, is to understand the ethical point of the *Tractatus*. Some meanings—such as the meaning of the sprig of hawthorne to Uhland's crusader—can only be disclosed through the imagination, because meaning is broader than what is literally said.

As we have seen, the resolute response to both the positivist reading, leading to a hallucination of meaning, and the strong ineffability reading, leading to an espousal of ineffable features of reality, involves an appeal to the imagination. Diamond provides the literary example of Charles Dickens, who through his novels seeks to "enlarge the moral imagination" of his readers so as to include the points of view of madmen like Mr. Dick and children like Pip and Oliver Twist.<sup>19</sup> By enlarging the moral imagination, literature leads its readers to new moral responses, demonstrating Diamond's point that convincing need not always only take the form of argument (*TRS*, p. 297).

Thinking well involves more than just thinking logically: it involves "thinking charged with appropriate feeling" and feeling the "force of a heart's responses" (*TRS*, p. 298). Argument is the preferred method of philosophy, yet argument—as Diamond demonstrates in her discussion of *Crito*—often cannot do without a similar appeal to the imagination. Socrates, arguing about whether or not he should escape from prison, seeks to give Crito and his friends a "way into his story," and does so through an "imaginative description of his situation" and a "personification of the Laws" (*TRS*, p. 311). Before Socrates's exercise of his creative imagination, what was to Crito and his friends unthinkable—that Socrates should refuse Crito's offer to escape from prison—was indeed that: unthinkable.

More than a case of extending sympathy toward other points of view, enlarging the imagination involves a finer appreciation of irony. An

appreciation of the irony of Austen and James might sufficiently convince us to reject the “heavy-handed, sententious, or solemn” in moral thought, in favor of a more keenly developed “critical intelligence” and “delicacy of moral discrimination” (*TRS*, p. 300). Literary ethics both makes use of and—more important—enlarges this imagination, improving the sensibilities of its readers, training them to recognize irony and to imagine themselves into an ever more diverse range of points of view.<sup>20</sup> Imagination also leads to a sense of adventure, allowing one to imagine more possibilities than have been fixed and given by thought. This sense of adventure is closely linked to a “sense of life” (*TRS*, p. 313).

In literary ethics, the adventurous reader is one who “delights in there being more in things than meets the eye,” who imagines more than what has been fixed, readily graspable, and given by the bounds of thought (*TRS*, p. 315). Against such imaginative freedom and an active sense of life may be contrasted the “compartmentalization of mind” and a certain “callousness” of imagination that accompanies it (*TRS*, p. 355). Having raised these concerns in the context of animal experimenters, Diamond argues that the compartmentalization of the mind leads to animal experimenters taking the treatment of the animals for granted and habituating themselves to it with the language of the normal. Against this, the resolute reader of Wittgenstein rejects the idea of “there being any area to which we should not bring our thought and imagination as best we can” (*TRS*, p. 364).

On the resolute reading, works of literature, and not just works of philosophy, invite the “taking up of an attitude or of a mode of thought” (*TRS*, p. 303). To say that someone is in need of moral convincing is to imply that he can, through a better use of his own capacities as a moral being, be led to assume an improved moral outlook. One of these capacities, of course, is a “capacity for attention to things imagined or perceived,” or what Diamond calls a “loving and respectful attention” (*TRS*, p. 306). Literary ethics takes up Diamond’s suggestion of regarding imaginative literature as “of the greatest importance in developing and strengthening our moral capacities” (*TRS*, p. 307).

The great advantage of relying on the imagination rather than on thought is that the unthinkable becomes once more an Archimedean point with which to move the world. While the unthinkable cannot, by definition, be thought, it can certainly be imagined: we can imagine what the unthinkable would be like if it were to become thinkable in the future. To put it in terms of the resolute reading, the imagination pervades the unthinkable. What paradigm shifts in science, revolutions

in politics, and new movements in art have in common is their ability to imagine the unthinkable. To enlarge the imaginative capacity beyond the bounds of what has hitherto been thought is what made possible Victorian anti-vivisectionism, the three waves of the feminist movement, the African American civil rights movement, and green politics and the modern environmentalist movement.

