



# **Wittgenstein on Transcendental Ethics**

**Dr. Manoranjan Mallick**

**P.G. Department of Philosophy**

**Utkal University**

**Vani Vihar, Bhubaneswar - 751004**

# Transcendental notion of Ethics

---

- ❑ Traditional conception of ethics:
  - law like (norms), prescriptive, a system of code of conduct
- ❑ Wittgenstein's unique conception of ethics and ethical values:
  - ❑ Ethics is transcendental
    - Ethics does not treat of the world
    - Ethics must be condition of the world
  - ❑ Ethical values are absolute in nature
    - In the world, everything is as it is, and everything occurs as it does occur
    - The entire occurrence in the world is completely factual and relative in nature
- ❑ Hence, no value exists in the world, and “if it did exist, it would have no value” (*TLP*#6.41)

# Transcendental notion of Ethics

---

- ❑ If there is anything that does have value, it must lie outside the whole sphere of ‘what happens and is the case’
- ❑ So, the world in itself is neither good nor evil
- ❑ The world would remain non-ethical whether it contains dead matter or living things. Values cannot be captured within the network of facts about living things or dead matters in the world; they are not the case in the world and are not accidental, they are higher
- ❑ The facts or events of the world may change from time to time but values remain the same; they are absolute
- ❑ The absolute nature of ethical values is not opposed to the relative values rather they are involved in two different issues.

# Transcendental notion of Ethics

---

- ❑ Values which are concerned with the empirical aspects of the life and world are relative in nature and values which are to do with the moral aspects of the life and world are absolute in nature
- ❑ Values – the ethical, aesthetic, and religious, are non-accidental, unconditional and are devoid of empirical content
- ❑ Ethics and ethical values are not to do with facts rather they are concerned with something *higher order* of the world and the human life
- ❑ You cannot lead people to what is good...The good is outside the space of facts (CV, p. 3)
- ❑ The world is bereft of the ethical values as it contains nothing more than the facts. The world of dead matter or even of living things can in itself be neither good nor evil.

# Transcendental notion of Ethics

---

- ❑ Values are is completely indifferent to the subject matter of natural sciences as it lies outside the factual descriptions of the world
- ❑ We can not locate the realm of ethical in the empirical worldly context, which is the realm of everything contingent and accidental
- ❑ The distinction made between facts and values is translated in Wittgenstein in terms of ‘how things are in the world’ and ‘what is their significance.’
- ❑ First is defined by relative values and the second by values which are absolute in nature.
- ❑ In *Lecture on Ethics*, Wittgenstein makes a clear distinction between relative and absolute sense of using an expression

# Absolute values and Relative values

---

- ❑ An absolute value is essentially valuable for its own sake i.e. unconditional
- ❑ Absolute value is eternal, non-accidental, non-factual, and remains unchanged in different context
- ❑ Relative value is instrumental and context dependent i.e. conditional
- ❑ In a relative sense something is said to be good only when it serves towards some purpose and some ends
- ❑ Both absolute values and relative values are completely different in nature. When it comes to making judgment, there is an unbridgeable gap between the two cases

# Absolute values and Relative values

---

- ❑ Judgment of relative value: Playing well (it is not necessary for all those who opt for playing, it is conditional)
- ❑ Judgement of absolute value: Behaving well (it is a rational way of living for human beings, which is unconditional)
- ❑ Nobody can disapprove the logical necessity of such ethical judgement as it is case of absolute value judgment
- ❑ Playing tennis better is conditional as one has a choice whether to go for or not. It depends on agent's inclination and does not create any moral dilemma in any case
- ❑ But, in an ethical context, not behaving well cannot be accepted as exercise of choice. Others would find it morally unacceptable if one says "I know I behave badly, but then I don't want to behave any better"

# Absolute values and Relative values

---

- ❑ In ethical context, it is unconditionally expected that one ought to want to behave better
- ❑ No possible justification can be if asked why one ought to behave well
- ❑ An absolute value has a moral force which compels us for certain actions in a given situation independent of our liking or disliking for it. Wittgenstein calls it coercive power of absolute values
- ❑ This coercive power of absolute value judgement does not lie in a state of affairs
- ❑ If absolute values are treated as facts, then values do not have coercive power to produce guilt in a person even if the person is morally guilty
- ❑ Morality ought to have what is call as moral force
  - Any immoral act ought to produce feeling of guilt in a person



