

NB. DRAFT: FINAL AUTHOR MANUSCRIPT.

ABSTRACT:

In this paper, I examine Wittgenstein’s earlier treatment of the relation between normativity and ethics. I argue that Wittgenstein’s philosophical method shapes his approach to metaphysics and the self and this, in turn, shapes his approach to ethics. The paper is divided into three parts. In Part 1, I examine Wittgenstein’s philosophical method in the *Tractatus*. In Part 2, I argue that exposure to the views of Schopenhauer, Russell and Mach shapes the evolution of Wittgenstein’s thinking on the self, leading him to reject restrictive (metaphysical) solipsism and to endorse a non-restrictive (philosophical) notion of the subject. In Part 3, I bring out the intimate connection that exists between Wittgenstein’s approaches to philosophical method, the self and ethics in the *Tractatus*. I argue that, for Wittgenstein, dissolving restrictive solipsism is ethically transforming: this dissolution retunes our dispositions to think and speak in a manner that reflects a greater clarity in our understanding of our place in the world – a clarity of understanding that is, in and of itself, ethically valuable.

Keywords: Wittgenstein; *Tractatus*; normativity; ethics; the self; philosophical method.

Chon Tejedor, “Normativity and Ethics in the *Tractatus*: Method, Self and Value”

In this paper, I examine Wittgenstein’s earlier treatment of normativity and ethics. More specifically, I examine how his earlier approaches to philosophical method and to the self shape his approach to value, culminating in his claim to Ficker that the point of the *Tractatus* is “an ethical one.”¹ One of the subsidiary aims of this paper is to clarify the way in which the views of Schopenhauer, Russell and Mach contribute to Wittgenstein’s earlier treatment of the self and ethics. Schopenhauer, Russell and Mach are by no means the only thinkers to have exerted an important influence on Wittgenstein on this front; in

¹ I will be citing from Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. David Pears and Brian F. McGuinness (London: Routledge, 1961). This letter is cited in Brian F. McGuinness, *Approaches to Wittgenstein: Collected Papers* (London: Routledge, 2002), note 11, chap. 9. Some commentators have argued that Wittgenstein may have been merely trying to entice a reluctant publisher by presenting his book as having an ethical point. In my view, however, Wittgenstein’s insistence on the ethical dimension of the *Tractatus* needs to be taken seriously. On this, see Hans-Johann Glock, *A Wittgenstein Dictionary* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 330; Cora Diamond, “Ethics, Imagination, and the Method of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*,” in *The New Wittgenstein*, ed. Alice Crary and Rupert Read (London & New York: Routledge, 2000), 149-173; Michael Kremer, “The Purpose of Tractarian Nonsense,” *Noûs* 35 (2001): 39-73; and Chon Tejedor, *The Early Wittgenstein on Metaphysics, Natural Science, Language and Value* (London: Routledge, 2014), 138-155.

this respect, this paper only presents part of the complex intellectual background that contributes to the development of Wittgenstein's position.²

Wittgenstein's early approach to normativity and ethics is closely intertwined with his understanding of philosophical method. In this respect, we could go as far as saying that, in the *Tractatus*, all roads – that is, all discussions (e.g. those relating to thought, language, logical operations, necessity, science, the self, etc.) – lead to ethics. These different sections of the *Tractatus*, insofar as they exemplify the *application* of a philosophical method that aims at conceptual clarity, have a crucial ethical dimension for Wittgenstein. In this paper, I would like to explore one of these roads in particular: that which begins, in the *Tractatus* 5.6ff, with Wittgenstein's application of his philosophical method to the problem of solipsism and the self and which culminates in an ethical transformation.³

Since Wittgenstein's approach to ethics is intimately connected to the philosophical method at work in the *Tractatus* and to his discussion of the self, I have

² The notion of “influence” needs to be handled with care in this context. As we will see, the idea is not that Wittgenstein draws from these thinkers' positions that he incorporates into his own; the idea is, rather, that by reflecting on their views (as he understood them) – that is, by entering into an internal dialogue with these authors – he is able to clarify and fine-tune his own approach to the philosophical problems that preoccupied him.

³ For a discussion of (some of) the other roads to ethics found in the *Tractatus*, see Tejedor, *The Early Wittgenstein*, 91-155 and Chon Tejedor, “The Earlier Wittgenstein on the Notion of Religious Attitude,” *Philosophy* 88 (2013): 55-71.

divided the paper into three sections: section 1 on the method of the *Tractatus*; section 2 on the self; and section 3 on ethics.

L1 The Method of the *Tractatus*

As we know, the question of the philosophical method at work in the *Tractatus* has been one of the focus points of the New Wittgenstein debate.⁴ In spite of their important differences, authors on different sides of this debate have tended to share two major related assumptions on this question. The first is that, for Wittgenstein, a proposition that is neither senseful nor senseless is therefore nonsensical.⁵ The second is

⁴ There are, in fact, not one but a variety of philosophical *methods* at work in the *Tractatus*. On this, see notably Juliet Floyd, “Wittgenstein and the Inexpressible,” in *Wittgenstein and the Moral Life: Essays in Honor of Cora Diamond*, ed. Alice Crary (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), 177-234. It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss this point in any detail; I will therefore, for the sake of simplicity, speak of the method (in the singular) of the *Tractatus* in what follows. For a further discussion of this, see Tejedor, *The Early Wittgenstein*, 156-168.

⁵ Cf. James Conant, “Frege and Early Wittgenstein,” in Crary and Read, *The New Wittgenstein*, 189-195 and Peter M. S. Hacker, “Was he trying to whistle it?,” in Crary and Read, *The New Wittgenstein*, 353-355. Michael Kremer and Cora Diamond have both questioned this assumption. See Michael Kremer, “Mathematics and Meaning in the *Tractatus*,” *Philosophical Investigations* 25 (2002): 272-302, and Cora Diamond, “Wittgenstein, Anscombe and What Can Only be True” (Paper presented at the Wittgenstein Workshop, University of Chicago, 2013).

that Wittgenstein regards most – or at any rate a significant proportion – of the remarks that make up the *Tractatus* as nonsensical (either illuminatingly or plainly so). That the *Tractatus* should be made up of remarks that are nonsensical is indeed seen as central to the very task that the book is trying to achieve.⁶

In my view, both of these assumptions misrepresent Wittgenstein's position and distort our understanding of the method at work in the *Tractatus*. Although it is not

