

WITTGENSTEIN AND PHILOSOPHICAL SPIRITUALITY IN THE LIGHT OF THE *LECTURE ON ETHICS*

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1. Introduction

The goal of this paper is to provide a reading and interpretation of one of Ludwig Wittgenstein's less known writings, the *Lecture on Ethics*. While this text is often neglected in favour of other works from this author, nonetheless, given its richness of content, I hold this lack of interest to be unmotivated. My understanding of the *Lecture* is inspired by the interpretation of Wittgenstein's philosophy delivered by Pierre Hadot. In fact, what I will argue for is that the entire *Lecture on Ethics* can be seen as a so-called 'Spiritual Exercise': thus, I shall present this text not only as a piece of writing whose features show it to be in line with Hadot's vision of Philosophy, but I will also show that the therapeutical spirit of others works, such as the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, is as well evident.

Following Hadot, I will argue that the *Lecture's* first purpose is to change the way we relate ourselves to the world or, in other words, our ethical attitude and behaviour toward it: such is the goal of a Spiritual Exercise, and the broader focus of the Austrian philosopher's activity, that is, to engage the listener/reader causing him to consider and possibly revise his way of life, as regards the whole sphere that falls under the category of Ethics. Therefore, to epitomize the whole attitude of this paper toward philosophy, we might say that here the latter is primarily seen as an «activity»¹: in Wittgenstein's own terms, the philosophical work is a process led on the self, and specifically on the way we look at things².

Before proceeding to the actual paper, I wish to acknowledge some of the intellectual contributions on which I drew in order to write this essay. Firstly, as it comes to the understanding of the ethical aspect of Wittgenstein's thought, I am employing Cora Diamond's reading. In particular, I rely on Diamond's view of the «ethical» as a dimension which concerns the framework of our world and the way we «look it». Secondly, another source of inspiration of the following reflections is Foucault's work on the 'Care of the self in the context of ancient philosophy. I will develop my argument according to the following scheme: to begin with, I shall argue that we can find hints about the nature of the *Lecture* as a Spiritual Exercise, already in its opening words and that in this, the *Lecture* is consonant with the forewords to the *Tractatus* and the *Investigations*. Then, the main body of the paper will be devoted to show the means through which the exercise is carried out; hence, the focus will be on the examples employed by Wittgenstein in order to clarify and set forth his thoughts, as well as which reactions these 'speech acts' are aimed to cause in the audience. In respect to this last passage, Badiou's notion of 'Event' shall also be considered as a useful picture of the «fruits» that a spiritual exercise such as the *Lecture on Ethics* is meant to give birth to. In conclusion, I shall first consider what actually is the «end» a Spiritual Exercise heads for and subsequently I will add some considerations on the lines of continuity that seem to connect this text to other, well-known works by Wittgenstein.

¹ P. Donatelli, *Wittgenstein e l'Etica*, Laterza, Napoli 1998, p. 34.

² *Ibidem*.

2. «Useful not interesting»

In order to investigate whether Hadot's interpretation is corroborated by a reading of the *Lecture on Ethics*, we ought to start with laying down the definition of Spiritual Exercise as given by Hadot himself. During an interview with his disciple Arnold I. Davidson, Hadot clarifies that with the expression of Spiritual Exercise he wishes to describe a «[...] Practice capable of provoking an existential and moral transformation in the subject that is undergoing it [...]»³. This way, Philosophy is perceived as being something that ought to change the very philosophers exposed to it, thus being something primarily concerned with individuals and their character, rather than with facts⁴. Since this is a clear definition of the concept under examination, we ought to enquire whether the goal of a Spiritual Exercise as emerges from this definition is applicable to the context of the *Lecture*. A positive response to this query would give us a strong indication toward the legitimacy of our argument.

I believe that the answer to this question is yes, and I ground this assertion in what Wittgenstein writes in those that were meant to be the preambles of his exposition. There, the author states that after he was offered the chance to deliver this talk, he made up his mind so to provide his audience with «[...] something which some of them might possibly find useful, I say useful not interesting [...]»⁵. I deem that this is possibly the crucial information that Wittgenstein is giving us at the beginning of his lecture, namely the one that sheds light on all that follows; therefore, it will be necessary to keep in mind this «declaration of intents», in order to understand every single notion and piece of reflection that constitutes the «matter» of the *Lecture*. In other words, we must keep in mind that, all the elements which compose this text are meant to be somehow useful to our «ordinary lives».