Wittgenstein's admiration for Tolstoy's *Hadji Murad* is another case in point for how literary ethics might be formulated. First recommended in a 1912 letter to Bertrand Russell, it resurfaces in a 1945 letter to Norman Malcolm in connection with thinking as an activity ("digesting") rather than as a body of doctrine ("preaching").<sup>21</sup> It may be inferred that Wittgenstein had the *Hadji Murad* in mind when he told Malcolm, three months later, that "when Tolstoy just tells a story he impresses me infinitely more than when he addresses the reader. When he turns his back to the reader then he seems to me *most* impressive" (*LWM*, p. 98).

Wittgenstein was, of course, comparing *Hadji Murad* favorably against *Resurrection*, Tolstoy's more didactic novel. *Hadji Murad*, a posthumous novel about a historical warrior from the Caucasus who deserts to the Russians and is eventually killed, has been described by John Bayley as a "parable without a point" that is "full of tendentious Tolstoyan matter."<sup>22</sup> Didactic literature, as embodied in *Resurrection*, remains in the grip of the hallucination of meaning, whereas nondidactic (dare we say: pointless?) literature like *Hadji Murad*, by leaving the unutterable unuttered, is closer to the ethical spirit of Wittgenstein than to the ethical discourse of the positivist and ineffability theorists. Literary ethics, then, is concerned with didactic literature only insofar as it serves as testament to the same illusion of meaning under which ethical discourse suffers, and not for any further elucidation as may be provided by nondidactic literature.

Against the positivist and ineffability readings, the resolute reading proposes an austere and nonsubstantialist conception of nonsense. Both the positivists and the ineffability theorists bank on there being a "something" that nonsense is trying to say, thus drawing yet another limit between mere gibberish and substantial nonsense (*WETN*, p. 49; *EI*, pp. 158–60). As Conant astutely puts it, however, this mistakes the "bait" for the "hook," insofar as the *Tractatus*, on the resolute reading, is an attack on the substantialist conception of nonsense rather than an endorsement of it (*WETN*, p. 49). To presume that a limit can be drawn between garden-variety nonsense and logically more sophisticated nonsense, which are apparent violations of logical syntax, is to remain under the sway of the illusion of meaning.

Against this temptation to draw limits to delimit discourse, the austere conception of nonsense recommends “there is no dividing nonsense-sentences” (EI, p. 158). Whereas the ineffability theorist presumes that some extralogical and ineffable truth lies beyond the limits of language, the resolute reading heeds the cautionary note in the preface that what lies on the other side will be *einfaeh Unsinn* (sheer nonsense) (*TLP*, p. 3). A nonsensical ethical proposition is internally the same as all other nonsensical propositions, and therefore does not constitute important nonsense in any sense. Where the positivist sees “psychological content” or “emotive meaning” and the ineffability theorist sees “metaphysical insight” and “inexpressible truth,” the resolute reader of Wittgenstein sees merely nonsense.

One recognizes the spirit rather than the limit of things when one exercises the imagination. Against the letter of what is literally said, the imagination discloses that some meanings may be conveyed in a non-descriptive manner. Through the exercise of the imagination, we come to realize that neither logic, ethics, nor the mind that attends to them should be compartmentalized, but rather that a certain ethical spirit pervades them, a spirit that is intimately concerned with the taking up of attitudes. Literary ethics is composed of various invitations to partake of this spirit: an invitation to imagine a context in which meaning does not come apart from use, an invitation to project concepts onto new objects, and—most important—an invitation to take up an attitude or a mode of thought. Thought seeks to draw limits between what can be thought and what cannot, thus committing itself to being able to think the unthinkable and to instability. Conversely, there is a certain stability in the givenness of a situation from which the imagination proceeds, a stability that in no way limits the scope of possible outlooks that may be imagined, or even the possibility that the imaginative capacity may itself be enlarged.

The temptation to draw limits in traditional philosophy, then, may be correlated with the temptation to fill the inside of these limits with substantial content. Both Conant and Diamond warn of the exegetical danger of “one’s projecting some or other favoured ethical view into Wittgenstein’s remarks” (EI, p. 165). This danger runs as follows: the would-be commentator considers a list of philosophers that Wittgenstein admired—Tolstoy, Kraus, Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard, James, and so forth. The commentator then projects these philosophers onto Wittgenstein to make up for the absence of overt ethical discourse in Wittgenstein’s writings. In so doing, he misappropriates Wittgenstein

for ethical discourse, and grossly reduces the spirit of Wittgenstein's ethics to the letter.