⁶ Marie McGinn, Dan Hutto, Michael Kremer, Peter Sullivan and Cora Diamond have also questioned this assumption to varying degrees. See Marie McGinn, "Between Metaphysics and Nonsense: Elucidation in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*," *Philosophical Quarterly* 99 (1999): 491-513; Daniel Hutto, *Wittgenstein and the End of Philosophy. Neither Theory nor Therapy* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), esp. chap. 3; Kremer, "Mathematics and Meaning in the *Tractatus*"; Peter Sullivan, "On Trying to be Resolute: A Response to Kremer on the *Tractatus*," *European Journal of Philosophy* 10 (2002): 50-52; Marie McGinn, *Elucidating the Tractatus: Wittgenstein's Early Philosophy of Logic and Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); Diamond, "What Can Only be True.". In connection to this debate, it is worth noting that Conant does not suggest that Wittgenstein regards the propositions of the *Tractatus* as nonsensical in perpetuity, as if nonsensicality was a quality that remained permanently attached to certain signs. Nevertheless, it is, in Conant's view, a crucial aspect of the method of the *Tractatus* that we should be able to view the propositions that make it up as nonsensical – James Conant, "Frege and Early Wittgenstein". I am grateful to an anonymous referee for highlighting this point.

possible to provide a detailed defense of this claim here, I would like briefly to summarize some of the considerations that lead me to it.⁷

My reasons for rejecting the first assumption – namely that a proposition that is neither senseful nor senseless is automatically nonsensical – stem in part from Wittgenstein’s discussion of the principles of the natural sciences in the *Tractatus* 6.3ff. In brief, Wittgenstein suggests that the principles of the natural sciences are neither senseful nor senseless propositions: they are instruction-propositions (akin to imperative commands) that are not truth-assessable.⁸ Wittgenstein does not view these propositions as nonsensical, however, because they serve a genuine purpose: the purpose of *stipulating* different optional, instrumentally valuable, natural science systems. Wittgenstein’s discussion of the principles of the natural sciences shows clearly, in my view, that it is a mistake to assume that a proposition that is neither senseful nor senseless must be nonsensical for Wittgenstein. A proposition is a linguistic sign – a sentence – *used for a particular purpose*.⁹ In turn, a proposition is nonsensical when the sign that expresses it is

⁷ For a more in depth discussion, see Tejedor, *The Early Wittgenstein*.

⁸ The view that scientific principles are not senseful, senseless or nonsensical can be traced back to James Griffin, *Wittgenstein's Logical Atomism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964), 102-108. Michael Kremer makes a similar point in connection to mathematical propositions in Kremer, “Mathematics and Meaning in the Tractatus.” It is also noted by Diamond in “What Can Only be True.”

⁹ Although our views ultimately differ in their details, I am indebted to Michael Kremer and Luigi Perissinotto for the genesis of my thoughts on the relation between the notion of purpose and the method of the *Tractatus*. On this see notably Kremer, “Tractarian

used in a manner that defeats its apparent purpose.¹⁰ Nonsensical propositions are sentences used with an apparent purpose, where this apparent purpose subverts itself and ends up dissolving upon closer examination. In so far as they *purport* to serve a purpose, however, it can be helpful to call them ‘propositions’, as Wittgenstein does throughout the *Tractatus*.

Senseful propositions, senseless propositions and the instruction-propositions that express principles in the natural sciences all involve sentences used in purposeful manners – even though only the first serve the purpose of *representing possible states*.¹¹

Nonsense” and (in connection to *On Certainty*) Luigi Perissinotto, “To begin at the beginning,” in *Doubt, Ethics and Religion: Wittgenstein and the Counter-Enlightenment*, ed. Luigi Perissinotto and Vicente Sanf  lix (Wien: Ontos Verlag, 2010), 151-178.

¹⁰ Traditional philosophy is characterized by precisely this kind of nonsense for Wittgenstein.

¹¹ Wittgenstein’s employment of the word ‘use’ in the *Tractatus* is not univocal. He employs ‘ben  tzen’ or ‘gebrauchen’ (translated as ‘to use’) in a variety of different ways and in very different contexts in the *Tractatus*, including in discussions of: the use of propositional signs to express senseful propositions (3.11 – ‘ben  tzen’; 3.326 – ‘gebrauchen’); the use of signs to signify meanings (3.322 – ‘gebrauchen’); the use of signs in senseless symbolic notation (3.3441 – ‘gebrauchen’; 5.461 – ‘die Ben  tzung’); the use of variables (4.1273 – ‘gebrauchen’); the use of neither senseless nor nonsensical mathematical propositions (6.211 – ‘ben  tzen’); the use of signs to produce nonsensical propositions (5.5351 – ‘ben  tzen’). For different treatments of ‘use’ in the *Tractatus*, see Roger White, *Wittgenstein’s Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus: A Reader’s Guide* (New

It is with this broader notion of purposeful use in mind, I suggest, that Wittgenstein notes, in the midst of his discussion of the principles of the natural sciences: “In philosophy the question, ‘What do we actually use [‘gebrauchen’] this word or this proposition for?’ repeatedly leads to valuable insights.”¹²

For Wittgenstein, our ability to judge how and to what purposes signs are used is not dependent on our being presented with anything like a theory of language, thought or representation – and, indeed, the *Tractatus* does not aim to present anything like such a theory. On the contrary, in so far as we already have mastery of everyday language and thought, we already have the ability to make judgments of this type, even when we have no awareness of the deeper level, logical structure of language.

Man possesses the ability to construct languages capable of expressing every sense, without having any idea how each word has meaning or what its meaning is—just as people speak without knowing how the individual sounds are produced.¹³

York: Continuum, 2006), 61-62; Colin Johnston, “Symbols in Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*,” *European Journal of Philosophy* 15 (2007): 367-394; McGinn, *Elucidating the Tractatus*, 163-167; Cora Diamond, “Logical Syntax in Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*,” *Philosophical Quarterly* 55 (2005): 78-89; Conant, “Frege and Early Wittgenstein.”

¹² Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, 6.211.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 4.002.

In fact, all the propositions of our everyday language, just as they stand, are in perfect logical order.—That utterly simple thing, which we have to formulate here, is not an image of the truth, but the truth itself in its entirety.

(Our problems are not abstract, but perhaps the most concrete that there are.)¹⁴

“Our problems are not abstract” in that they are not problems to be resolved by getting to grips with an abstract theory – for they do not stem from the lack of such a theory. Instead, our philosophical problems arise because, although we already possess the know-how necessary to use signs with a purpose and to recognize the purposeful use of signs (insofar as we already have mastery of everyday language and thought), *our disposition to act on this know-how is eroded by our distorting philosophical practices.*

Most of the propositions and questions to be found in philosophical works are not false but nonsensical. Consequently we cannot give any answer to questions of this kind, but can only point out that they are nonsensical. Most of the propositions and questions of philosophers arise from our failure to understand the logic of our language.

(They belong to the same class as the question whether the good is more or less identical than the beautiful.)

And it is not surprising that the deepest problems are in fact *not* problems at all.¹⁵

¹⁴ Ibid., 5.5563.

¹⁵ Ibid., 4.003.