What is relevant, is that this *incipit* echoes strongly those that we know to be the assumptions and the intentions underlying the *Tractatus*: first, we can see the echo of Wittgenstein's famous statement about the ethical nature of his work⁶; second, I believe that we can find a strong assonance between these words from the *Lecture* and at least a *locus* of the *Tractatus* and namely its introduction. In this respect, we ought to consider some of Wittgenstein's expressions referring to his first book, as placing that work as well in the field of the «useful»: this way, I hold that we can make sense of what Wittgenstein meant, when he stated that the object of the *Tractatus* would have been attained if only one reader was able to understand, as well as finding in it a source of «pleasure»⁷. We know that, to understand the *Tractatus* implies to be able to accomplish such feats as «throwing away the ladder», or being silent when it is the case to be so⁸: both these events, which I believe can be considered «ethical» as they concern the way we look and interact with what there is of valuable in our life⁹, fit well in what the author seems to mean through the usage of the adjective 'useful'. In other words, to be able

³ A. I. Davidson, F. Worms (edited by), *Pierre Hadot: L'insegnamento degli antichi l'insegnamento dei moderni*, ETS, Pisa 2012, p. 34.

⁴ J. Schulte, *Coro e legge*, Pensa Multimedia, Lecce 2007, p. 134.

⁵ L. Wittgenstein, *Lecture on ethics*, Quodlibet, Macerata 2007, p. 135.

⁶ Id., *Briefe an Ludwig von Ficker*, O. Muller, Salzburg 1969, p. 72.

⁷ Id., *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London 1951, p. 28.

⁸ *Ivi*, p. 189.

⁹ Which, according to Wittgenstein's «moorean» perspective, is in fact the field of Ethics itself.

to tell when one ought to be silent it is not just an interesting notion to have, but it is «useful» indeed, as the capacity to do so is an evidence of the success of our efforts toward dispelling the illusions that we force on us through a misunderstanding of language. Similarly, we can appreciate the appearance of a similar motive to this one in the closing sentences of the preface to the *Philosophical Investigation*. Speaking of the content of his last work, Wittgenstein states that probably it will fall to the lot of it, «[...] in its poverty and in the darkness of this time, to bring light into one brain or another [...]». Then he concludes: «[...] I should not like my writing to spare other people the trouble of thinking. But, if possible, to stimulate someone to thoughts of his own [...]»¹⁰.

As we can see, there is a «communion of intents» that we find all over the introductions to these three works that we are taking into consideration. In all three situations, the author seems to be mostly concerned with providing his audience with tools which, using the adjective employed in the *Lecture*, we can describe as «useful». Hence, meaningfulness in the context of all these three texts is in the first place a matter of norm rather than description: that is, they are devised so to shape our practice and understanding of language, and through this our ethical view of the world and of our life¹¹. In other words, in all three occasions Wittgenstein's intention was that of producing a «stimulus», so to make able the people paying attention to him, to think and to re-consider some elements of their life under a different light. This is precisely the essence of philosophy as seen as a Spiritual Exercise, namely as an activity that takes into account the human being in the whole width of his existence, and is concerned with giving him the chance to form a more cohesive and meaningful form-of-life. Moreover, another aspect of this philosophical activity disclosed by Hadot and that we reflected here, is the variety of shapes that these Spiritual Exercises can take: in fact, Hadot argues that their diversity is just apparent but, be they oral or written, and in spite of the multiplicity of traditions that might employ them, they are found to be analogous as it comes to their means and ends¹².

I suppose I have gathered sufficient data, in order to consider the *Lecture* as a text ascribable to the category of the spiritual Exercise. However, there is one last consideration that I have to make before proceeding to a closer inspection of the *Lecture*. So far, though I mentioned multiple times the nature of the end of this particular activity that I am examining, still I have not specified the way Wittgenstein presents this end in the context that we are inspecting. The purpose of the *Lecture* is in fact revealed toward its conclusion where, after having declared why he would refuse *ab initio* any tentative of describing what an 'absolute value' is, Wittgenstein states:

[...] My whole tendency and I believe the tendency of all men who ever tried to write or talk of Ethics or Religion was to run against the boundaries of language. This running against the walls of our cage is perfectly, absolutely, hopeless.- Ethics [...] can be no science. But it is a document of a tendency in the human mind which I personally cannot help respecting deeply and I would not for my life ridicule it[...]¹³.

¹⁰ Id., *Philosophical Investigation*, Blackwell, Oxford 1958, p. x.