To take up the ethical spirit of Wittgenstein is to respect that logic and ethics pervade and penetrate all thought and action. Ethics pervades the *Tractatus*, which entails that the ethical spirit permeates not just the ethical propositions of the *Tractatus* but all the other propositions as well. This is crucial for literary ethics: the absence or presence of ethical terms such as "good," "evil," "right," and "wrong" in no way can be regarded as a guide to locating the presence of ethical thought, which pervades, penetrates, and cannot be departmentalized (WETN, p. 66). Literary ethics, as Conant avers, lets ethics show itself.

To take up the suggestion that ethics pervades action and thought is to refuse to draw a limit between Wittgenstein the man and Wittgenstein the philosopher, and to refuse to relegate the ethical concerns of Wittgenstein the man as of biographical rather than of philosophical importance. Indeed, to delineate and separate the one from the other would be to leave the resolute reader with a sense that something has "gone badly wrong" (WETN, p. 42). As biographers of Wittgenstein have repeatedly reminded us, Wittgenstein set up an anonymous grant to aid artists and writers like Georg Trakl and Rainer Maria Rilke, and abandoned philosophy in favor of teaching the children of peasants in the mountains of Lower Austria for six years.<sup>23</sup> We also should not forget that Wittgenstein wrote the *Tractatus* as a soldier during the First World War, and completed it as a prisoner-of-war at Como and Cassino. Add to these Wittgenstein's "battle with the fear of death" in his *Secret Diaries*, manning the searchlight on the Vistula patrol boat *Goplana*, and to say that the ethical spirit does not pervade the thought and action of Wittgenstein the man would be the height of naiveté.<sup>24</sup>

Having already, in the ethical spirit of the *Tractatus*, removed the limit between the biographical and the philosophical, are we further allowed to dissolve the limit between the logical and the psychological? Here, the exegetical danger of projecting other views onto Wittgenstein, forewarned by Conant and observed by Diamond, should be borne in mind. As is well known, Frege's *Grundlagen der Arithmetik* is shaped by three fundamental principles: the need to separate the psychological (subjective) from the logical (objective), the need to ask for the meaning of a word in the context of a sentence (otherwise known as Frege's context-principle), and the need to bear in mind the distinction between concept and object (*TRS*, p. 97). Diamond claims that the resolute reading is compatible with respect for Frege's distinction "between

what empirical psychology might show us of people's minds and what belongs to the mind" (*TRS*, p. 5). If my reading is correct, however, the spirit will recognize the limit drawn between the logical (cognitive) and the psychological (emotive) as yet another hallucination of meaning.

In *TLP* §3.32, Wittgenstein distinguishes between signs and symbols: "The sign is that in a symbol which is perceptible by the senses." The logical symbol pervades the psychological sign, and therefore psychological affects may function as signposts for the logical and (by extension) the ethical. It is in this spirit that we should regard Wittgenstein's discussion of psychological affects in his 1929 "Lecture on Ethics." Here, Wittgenstein appears to install the affect of wonder at the base of his ethics: "I wonder at the existence of the world. And I am then inclined to use such phrases as 'how extraordinary that anything should exist' or 'how extraordinary that the world should exist.'"<sup>25</sup>

If this account is correct, Wittgenstein's assertion in *Culture and Value* that man has to awaken to wonder when science sends him to sleep appears to require being interpreted as an ethical imperative.<sup>26</sup> The danger lies in attributing this psychological affect of wonder to a content ("emotive meaning" for the positivist, the "mystery of the world" for ineffability theorists) rather than to a spirit of or an attitude toward the world. Edwards falls prey to this sentiment, arguing that wonder at the miraculous existence of the world is a "properly ethical" sentiment, far removed from the scientific curiosity of arrogant positivism (*EWP*, p. 234). Rather, the ethical spirit should be interpreted thus: the imaginative capacity incorporates into its point of view such psychological affects as wonder, which might follow from taking nonsense for sense. The logical pervades the psychological, but is not exhausted by its signs.