Our “failure to understand the logic of our language” is a failure in our *practical understanding*, a failure to use signs in particular ways – not the kind of failure that might result from the lack of an abstract theory of language.¹⁶ It is our disposition to *act* – to *use* signs in particular ways – that needs to be corrected. And, for Wittgenstein, only an *activity* could help to correct such a floundering disposition to act. In his view, philosophy – properly understood – is precisely as such an *activity*:

Philosophy aims at the logical clarification of thoughts.

Philosophy is not a body of doctrine but an activity.

The purpose [‘Zweck’ in the original] of philosophy is 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.

¹⁶ It is this notion of practical understanding that is at the heart of Wittgenstein’s notion of *showing* in the *Tractatus*. I develop this idea further in Tejedor, *The Early Wittgenstein*. On this see also Michael Kremer, “The Cardinal Problem of Philosophy,” in Crary, *Wittgenstein and the Moral Life*, 143-176; and Adrian W. Moore, *The Evolution of Modern Metaphysics: Making Sense of Things* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 222-254.

Without philosophy thoughts are, as it were, cloudy and indistinct: its task is to make them clear and to give them sharp boundaries.¹⁷

The aim of this activity is to enable us to fine-tune our practical thinking and linguistic *abilities*, to orient our disposition to use signs away from the production of nonsense and towards the production of senseful propositions and thoughts. Ideally, this philosophical task would be performed in a face-to-face, interpersonal, dialectical manner, so that our individual dispositions to produce nonsense (the concrete dispositions each of us – as philosophers – has) could be worked on as soon as they broke surface.¹⁸

The correct method in philosophy would really be the following: to say nothing except what can be said, i.e. propositions of natural science—i.e. something that has nothing to do with philosophy—and then, whenever someone else wanted to say something metaphysical, to demonstrate to him that he had failed to give a meaning to certain signs in his propositions.¹⁹

Since such a one-to-one, direct approach is not always possible, however, Wittgenstein produces a book – the *Tractatus* – that aims to achieve a similar result. The method of this book is intended to be similarly interactive: the aim is to engage the reader in an

¹⁷ Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, 4.112.

¹⁸ On this, see Floyd, “Wittgenstein and the Inexpressible,” and McGuinness, *Approaches to Wittgenstein*, 264.

¹⁹ Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, 6.53.

internal dialogue, similar to that which would take place in the more direct approach. Part of the idea is, of course, that it is only by personally engaging in such a dialectic struggle that the required transformation – the transformation in our disposition to use signs – can be achieved.

In order to effect this transformation in us, Wittgenstein presents us with a careful arrangement of sentences in the form of the *Tractatus*. But what status do these sentences have, in his view? Does he regard the bulk of them as nonsensical? This leads us to the second assumption mentioned earlier: the assumption that Wittgenstein regards most – or at any rate a significant proportion – of the remarks that make up the *Tractatus* to be nonsensical; in other words, the assumption that the *Tractatus* achieves its objectives precisely because it presents us with remarks that are, for the most part, (either illuminatingly or plainly) nonsensical.

I suggest that this misrepresents Wittgenstein's position. In my view, Wittgenstein intends the *Tractatus* to present us with sentences (with signs) that can be used and understood in different ways. By arranging these sentences as he does, he is inviting us to engage with them in different ways – he is inviting us to try out different uses to which these sentences might be put. Wittgenstein's method is varied and heterogeneous. He uses sentences in an intentionally ambiguous manner, as puzzles, with the deliberate purpose of encouraging us to exercise our everyday thinking and linguistic abilities against them.²⁰ The process he invites us to follow often involves using one and the same

²⁰ There are some important affinities between my understanding of Wittgenstein's use of puzzles and Cora Diamond's discussion of riddles, even though our approaches

sentence, in turn, to express a senseful proposition, a senseless proposition and a piece of philosophical nonsense. This activity of using sentences in different ways and of coming to see clearly when a sentence is used in a manner that subverts its apparent purpose – i.e. nonsensically – is central to Wittgenstein’s method in the *Tractatus*.

Interestingly, both Paul Engelmann and Frank Ramsey, who were amongst the first to read the *Tractatus* and to discuss it with Wittgenstein, mention that he deliberately includes ambiguous sentences in his book, as part of his philosophical method. In his *Memoir*, Engelmann makes the following remark concerning Wittgenstein’s use of brackets in “(Ethics and aesthetics are one and the same.)” in *Tractatus* 6.421:

But the statement [in *Tractatus* 6.421] is put in parentheses, said by the way, as something not really meant to be uttered, yet something that should not be passed over in silence at that point. And this is done as a form of a reminder recalling to the understanding reader an insight which he is assumed to possess in any case.²¹

Similarly, in a letter to his mother dated 20th September 1923, Ramsey writes:

ultimately differ in their details – Cora Diamond, *The Realistic Spirit: Wittgenstein, Philosophy and the Mind* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), 267-290.

²¹ Paul Engelmann, *Letters from Ludwig Wittgenstein, with a Memoir*, trans. L.

Furtmüller (Oxford: Blackwell, 1967), 124, also quoted in Joachim Schulte, “Ethics and Aesthetics in Wittgenstein” (Paper presented at the “Wittgenstein on the Literary, the Ethical and the Unsayable” workshop. Chicago, IL, 2011): 3.

His [Wittgenstein's] idea of his book is not that anyone by reading it will understand his ideas, but that some day someone will think them out again for himself, and will derive great pleasure from finding in this book their exact expressions. [...] Some of [Wittgenstein's] sentences are intentionally ambiguous having an ordinary meaning and a more difficult meaning which he also believes.²²

In the light of this, the following remarks by Paul Engelmann strike a particularly strong chord:

Yet we do not understand Wittgenstein unless we realize that it was philosophy that mattered to him and not logic, which merely happened to be the only suitable tool for elaborating his world picture.

This the *Tractatus* accomplishes in sovereign fashion, ending up with implacable consistency by nullifying the result, so that the communication of its

²² This remark is also quoted in Brian F. McGuinness, *Wittgenstein in Cambridge* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), 139 (no. 99), and in Schulte, "Ethics and Aesthetics in Wittgenstein," 13. It is unclear what Ramsey means by "meaning" and "believes" here. Since the letter in question is addressed to his mother (rather than to a philosopher acquainted with the *Tractatus*), we need not understand Ramsey to be using 'belief' to capture the mental representation of content. His intention may simply have been to indicate that the more difficult lesson to be drawn from such sentences is also one that Wittgenstein found purposeful or one he subscribed or was committed to.

basic thoughts, or rather of its basic tendency — which, according to its own findings, cannot on principle be effected by direct methods — is yet achieved indirectly. He nullifies his own world picture, together with the 'houses of cards' of philosophy (which at that time at least he thought he had made collapse), so as to show '*how little is achieved when these problems are solved*'.²³

Wittgenstein uses the sentences of the *Tractatus* for a particular purpose. This purpose is the clarification of propositions and thoughts — that is: the re-orientation of our *disposition* to use linguistic and mental signs away from nonsense. The propositions of the *Tractatus* have a purpose to serve as long as we continue to be drawn towards metaphysics and towards a confused approach to logic, representation and ethics. Once we overcome these, however, the propositions of the *Tractatus* no longer have a function to serve: they become redundant, that is, *purposeless*. I suggest that it is at *this* point that they become nonsensical.²⁴ Hence, the point at which the *Tractatus* fully achieves its own

²³ Engelmann, *Letters and Memoir*, 102.