¹¹ J. McDowell, *Mind, value and reality*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge-London 1998, pp. 235-236.

¹² P. Hadot, *Esercizi spirituali e filosofia antica*, Einaudi, Torino 1988, p. 59.

¹³ L. Wittgenstein, *Lecture on ethics*, cit., pp. 213-215.

Once again we can hear, in the end, the same assonance to other writings that resounds in the beginning: Wittgenstein's goal is to make us acknowledge the nature of Ethics, and the attitude that we ought to have toward it. Hence, we should see that we cannot scientifically describe the nature of what of absolute value there is, but at the same time we should not cast ridicule on the attempts made in order to do so.

According to the interpretation that I defend, not only in the *Lecture*, but also in the *Tractatus* and in the *Investigations*, I believe that the intent of the Austrian philosopher is that of making us see things in a different perspective, and change our attitude toward what worthy there is in our lives. Therefore, in conclusion of this section I claim that, thanks to its features and in comparison with other Wittgenstein's works, I provided evidence of the fact that the *Lecture on Ethics* bears the traits common to any Spiritual Exercise. Later over the course of this essay, I shall discuss whether these three writings are driving or not toward the same end. However, right now I shall dig deeper in the *Lecture* bringing to the surface its «means». In other words, we will see how a Spiritual Exercise concretely «gets his job done».

3. The therapist's tools

So far, I argued that the nature of the *Lecture on Ethics* is that of a Spiritual Exercise, taking into consideration what its author aims to discuss and to induce through it. Now, I will take a step further, and explore which are the «means» of this text: in other words, if the goal of a Spiritual Exercise is to lead us to a reconsideration and subsequently to a shift in our ethical attitude, hence, we will now see how this goal is to be accomplished; if philosophy is a therapy conceived in order to dispose of our illusions, then which are the tools employed?

According to Hadot, in the context of ancient philosophy the world-view of the disciples of a particular school of thought changed over the course of their training, thanks to the retention of a number of dogmas¹⁴. A typical example of this might be the classical argument formulated by Epicurus, so to dispel our fear of death¹⁵: in this case, the «intellectual» understanding of the line of thought leading to the negation of death as something fearful, should lead us to grasp its consequences for our «real» life. Subsequently, we ought to shape our character according to our new understanding, namely «incarnating the argument», and actualizing its implication in our daily existence. At the same time, we gain the basis needed by our imagination to formulate such an argument from the Epicurean ontology, which sees the universe as composed of atoms and void: these are specifically the dogmas that a follower of Epicurus's doctrines has to learn and master, in order to his vision of the world in a better way.

Is it possible to find anything like this in Wittgenstein's *Lecture on Ethics*? To solve this issue, first of all we must further clarify what we mean with the notion of «dogma», as it appears to be employed by Hadot. To this effect, it is important we separate this noun from its closely and oft-associated adjective of «dogmatic», as the latter normally purports to describe something upheld through the sole use of authority. However, it is clear that Epicurus's argument and its theoretic-

¹⁴ P. Hadot, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

¹⁵ Epicuro, *Opere*, Laterza, Roma 2003, p. 42.

cal ground cannot in this respect be considered «dogmatic», nor we should search for anything like this all-over the *Lecture on Ethics*.

Any metaphysical description of the world, is rooted in the personal experience of an individual who, out of the nature of his original and sustained «meeting with the universe», comes to build an image of the universe he lives in; in other words, our life comes always to us as an ordered cosmos, and any particular vision of it finds birth in the encounter of a subjectivity with his environment. At the same time, we can agree with a view of the world that we did not contribute to form in the first place, in the case it resonates with our mindset and disposition toward life: such is precisely the case when we come to accept certain previously unknown doctrines and teachings, and shape our previous world-vision in accordance to them. In this light any ontological doctrine is not chiefly a foundation for our truth-claims regarding the world: instead, on one hand it is a way to provide a clarification of the nature of our understanding and world experience¹⁶, while on the other it aims to shape and change the very same thing. Therefore, our acceptance of dogmas, insofar as they affect our psychology, is the driving force of the building process of our self-understanding and attitude toward the world and others¹⁷.