Just as the departmentalization of the logical and the ethical is foreign to Wittgenstein, so too does a departmentalization of the literary and the philosophical rank as being alien (*WETN*, p. 86). Consider Frege's remark to Wittgenstein that the *Tractatus* is more of an artistic than a scientific achievement, a remark that may be classified alongside the positivist readings of Ayer and Carnap. What Frege intended as an objection would not have been regarded as one by Wittgenstein (*WETN*, p. 86). Indeed, to draw the limit between form (noncognitive) and content (cognitive), as Frege appears to want to do, is to fail to respect the ethical spirit in which the inquiry of the *Tractatus* is being conducted. If the ethical spirit pervades and penetrates all thought and action, it will by the same token penetrate literary forms of life.

Terry Eagleton, in an introduction to the screenplay he wrote for Derek Jarman's film on Wittgenstein, records the amenability of Wittgenstein to writers and poets:

Frege is a philosopher's philosopher, Bertrand Russell every shopkeeper's image of the sage, and Sartre the media's idea of an intellectual; but Wittgenstein is the philosopher of poets and composers, playwrights and novelists, and snatches of his mighty *Tractatus* have even been set to music.<sup>27</sup>

The question remains: why? In *Culture and Value*, Wittgenstein demonstrates that his philosophical concerns pervade the aesthetic. As many commentators have noted, Wittgenstein possesses enough of *le côté Viennois* (the Viennese social code) to make cultural pronouncements on the following: Brahms is Mendelssohn without flaws, Brahms is abstract compared to Bruckner, Bruckner's Ninth is a protest against Beethoven's Ninth (*CV*, pp. 21e, 25e, 34e). Literary pronouncements extend to the writings of Kraus, the essays of Macauley, and Shakespeare's display of the dance of human passions (*CV*, pp. 12e, 27e, 36e). Furthermore, of the six or seven mottoes he considered for his later work, three were taken from poets (Goethe, Matthias Claudius, and Longfellow).<sup>28</sup>

If ethics is not a kind of discourse or a branch of thought but rather an attitude toward and a way of living in the world, then the resolute reader easily recognizes how an ethical spirit might pervade cultural and aesthetic attitudes toward the world. In order to have an attitude toward the world, you must first have a willingness to look at it (*TRS*, p. 21). If Wittgenstein capitulated to the positivist dream of a logically perspicacious concept-script earlier, it was because he assumed that it would "lay before us clearly what we need to look at" (*TRS*, p. 143). Once we free ourselves from the imagination of necessity—the "rigour of logic, the bindingness of ethics, the necessity of mathematics"—we realize that the solution to the riddle is in the "knots and threads" that we are willing to look at (*TRS*, p. 36).

To be willing to look at what literary ethics has to offer is to refuse to draw limits between philosophy and literature and to recognize what philosophy, and ethical discourse in particular, may "lead us to ignore" (*TRS*, p. 24). To be willing to look at what literary ethics has to offer is to realize that ethical thought may proceed by way of both stories and argument (*TRS*, p. 27). Indeed, literature avails us of the various and diverse methodological possibilities for ethical thought: "we may make the words tell by argument, by image, by poetry, by Socratic



redescription, by aphorism, by Humean irony, by proverbs, by all sorts of old and new things" (*TRS*, p. 28). To choose to be limited by ethical discourse is to ignore the pervasiveness and the penetration of the ethical spirit, a spirit that literature lets show itself even when it need not say anything about it.