²⁴ In the more direct, face-to-face method, this would be the point at which the interlocutor would simply end the discussion — that is, opt for silence. We should avoid persevering in attending to or in repeating these sentences beyond this point, in that doing so might lure us back into the misguided attractions of substantive metaphysics. In this respect, persevering with these sentences once they have served their purpose would be self-subverting. I am grateful to an anonymous referee for raising a question that led to this clarification.

purpose of clarification is precisely the point at which it becomes redundant: it is the point at which we come to recognize that it is time to let go of the sentences of the book, just as we might let go of a ladder once we have used it for the purpose of climbing to the top. It is with this in mind, in my view, that we should approach *Tractatus* 6.54:

My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me, eventually recognizes them as nonsensical, when he has used them – as steps – to climb up beyond them. (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it.)

He must transcend these propositions and then he will see the world aright.²⁵

The message from this entry is not that Wittgenstein regards the bulk of the propositions in the *Tractatus* as nonsensical and that their being so is central to the *Tractatus*' task and method. The idea is that the process of clarification in which the *Tractatus* engages us culminates in our coming to recognize that there is no longer any purpose to be served by the propositions in the book: it involves coming to recognize that, at the end of the process, *in the end* ('am Ende' in the German), they become nonsensical precisely because the process in question has been successful. As we will see in section 3, Wittgenstein's understanding of the philosophical method at work in the *Tractatus* is intimately connected to his understanding of the ethical dimension of his

²⁵ Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, 6.54.

book. Before we are in a position to turn to this issue, however, we need to consider the question of Wittgenstein's earlier approach to the self.

L1 Wittgenstein's Earlier Approach to the Self

There is no doubt that Wittgenstein's earlier approach to ethics develops and changes during the period of the composition of the *Notebooks*.²⁶ Much of the evolution in his understanding of ethics during this period is tied to changes in his approach to the notion of the self or subject and therefore to his discussion of solipsism. I suggest that the approach to ethics that finally crystallizes in the *Tractatus* results in part from the rejection of two particular notions of the self or subject: the Schopenhauerian notion of 'willing subject' understood as a transcendental condition of ethics and representation; and the Russellian notion of "thinking subject" understood as an object-like subject of thought. In the next two sections, I will briefly defend my claim that Wittgenstein rejects both of these notions of the subject in the *Tractatus*. This will enable us to see how his discussion of the self in the *Tractatus* 5.6ff eventually leads him to ethics.²⁷

L2 The Willing Subject

²⁶ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Notebooks 1914–1916*, ed. Georg H. von Wright and Gertrude E. M. Anscombe, trans. Gertrude E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1961).

²⁷ There are important points of convergence between my approach in this section and Juliet Floyd's in Juliet Floyd, "The Uncaptive Eye: Solipsism in the *Tractatus*," in *Loneliness*, ed. Leroy S. Rouser (Notre Dame: Boston Studies in the Philosophy of Religion, 1998), 79-108.

According to one prevalent interpretation of the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein rejects the notion of thinking subject only to endorse the Schopenhauerian notion of a willing subject understood as a transcendental condition of ethics and representation. In other words, in this reading, the notion of thinking subject is only of secondary interest to Wittgenstein – his real interest lies with the notion of willing subject, which, in the *Tractatus*, he calls “metaphysical subject.” This notion of the subject is seen as at the heart of Wittgenstein’s approach to ethics: ethical value, in this view, is made possible by virtue of this subject. I call this the Schopenhauerian reading.

According to the Schopenhauerian reading, both ethics and representation are made possible by virtue of the actions of the transcendental willing subject.²⁸ Wittgenstein certainly appears to endorse such a view at several junctures in the *Notebooks*.²⁹ The question before us is whether he continues to endorse this view in the

²⁸ See, for instance: Michael Morris, *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Wittgenstein and the Tractatus* (London: Routledge, 2008), 320-328 (note 4), and Martin Stokhof, *World and Life as One. Ethics and Ontology in Wittgenstein's Early Thought* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2002), 202-203 (note 4). Peter Hacker places the emphasis on the view that the willing subject is the condition of representation – Peter Hacker, *Insight and Illusion. Themes in the Philosophy of Wittgenstein* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 73-80.

²⁹ For example, Wittgenstein, *Notebooks*, 5.8.16.

Tractatus. I suggest that he does not – a conclusion I have defended in detail elsewhere.³⁰ Here, I will limit myself to summarising some of the main arguments for this conclusion.

Although the expression “willing subject” is absent from the *Tractatus*, it is often suggested that this notion survives into the *Tractatus* under a different label: that of “metaphysical subject.” After all, Wittgenstein does use the expression “metaphysical subject” and, indeed, appears actively to endorse it, notably in *Tractatus* 5.641:

Thus there really is a sense in which philosophy can talk about the self in a non-psychological way.

What brings the self into philosophy is the fact that ‘the world is my world’.

The philosophical self is not the human being, not the human body, or the human soul, with which psychology deals, but rather the metaphysical subject, the limit of the world – not a part of it.³¹

There are serious problems with the suggestion that the “metaphysical subject” of *Tractatus* 5.641 is the “willing subject” of the *Notebooks*, however. For there is simply

³⁰ See Chon Tejedor, “El solipsismo en el *Tractatus*,” in *Sentido y sinsentido:*

Wittgenstein y la crítica del lenguaje, ed. Carlos Moya (Valencia: Pre-Textos, 2008), 189-206; Chon Tejedor, “The Ethical Dimension of the *Tractatus*: Wittgenstein and the Counter-Enlightenment,” in *Doubt, Ethics and Religion*, ed. Luigi Perissinotto and Vicente Sanfélix (Frankfurt: Ontos Verlag, 2010), 85-103; Tejedor, “Wittgenstein on the Notion of Religious Attitude”; Tejedor, *The Early Wittgenstein*, 46-90.

³¹ Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, 5.641.

no evidence, in the *Notebooks*, to indicate that the expressions “willing subject” and “metaphysical subject” are regarded by Wittgenstein as interchangeable. Both expressions appear in the *Notebooks*, but – crucially – they are never used alongside each other in the same entries.³² And there is nothing in those entries that do discuss them to suggest that these expressions are in any way equivalent to each other for Wittgenstein.