If we consider these elements, such as the duality of void and atoms in epicurean ontology, to be the «basic props» of a certain *Weltanschauung*, then we can find something similar inside the *Lecture*. Specifically, I believe that we meet three of these dogmas in Wittgenstein's definition of what Ethics is¹⁸, as well as in the distinction that he traces between the 'relative' and the 'absolute' or 'ethical' use of our value-related vocabulary¹⁹. In other words, here we are witnessing an operation that aims at individuating through the name 'Ethics', all that which is important in our lives, as well as bringing to light the difference between the absolute, and the relative use of our axiological language. As a matter of fact, the rest of the *Lecture* is devoted to the elucidation of the features of these two possible modalities, through which we can employ a certain part of our languages. Now that we have identified the dogmas that base the discourse of the *Lecture*, we can finally address directly the question of the means.

As I mentioned above, the purpose of the *Lecture* is obtained once we recognize that it is inappropriate, as well as impossible, to try to describe what an absolute value is. Hence, what we must learn to do through the repetition, internalization and understanding of the aforementioned «dogmatic division» is to see what in our lives falls under the label of 'ethical' and how we should speak about it. Therefore, we need to consider how we employ language in an 'ethical' or 'absolute' sense, and how we should relate to other human beings who are employing this vocabulary. Since the subject of this paper is not an analytical exposition of the content of this writing, it is sufficient for our aims to ask ourselves: how is this task possible? This question is far from being pointless: since Wittgenstein thinks it to be impossible to describe what an absolute value is, therefore it is impossible to just say «look, this thing here is an absolute value and this one is not»; however, if we cannot point out with sufficient clearness to

¹⁶ P. Donatelli, *op. cit.*, p. 44.

¹⁷ Ivi, p. 50.

¹⁸ L. Wittgenstein, *Lecture on ethics*, cit., pp. 137-139.

¹⁹ Ivi, pp. 141-143.

the nature of «linguistic absoluteness», our quest seems to be hopeless and bound to failure.

Being conscious of this problem, Wittgenstein decides to renounce to any «straight-forward» description and resorts to a much more «circular» motion: what he attempts to do is in fact to describe absoluteness through the use of examples; these are the means and «supports», thanks to which the therapy that the audience of the *Lecture* is withstanding, can come to a successful end. Moreover, Wittgenstein's usage of examples addresses not only the nature of what an absolute value is, but also another question that we did not ask so far: how exactly do dogmas come about? We can get an answer to both questions if we take a look at what Wittgenstein actually discusses.

First of all, let us consider the passage of the *Lecture* where we are presented with the cases of a bad piano player and that of someone behaving in a beastly way: the former is described as being an example of a relative use of our value-related vocabulary, whereas the latter is a case of an absolute employment of value language. The crucial point, as observed by the author, is that in the first instance we can recognize the occurring evaluation as a simple statement of facts that could be put in a non-value form²⁰; on the contrary, no statement of facts could ever imply an ethical judgement because, as explained by Wittgenstein through the closely following the metaphor of the book, there is no place among facts for anything 'absolute'²¹. This way, we can appreciate the importance of examples in the economy of this writing, as they aim to elucidate the nature of dogmas indirectly, by trying to paint a picture of how the speaker actually sees the arrangement of the cosmos.

Then, it is evident how the *Lecture's* dogmas were developed: they were developed through the observation of how language works. In other words, I argue that Wittgenstein's observation of how language is structured²² led him to acknowledge as meaningful Moore's notion of what Ethics is, as well as realizing that there is no place in the world of facts for such «ethical stuff». Hence, examples are meant to provide the audience with an «invitation upon reflection»: their goal is to make us consider once again the way we think and express ourselves, in order to realize that the dogmas we are presented with form a meaningful picture of the world. Their indirect nature is at once what should give us the understanding of why is it impossible to describe directly any absolute value, as well as fostering the very idea of ethical absoluteness, as this happens as we are asked to reflect upon the distinction between a beastly behaviour and a sloppy way to play the piano.

The nature of the employment of examples is further elucidated in the following pages of the *Lecture*, when Wittgenstein tries to further make his point by taking into consideration three personal «experiences of absoluteness»²³. At first this choice might seem strange: up until now he spoke mostly about «absolute values», that is, of absoluteness as something attached to judgements and generally speaking to value expressions; after all, such was the na-

²⁰ L. Wittgenstein, *Lecture on ethics*, cit., p. 143.

²¹ Ivi, pp. 145-151.

²² We could also employ the word 'thinking' since, as it is stated in the preface to the *Tractatus*, to work on language means to work on the expression of thoughts, and thus on thinking itself. L. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*, cit., p. 27.

²³ L. Wittgenstein, *Lecture on ethics*, cit., pp. 153 and following.

ture of the examples used to trace the distinction between the relative and the absolute use of our language. Instead, we are now turning to experiences, and not to judgements anymore: nonetheless, these experiences imply in themselves judgements, and once again they find their place in this context as ways of leading the audience to see the world as the speaker does.