CARDIFF UNIVERSITY

1. This paper is based on the first chapter of my doctoral dissertation, entitled "The Limits of Ethical Philosophy and the Need for Literary Ethics" (2015, forthcoming).
2. James Conant, "The Method of the *Tractatus*," in *From Frege to Wittgenstein: Perspectives on Early Analytic Philosophy*, ed. Erich H. Reck (Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 375.
3. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness, intro. Bertrand Russell (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 3; hereafter abbreviated *TLP* and cited by section and page number.
4. Rudolf Carnap, "The Elimination of Metaphysics through the Logical Analysis of Language," in *Logical Positivism*, ed. A. J. Ayer (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1959), p. 78; hereafter abbreviated EMLAL. See Wittgenstein's definition of propositions as describing states of affairs, in *TLP*, §4.1.
5. A. J. Ayer, *Wittgenstein* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1985), p. 32; hereafter abbreviated *W*.
6. A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth, and Logic*, intro. Ben Rogers (Penguin, 2001), p. 116; hereafter abbreviated *LTL*.
7. See also A. J. Ayer, "On the Analysis of Moral Judgments," in *Philosophical Essays* (London: Macmillan, 1963), p. 236.
8. Cora Diamond, "Ethics, Imagination and the Method of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*," in *The New Wittgenstein*, ed. Alice Crary and Rupert Read (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 153; hereafter abbreviated EI.
9. James Conant, "Must We Show What We Cannot Say?" in *The Senses of Stanley Cavell*, ed. Richard Fleming and Michael Payne (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1989), p. 259.
10. James Conant, "What 'Ethics' in the *Tractatus Is Not*," in *Religion and Wittgenstein's Legacy*, ed. D. Z. Phillips (Ashgate Publishing, 2005), p. 50; hereafter abbreviated WETN.
11. Ogden translates as "theory" what Pears and McGuinness translate as "body of doctrine," but for my present purposes either will suffice.
12. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1968), §134; hereafter abbreviated *PI* and cited by section number.

13. James Conant, "Stanley Cavell's Wittgenstein," *The Harvard Review of Philosophy* 13, no. 1 (2005): 53.
14. Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 223, hereafter abbreviated *TCR*.
15. James Conant, "Wittgenstein on Meaning and Use," *Philosophical Investigations* 21, no. 3 (1998): 222–50; hereafter abbreviated *WMU*.
16. Norman Malcolm, *Wittgenstein: A Religious Point of View?* ed. Peter Winch (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 2; hereafter abbreviated *WRPV*.
17. P. M. S. Hacker, "Was He Trying to Whistle It?" in *The New Wittgenstein*, ed. Alice Crary and Rupert Read (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 357; hereafter abbreviated *WHTWI*.
18. Paul Engelmann, *Letters from Ludwig Wittgenstein, with a Memoir* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1967), p. 7.
19. Cora Diamond, *The Realistic Spirit: Wittgenstein, Philosophy, and the Mind* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1995), p. 294; hereafter abbreviated *TRS*.
20. To understand how care might share a similar role with the imagination in literary ethics, see Melvin Chen, "Care, Narrativity, and the Nature of Disponibilit e," *Hypatia* 30, no. 4 (2015, forthcoming). I have also defended literary ethics as a meta-ethical position undergirded by a theory of narrativity in the following papers: "Strawson *contra* Strawson: Moral Responsibility and Semi-Compabilitism," *The Philosophical Forum* 45 (2014): 1–15, and "Apologia pro Vita-fabula Sua," *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 53, no. 3 (2015, forthcoming).
21. Brian McGuinness and G. H. Von Wright, ed., *Ludwig Wittgenstein: Cambridge Letters: Correspondence with Russell, Keynes, Moore, Ramsey and Sraffa* (Blackwell, 1997), p. 20; Norman Malcolm, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: A Memoir*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), p. 95, hereafter abbreviated *LWM*.
22. John Bayley, *Tolstoy and the Novel* (New York: Viking, 1967), pp. 273–74.
23. James C. Edwards, *Ethics Without Philosophy: Wittgenstein and the Moral Life* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1982), p. 61; hereafter abbreviated *EWP*.
24. Allan Janik, *Wittgenstein's Vienna Revisited* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2001), pp. 172–74.
25. Ludwig Wittgenstein, "A Lecture on Ethics," *Philosophical Review* 74, no. 1 (1965): 8.
26. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, ed. G. H. von Wright and Heikki Nyman (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980), 5e; hereafter abbreviated *CV* and cited by page number.
27. Derek Jarman, *Wittgenstein: The Terry Eagleton Script, the Derek Jarman Film* (London: British Film Institute, 1993), p. 5.
28. Joachim Schulte, "'The Life of the Sign': Wittgenstein on Reading a Poem," in *The Literary Wittgenstein*, ed. John Gibson and Wolfgang Huemer (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 146.