There is, furthermore, persuasive evidence to suggest that Wittgenstein had come to reject the notion of willing subject prior to writing the *Tractatus*. Note indeed that, having endorsed the notion of willing subject in entries such as *Notebooks* 5.8.16, the *Notebooks* discussion comes to a rather abrupt end in November of 1916, with two entries that show Wittgenstein as having second thoughts about this very notion: *Notebooks* 9.11.16 and 19.11.16. *Notebooks* 9.11.16 indicates that experience does not require the willing subject to be possible. Since experience is a type of thought, of mental representation at this stage for Wittgenstein, *Notebooks* 9.11.16 therefore advances that mental *representation* does not require the willing subject. In the next entry (i.e. *Notebooks* 19.11.16), Wittgenstein considers an even stronger suggestion: that there is in fact no reason *whatsoever* to posit a willing subject. I propose that Wittgenstein does indeed abandon this notion of willing subject *in its entirety* in or shortly after November 1916 – and certainly before he starts working on the final version of the *Tractatus*. the notion of a transcendental subject understood as a condition of representation *or* as a condition of ethics.

³² Indeed, the expression “metaphysical subject” is only used in two entries of the *Notebooks*: in 4.8.16 and 2.9.16.

That Wittgenstein's approach to ethics undergoes a significant change precisely around this time is corroborated by his correspondence with Paul Engelmann. Wittgenstein's thoughts on the willing subject develop most rapidly during the weeks he spends with Engelmann, whom he first meets in Olmütz in October 1916.³³ We know that many of the conversations between Wittgenstein and Engelmann during this period focus on Schopenhauer's approach to ethics, an approach that posits a transcendental notion of the subject very much like that of the "willing subject" from the *Notebooks*.³⁴ The strongly Schopenhauerian remarks from the *Notebooks* end abruptly in late November 1916, with the two entries I mentioned above (*Notebooks* 9.11.16 and 19.11.16). Shortly thereafter, Wittgenstein leaves Olmütz to travel to Vienna and then returns to the front. When Engelmann and Wittgenstein meet again in December 1917, Engelmann notes that Wittgenstein's views and attitude have changed. It is thus that, in January 1918, Engelmann writes a letter in which he expresses his concern over Wittgenstein's altered spiritual and ethical state. Referring to their recent meeting, in December 1917, Engelmann writes: "It seemed to me as if you – in contrast to the time you spent in Olmütz, where I had not thought so – had no faith."

To this, Wittgenstein replies:

³³ See Wittgenstein, *Notebooks*, 12.10.16; 15.10.16; 17.10.16; 20.10.16; 4.11.16; 9.11.16; and 19.11.16.

³⁴ That Wittgenstein and Engelmann repeatedly discuss Schopenhauer's views during their stay in Olmütz is established in Brian F. McGuinness, *Wittgenstein: A Life. Young Ludwig 1889-1921* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 252-253.

If you tell me I have no faith, you are *perfectly right*, only I did not have it before either. [...] *I am clear about one thing*: I am far too bad to be able to theorize about myself; in fact, I shall either remain a swine or else I shall improve, and that's that! *Only let's cut out the transcendental twaddle* when the whole thing is as plain as a sock on the jaw.³⁵

Wittgenstein's reply to Engelmann betrays an important change in Wittgenstein's attitude to (and tolerance of) the transcendental approach to ethics that had been the focus of so many of his conversations with Engelmann in Olmütz, in the autumn of 1916. A likely explanation for this change would be that, having explored the Schopenhauerian, transcendental approach in depth in his conversations with Engelmann, Wittgenstein has, during the time they have spent apart, concluded that this approach is to be discarded: the notion of transcendental willing subject has fallen apart in his hands.³⁶ I propose that, by the winter of 1917 – 1918, when Wittgenstein is writing the remarks that come to form the *Prototractatus*, he has already abandoned the Schopenhauerian notion of

³⁵ See Paul Engelmann, *Wittgenstein: Letters, Lectures, Conversations, Memoirs* (Oxford: Intellect Past-Masters, Oxford University, 2013), 10. These letters are cited in Ray Monk, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius* (New York: Penguin Books, 1991), 152-153. My italics in the last instance.

³⁶ We owe this expression to Warren Goldfarb – Warren Goldfarb, “Metaphysics as Nonsense: On Cora Diamond's *The Realistic Spirit*,” *Journal of Philosophical Research* 22 (1997): 71.

transcendental willing subject as condition of representation and ethics.³⁷ This would indeed explain why there is no mention of the willing subject in the *Prototractatus*, the *Tractatus* or indeed the *Notebooks*, after the 19th of November 1916.

L2 The Thinking Subject³⁸

Wittgenstein's discussion of the "thinking subject," unlike that of the "willing subject," survives into the composition of the *Prototractatus* and the *Tractatus*. Wittgenstein characterizes the "thinking subject" as a simple, object-like subject that entertains thoughts. In other words: the thinking subject is a simple, object-like subject of thought. According to Wittgenstein, this notion of subject is also fundamentally flawed.³⁹

³⁷ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Prototractatus*, ed. Brian F McGuinness, Tauno Nyberg, Georg H von Wright, trans. Brian F McGuinness and David Pears (London: Routledge, 1971).

³⁸ For an earlier version of my discussion of Wittgenstein's treatment of the thinking subject and the visual field, see Tejedor, "El solipsismo." On this, see also Luciano Bazzocchi, "A Significant 'False Perception' of Wittgenstein's Draft on Mind's Eye," *Acta Analytica* 29 (2014): 255-266.

³⁹ See also Hans Sluga, "Whose House is that? Wittgenstein on the Self," in *The Cambridge Companion to Wittgenstein*, ed. Hans Sluga and David G. Stern (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996), 320-353. For a different strand in Wittgenstein's critique of the notion of thinking subject, see James Levine, "Logic and Solipsism," in *Wittgenstein's Tractatus: History and Interpretation*, ed. Michael Potter and Peter Sullivan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 170-238.

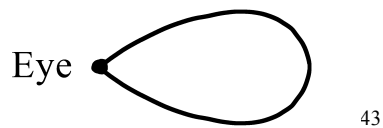
Wittgenstein's preoccupation with the notion of thinking subject emerges as early as August 1916 in the *Notebooks*, in the following entries:⁴⁰

The I is not an object.⁴¹

I objectively confront every object. But not the I.⁴²

The I makes its appearance in philosophy through the world's being *my* world.

The visual field has not, e.g., a form like this:



These concerns survive into the composition of the *Tractatus*, where they emerge in the following entries:

There is no such thing as the subject that thinks or entertains ideas.