# Absolute values and Relative values

---

- ❑ If ethical values were facts, they would lack the moral force
  - For instance, feeling guilty for ‘not being able to help a needy’ cannot be compared with feeling guilty for ‘not being able to score high marks in an examination’
- ❑ The state of affairs, in this case, ‘high score in the examination’, does not have the coercive power of an absolute judge
- ❑ It may not be appropriate even to talk about guilt in later case
- ❑ Facts would lack the power to guide morally
- ❑ Values which are concerned with the factual aspects of the life and world are relative in nature and values which are to do with the moral aspects of the life and world are absolute in nature
- ❑ So, ethical values such as ‘good’, ‘bad’, ‘evil’, etc., can never be properties of anything whose subject is factual in nature

# Absolute values and Relative values

---

- ❑ No statements of fact can ever be statements of absolute value
- ❑ Any attempt to ascribe absolute value to relative judgments of value leads to absurdity.
- ❑ For example, “the absolute right road”
- ❑ No road can be called ‘the absolutely right road’ independent of people’s interests, tastes, and inclinations
- ❑ A describable state of affairs does not necessitate logically the absolute good. (it is conditional)
- ❑ Values such as good, bad, right, etc., have deeper meanings when used in an ethical sense but wouldn’t remain so when these terms are used in a trivial sense.
- ❑ This makes a sharp distinction between facts i.e. how things are in the world and values i.e. ‘what is their significance’ for the human

# Absolute values and Relative values

---

- ❑ Wittgenstein is very right in claiming that absolute values cannot be facts since the values are viewed as supernatural in nature and cannot be ascribed anything natural
  - Ought cannot be derived from the facts
- ❑ The term 'Good' is divine and cannot be ascribed as an ethical predicate in the relative judgments of value
- ❑ Not possible to describe the supernatural values as language is merely designed to describe the factual world.
- ❑ Judgments of absolute value being beyond the facts cannot be captured by the natural language; they convey something higher.
- ❑ Words in natural language are like vessels capable only of containing and conveying meaning and sense. Values cannot be used meaningfully to express something which is supernatural or higher.

# Absolute values and Relative values

---

- ❑ One write a book on ethics as language has not capacity to capture something what is supernatural
- ❑ If such book can exist at all it would destroy all other books with an explosion. That is, the subject matter of such book being above all other subject matters would cease the possibility of having books on any other subject matter.
- ❑ Absurdity arises when we are inclined to ascribe absolute values in expressing our everyday experiences. In *Lecture on Ethics* he mentions three such instances:
  - ‘wondering the existence of the world’
  - ‘feeling absolutely safe’
  - ‘feeling guilty’
- ❑ The walls of our cage set by the language do not permit to convey the sense of miraculous or mystical. Wittgenstein calls it absolutely hopeless attempt to run against these walls

# Absolute values and Relative values

---

- ❑ Paradoxical situations: when we describe the moral experiences in the domain of language.
- ❑ When somebody attempts to express a feeling of seeing the world as miracle by saying “I wonder at the existence of the world”, it leads to absurdity. The feeling of absolute values does not treat facts in the word rather they involve the notion of miraculous.
- ❑ But when we look at it the way we look at the facts or events in the world it ceases to be a miracle. A miracle has to be seen in an absolute sense. No expression can express it, since to say of an experience that it is mystical or miracle is to attempt to go beyond the limits of language
- ❑ To talk or to write ethics is to run against the boundaries of language
- ❑ Values can never be attributed to the properties of anything which is accidental or factual in nature. They are predicates of the moral subject<sup>18</sup> which transcends the world

# Conclusion

---

- ❑ The expression ‘value-fact’ is a contradiction in terms, because values are absolute and facts are relative.
- ❑ Value-judgments cannot be propositions
- ❑ A proposition is a descriptions of a state of affairs.
- ❑ Propositions can express nothing that is higher
- ❑ No statement of fact can ever be a judgment of absolute value.
- ❑ Ethical statement cannot be made