⁴⁰ In what follows, I am using my renderings of the original figures of the visual field drawn by Wittgenstein.

⁴¹ Wittgenstein, *Notebooks*, 7.8.16.

⁴² Ibid., 11.8.16.

⁴³ Ibid., 12.8.16.

If I wrote a book called *The World as I found it*, I should have to include a report on my body, and should have to say which parts were subordinate to my will, and which were not etc., this being a method of isolating the subject, or rather, of showing that in an important sense there is no subject; for it alone could not be mentioned in that book.⁴⁴

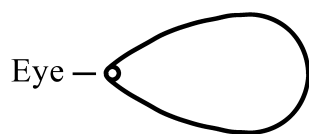
The subject does not belong to the world.⁴⁵

Where *in* the world is a metaphysical subject to be found?

You will say that this is exactly like the case of the eye and the visual field. But really you do *not* see the eye.

And nothing *in the visual field* allows you to infer that it is seen by an eye.⁴⁶

For the form of the visual field is surely not like this:



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⁴⁴ Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, 5.631.

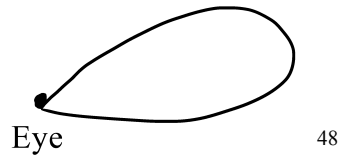
⁴⁵ Ibid., 5.632.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 5.633.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 5.6331.

The *Prototractatus* version of this discussion is similar to that of the *Tractatus*, except for a (significant, as we will see below) difference in the drawings of the visual field used in the *Tractatus* and *Prototractatus* versions of the argument. The latter reads:

For the form of the visual field is surely not like this:



Wittgenstein's discussion of the visual field in *Tractatus* 5.633, 5.6331, *Prototractatus* 5.33543, 5.335431 and *Notebooks* 12.8.16 is central to his rejection of the notion of thinking subject. The eye in these entries is intended to capture the notion of self; the visual field, the field of all possible thought.⁴⁹ That the metaphor of the visual field is used (at least in part) to reflect on what can possibly be represented in thought or language is corroborated by the way in which, in *Notebooks* 12.8.16, "the visual field has not, e.g., a form like this [...]" is immediately followed by a point concerning "all that we *can* describe at all."⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Wittgenstein, *Prototractatus*, 5.335431.

⁴⁹ The *Tractatus* 5.6ff place great emphasis on the notion of possible thought; indeed, "my world" in *Tractatus* 5.6, 5.62 and 5.641 stands for the world as it can possibly be given to me in thought.

⁵⁰ My italics.

The *Notebooks* discussion of the thinking subject makes it clear that Wittgenstein's point is not merely that the subject cannot be *found* in the field of possible thought.⁵¹ The point is, rather, that the subject is not an *object* and, *for this reason*, it is not a possible object of thought. That this is Wittgenstein's central concern is also shown in his choice of drawings for the visual field (see above), which do not uniformly place the eye inside the visual field, as one would expect them to do if Wittgenstein's central point concerned the location of the subject relative to the field of possible thought.⁵²

The driving force behind Wittgenstein's suggestion that the thinking subject is not a possible object of thought is not, therefore, that the thinking subject fails to show up in any empirical or introspective review of the contents of one's mind. Instead, the thinking subject is not a possible object of thought *in that* the notion of thinking subject is fundamentally inconsistent: the thinking subject is, in effect, the notion of an object-like non-object-like self. To put it more precisely: Wittgenstein uses the phrase "thinking subject" to highlight one particular – inconsistent and therefore purposeless – way in which the term self is used in philosophical arguments. Consider, for instance, the following:

⁵¹ Cf. David Pears, *The False Prison*, Vol. I (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), 153–190.

⁵² For an earlier version of my discussion of Wittgenstein's early treatment of the thinking subject, see Tejedor, "El solipsismo." See also Bazzocchi, "Draft on Mind's Eye." Several authors, including notably Pears, argue that the main point of the visual field analogy is that the eye cannot be found within this field. Pears, *The False Prison*, 153–190.

(R)

(a) There is only knowledge by acquaintance

(b) Other selves cannot possibly be given in acquaintance

(c) I am acquainted with my self as well as with other objects

Conclusion:

I can only have knowledge of my self and of the other objects given to me in acquaintance. I can have no knowledge of other selves.

Bertrand Russell tries to counter a version of this argument in his discussions of privacy, acquaintance, knowledge and the self between 1905 and 1919, in works such as “On Denoting,” “Knowledge by Acquaintance and Knowledge by Description,” *Problems of Philosophy*, and his manuscript for *Theory of Knowledge*. For Wittgenstein, however, Russell’s attempts to counter this argument are weakened by his failure to realize that the term “self” is used in an inconsistent manner in arguments such as (R): (b) uses “self” to capture a subject – that is, a *non object*; (c) in turn uses “self” to capture a possible *object* of acquaintance.

L2 Mach’s Influence and the notion of Metaphysical Subject

Wittgenstein’s rejection of the notions of willing and thinking subject has important ethical implications, as we will see in section 3. Before we turn to those, however, we need to consider his notion of “metaphysical subject.” The notion of metaphysical subject is clearly of great importance to Wittgenstein. He discusses it on

repeated occasions, in the *Notebooks*, the *Prototractatus*, and the *Tractatus*. I propose that, for Wittgenstein, any investigation into the notion of metaphysical subject is really an investigation into the question: is there a viable notion of the self that is distinctively philosophical?⁵³ In his search for a satisfactory, distinctively philosophical notion of the self, Wittgenstein considers three candidates: the notion of willing subject, that of thinking subject and that of metaphysical subject. The former two emerge as part of philosophical attempts to impose metaphysical, solipsistic restrictions on the world. Having discarded both of these notions of the self as restrictive *condition*, Wittgenstein moves on to endorse a different philosophical understanding of the self: the “metaphysical subject” of *Tractatus* 5.641.

In *Tractatus* 5.641, Wittgenstein writes that the metaphysical subject is “the limit of the world – not a part of it.” I suggest that the term “limit” does not aim to capture the notion of *condition* here.⁵⁴ When Wittgenstein indicates that the metaphysical subject is the limit of the world, he is not suggesting that some (object-like or non-object-like)

⁵³ It is because Wittgenstein has this question in mind that he equates “philosophical self” with “metaphysical subject” in *Tractatus* 5.641.

⁵⁴ The idea that the notion of limit need not be understood in a restrictive manner emerges in the works of McGinn, Moore and Sullivan, although their understandings of this notion differ from each other (and indeed from mine). See McGinn, “Between Metaphysics and Nonsense”; Adrian W. Moore, “Ineffability and Nonsense – Part I,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Supplementary Volume 77 (2003): 169-193; Peter M. Sullivan, “Ineffability and Nonsense – Part II,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Supplementary Volume 77 (2003): 195-223.

subject is a necessary condition of the world, representation or indeed ethics. Instead, Wittgenstein is here using the term “limit” to capture the notion of *totality*.⁵⁵ The metaphysical subject is the limit of the world *in that* it encompasses all possible thought. For Wittgenstein, the phrase “metaphysical subject” aims to capture, quite simply, the totality of possible thoughts.⁵⁶ It is this philosophical notion of the self that Wittgenstein endorses at the end of the solipsism discussion: the self understood quite simply as the totality of possible thoughts. This notion of the “metaphysical subject” is, I suggest, an adaptation of a notion of the self that Wittgenstein finds in the works of Ernst Mach. Let us therefore briefly consider the Machian approach to the self.

In *Knowledge and Error*, Mach engages in a discussion of the self that focuses on the distinction between the notions of object and subject. This discussion concludes with

⁵⁵ This understanding of limit as *totality* also emerges elsewhere in the *Tractatus*, notably in 4.51, where Wittgenstein writes: “Suppose that I am given *all* elementary propositions: then I can simply ask what propositions I can construct out of them. And there I have *all* propositions, and *that* fixes their limits.” I am grateful to John Preston for a discussion of this issue.

⁵⁶ There are serious problems with Wittgenstein’s understanding of totality in the *Tractatus*, as has been discussed in detail in Peter M. Sullivan, “The Totality of Facts,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 100 (2000): 175-192. However, I am not convinced that Wittgenstein is fully aware of these difficulties when he writes the *Tractatus*. For Wittgenstein’s treatment of the notion of totality, see Frank P. Ramsey, “Critical Notice of L. Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*,” *Mind* 32 (1923): 478.

the rejection of the notion of the self understood as an object-like subject and with Mach's endorsement of a different notion of the self: "my ego in the widest sense."

If I now call the sum of my mental aspect, sensations included, my ego in the widest sense (in contrast with the restricted ego) then in this sense I could say that my ego contains the world (as sensation and idea).⁵⁷

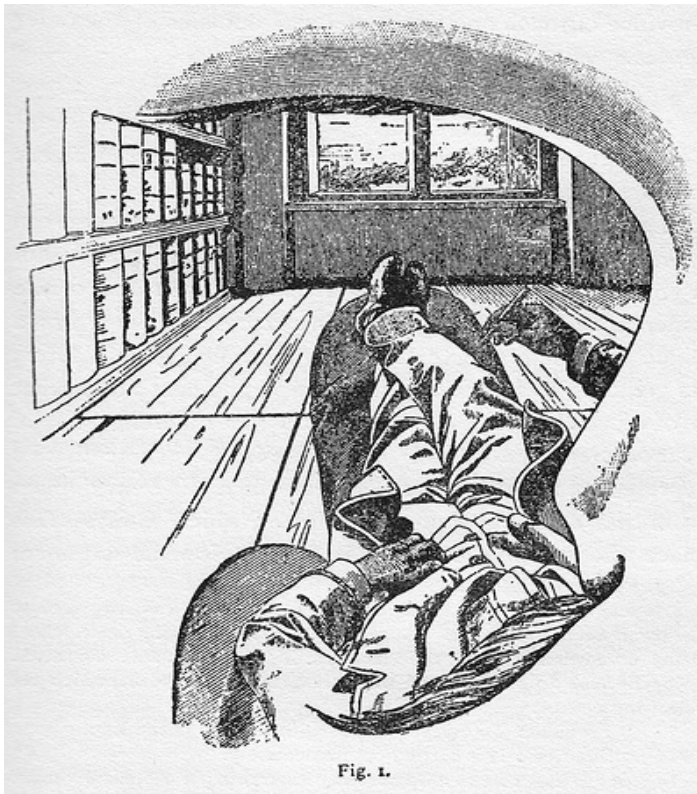
This notion of the self ("my ego in the widest sense") is intimately connected for Mach with the idea that my mental life (i.e. the contents of my mind) *coincides* with the world. Instead of working with the notion of the subject as *condition* of the world (the notion of a subject that *imposes metaphysical restrictions* on the world), Mach places the emphasis on the idea that the contents of one's mind and the contents of the world are perfect reflections of each other – that they are, in some important respect, identical to each other, or in perfect harmony with each other. This idea comes into focus when one pulls away from the notion of the subject as *condition* of representation and concentrates instead on the contents of representation themselves.

Wittgenstein's discussion of the thinking subject – which culminates in his rejection of this notion and in his endorsement of the notion of metaphysical subject – is greatly influenced by his exposure to Mach's work. Indeed, Wittgenstein seems to have drawn the phrase "a point without extension" from Mach, who uses it in *The Analysis of*

⁵⁷ Ernst Mach, *Knowledge and Error—Sketches on the Psychology of Enquiry*, trans.

Thomas J. McCormack and Paul. Foulkes (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1976), 6f. Cited in McGuinness, *Approaches to Wittgenstein*, 131.

Sensations (1886).⁵⁸ It also seems likely that Wittgenstein drew inspiration for his drawings of the visual field from Mach's own drawing of the contents of his visual field, found in the same work:⁵⁹



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⁵⁸ Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, 5.64. Ernst Mach, *The Analysis of Sensations and the Relation of the Physical to the Psychological*, trans. C. M. Williams (Chicago: Open Court, 1914), 12.

⁵⁹ Sabine Paul also draws a parallel between Mach's drawing and Wittgenstein's drawings of the visual field – see Sabine Paul, “Le moi peut-il être sauvé?,” *Philonsorbonne* 1 (2006-2007): 93.

⁶⁰ Mach, *Analysis of Sensations*, 19, Fig. I.

We know that Wittgenstein was acquainted with Mach's work.⁶¹ We also know that he was exposed to Mach's views on the self indirectly, though Weininger's writings, which he read (or perhaps re-read), in the middle of the First World War.⁶²

I suggest that, in the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein ends up endorsing a modified version of the Machian notion of self. Wittgenstein's version is modified in that his notion of the self is broader than Mach's: the notion endorsed by Wittgenstein is that of the "metaphysical subject" understood as the *totality of possible thoughts*. Where Mach is working with the idea of the mental life (the thoughts) of a particular human being, Wittgenstein is working with the broader notion of all possible thoughts: all possible representations in the medium of thought. For Wittgenstein, this notion of the self (the totality of possible thoughts) is not associated with the metaphysically restrictive notion of the subject as condition of representation and of the world. The "metaphysical subject" that Wittgenstein ends up endorsing in *Tractatus* 5.641 is metaphysically non-restrictive. By the end of the discussion of solipsism, Wittgenstein is thus encouraging us to acknowledge that the only viable, philosophically interesting notion of the self, is that of the totality of possible thoughts – where this notion is understood in a non-restrictive

⁶¹ For a discussion of the influence of Mach's writings on Wittgenstein, see notably Allan Janik and Stephen Toulmin, *Wittgenstein's Vienna* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1973), 92-166 and 202-238.

⁶² Indeed, this explains the timing of the *Notebooks* remarks on solipsism, which start to appear in 1915. See McGuinness, *Approaches to Wittgenstein*, 134.

manner, as imposing no conditions on the world.⁶³ As we will see in the next section, coming to reject the notion of the subject as condition of the world has important ethical implications for Wittgenstein.

L1 The Ethics of the *Tractatus*

According to the Schopenhauerian reading, the *Tractatus* succeeds in fulfilling its ethical purpose in that it contains ethical propositions (e.g. the *Tractatus* 6.4ff), which, though nonsensical, succeed in expressing ineffable ethical insights. In so doing, the *Tractatus* helps us to adopt what is, in this reading, Wittgenstein's understanding of the ethical attitude: the attitude of choosing to abandon or let go of desire, that is, the attitude of acceptance of reality. Elsewhere, I have argued that this fundamentally misrepresents Wittgenstein's position.⁶⁴ For Wittgenstein, the ethical attitude is not an emotive attitude of acceptance. Nor is the ethical attitude something that can be chosen (let alone freely chosen). Instead, the ethical attitude is dispositional: it is the disposition to use signs in ways that reflect the clarity in one's command of language and thought. Having an

⁶³ I develop this idea further in Tejedor, *The Early Wittgenstein*, 46-90 and 119-137. In connection to this, it is worth noting that, although *TLP* 5.5561 mentions "reality", there is strong evidence to suggest that the remarks on solipsism in the *TLP* 5.6ff in particular are primarily concerned, not with the world understood as reality or the totality of facts (cf. *TLP* 1), but with the world as the totality of *possibilities*. I defend this view in in Tejedor, *The Early Wittgenstein*, chap. 2.

⁶⁴ Tejedor, "Wittgenstein on the Notion of Religious Attitude"; Tejedor, *The Early Wittgenstein*, 138-155.

ethical attitude is having certain practical abilities honed, it is being disposed to use signs in certain ways and not in others. In particular, the ethical attitude involves being disposed to resist using signs in confused, purposeless ways that result in philosophical nonsense. In section 2, we discussed two such cases of nonsense: the Schopenhauerian use of the expression “willing subject” to capture a transcendental restrictive condition of the world; and the use of expressions such as “thinking subject” in solipsistic positions such as those discussed by Russell. One of the consequences of rejecting these notions of the subject as condition of the world – that is, one of the consequences of rejecting restrictive solipsism – is that doing so transforms our understanding of the place we occupy in the world. By abandoning restrictive solipsism – that is, by abandoning the idea that the self occupies a privileged position and is capable of imposing restrictive, metaphysical conditions on the world – we come better to understand ourselves: we come to understand that there is nothing special to our relation to reality, that we do not stand in a privileged position in the world, but that we are on a par with all other elements of reality. If the I, as subject, were a *condition* of the world, I would occupy a privileged, fundamental position within it: the world would be fundamentally dependent on *I*; I would be of far greater importance than anything else in the world since, without me, there would *be* no world. When the philosophical temptation to treat the *I* as condition of the world is removed, the temptation to see myself as *fundamentally* more important than other aspects of the world disappears. From the point of view of what is essential or fundamental (as opposed to, say, psychological – i.e. for Wittgenstein, accidental) we, human beings, are equal in importance and status to all other creatures and facts in the

world. This idea emerges in the *Notebooks* (where it is linked to a remark concerning the subject as boundary of the world which is clearly the precursor of *Tractatus* 5.641):

The philosophical self is not the human being, not the human body or the human soul with the psychological properties, but the metaphysical subject, the boundary (not a part) of the world. The human body, however, my body in particular, is a part of the world among others, among beasts, plants, stones etc., etc.

Whoever realises this will not want to procure a pre-eminent place for his own body or for the human body.

He will regard humans and beasts quite naïvely as objects which are similar and which belong together.⁶⁵

For Wittgenstein, acknowledging that we are equal in status to all other elements of the world changes our understanding of ourselves and of our position in the world. Since this understanding is ethically valuable, acquiring it makes us ethically better.⁶⁶ By exposing as nonsensical the notion of the subject as condition of the world, Wittgenstein thus aims to dissolve a fundamentally confused understanding of our own status in the world. For him, the increased clarity that results from this process is, in and of itself, ethically transforming: by overcoming a self-deceptive, confused understanding of our own importance and position in the world, we are rendered ethically better.

⁶⁵ Wittgenstein, *Notebooks*, 2.9.16. Cf. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, 5.641.

⁶⁶ I am grateful to an anonymous referee for a series of comments that led to the clarification of this point.

If the *Tractatus* succeeds in fulfilling its ethical purpose, it is not because it contains illuminatingly nonsensical propositions capable of expressing ineffable ethical insights (e.g. the *Tractatus* 6.4ff), but because the process of clarification in which the book as a whole engages us is – in and of itself – ethically transforming. In particular, by abandoning restrictive solipsism and gaining a clearer understanding of ourselves and of our position in the world, we become ethically better.⁶⁷ In so far as the *Tractatus* is designed to help us achieve greater clarity in these matters, it is designed ethically to improve us. In the 1918 letter to Engelmann cited earlier, Wittgenstein uses a most striking metaphor: that of the “machine for becoming decent.” He writes:

If you tell me I have no faith, you are *perfectly right*, only I did not have it before either. It is plain, isn’t it, that when a man wants, as it were, to invent a machine for becoming decent, such a man has no faith.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ There are important areas of overlap between my approach to Tractarian ethics and that defended by Michael Kremer, even though our positions ultimately differ in their details. See notably Kremer “Tractarian Nonsense.”

⁶⁸ These letters are cited in Monk, *Wittgenstein*, 152-153. In the original, Wittgenstein’s reply from 16.1.1918 reads: “Wenn Sie nun sagen daß ich keinen Glauben habe, so haben Sie *ganz recht*, nur hatte ich ihn auch früher nicht. Es ist ja klar, daß der Mensch der, so zu sagen, eine Maschine erfinden will um anständig zu werden, daß dieser Mensch keinen Glauben hat. Aber was soll ich tun? *Das eine ist mir klar*: Ich bin viel zu schlecht um über mich spintisieren zu können, sondern, ich werde entweder ein Schweinehund bleiben oder mich bessern, und damit basta! *Nur kein transzendentes Geschwätz*, wenn

I suggest that, for Wittgenstein, the *Tractatus* represents precisely such a “machine for becoming decent”: a machine designed to help us become ethically better by helping us gain greater clarity in our disposition to use signs.

alles so klar ist wie eine Watschen.” [My italics in the last instance.] See Engelmann, *Wittgenstein*, 10.

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