Wittgenstein makes his intentions clear, when he says that he is proposing these experiences as «stock examples» of what he means by an absolute value: although he is ready to recognize the personal nature of these experiences, at the same time he hopes that their exposure shall help the listeners to bring about similar, if not identical first-hand memories²⁴. The first such experience mentioned by Wittgenstein is that of wondering at the existence of the world²⁵. In analyzing such experience, he first of all recognizes the nonsensical nature of the expression, since this «sense of wonder» cannot be referred to any fact concerned by the statement, nor we could imagine the world as non-existing. Therefore, while we are surely in some way «wondering», we aren't really able to express why and at what we are exactly doing it. If Ethics «pervades» the world, there is not however anything «ethical per se», namely without any actual reference to the fact that we are judging it as such²⁶. The same goes for the other two experiences presented, that is, that of absolute safety no matter the danger, as well as that of absolute guilt before God. In this sense, the role of the philosopher is that of being a good draughtsman, one that tries to picture the way we «think of things» trying to highlight previously unnoticed aspects: to try to clarify «visually» the various relations between the parts of a building may mean to show eventually that there are inconsistencies in the project²⁷; the same can happen when we try to picture «colloquially» our *Weltanschauung*. Thus, to analyze these happenings and to see their being 'meaningless' helps Wittgenstein to give an idea of why he established the partitions mentioned above: the realization that we cannot find any ground among facts for what is absolute leads to the distinctions or dogmas presented at the beginning of this text. Therefore, this is the nature of the experience-judgment connection: to reflect on experiences helps us to establish an image of our world as an ordered *cosmos*; thanks to this, we are able to develop our life-experience in its multiple expressions, specifically being able to place «relativeness» as pertaining to facts and contingency, and «absoluteness» as not pertaining to this sphere. Dogmas are derived from linguistic analysis: examples are both a re-exposition of the process that first lead to their formation, as well as a way to induce a similar acquisition in other minds. These are the tools through which the Spiritual Exercise takes place and is practiced: in order to reach the exercise's conclusion, we must first induce the audience to arrange its world-view in such a way such that the radical change in behaviour shall be nothing more than this change's spontaneous flowering.

4. Something Happening

²⁴ *Ibidem*.

²⁵ *Ibidem*.

²⁶ G. Tomasi, *Ineffabilità*, ETS, Pisa 2006, p. 25.

²⁷ G. L. Hagberg, *The Thinker and the Draughtsman: Wittgenstein, Perspicuous Relations, and 'Working on Oneself'*, «Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement» vol. 66, 2010, p. 70.

I shall now address and further deepen a point raised in the previous section: namely, I shall explore the nature of the link that binds some of our experiences to our conception of absolute values, as well as to the formulation of their related judgments. In order to answer such a question, first of all it is necessary to give a broader definition of the kind of experiences we are talking about, that is, those that are reported by Wittgenstein as means to «give an idea» of what an absolute value is.

As I mentioned, in the conclusion of the *Lecture* we can find the statement that all the attempts of writing about Ethics are given birth to by the need to say something about the meaning of life, the absolute good and such things²⁸: generally speaking, we might want to say that to attempt to speak about Ethics is to try to say what «the Absolute is». However, the only way we can say something is through our language, which is something precisely concerned with speaking about what the world is: indeed, as it appears in Wittgenstein's discussion of the relative/absolute distinction, language is something concerned with speaking of «matters of fact». Since relative judgments can be reduced to matters of fact, then matters of fact share this relativity which results in their being contingent: therefore, we can imagine «an opposite situation» to them, namely one where a specific matter of facts is absent, or where an opposing one is present instead. However, this is in contrast with the absoluteness of the ethical sphere whose elements find no place among matter of facts, as well as with their being non-contingent. Thus, as reported in the discussion of our «sense of wonder» at the world's existence, we are not able to find any «wondrous» fact nor we are able to imagine an opposing situation, that is, one where the world is not.

This chain of thought leads Wittgenstein to proclaim that to try to write about Ethics is to run against the walls of a cage, namely that of the boundaries of language. Failure here is assured, as we are trying to describe as a part of the world something that just does not fit the way the contingent elements contained in the world are²⁹. However, even if it does not seem to find a place in our world, still we cannot object that absoluteness plays a part in our existential experience since we actually employ it as a part of our language: so, where we ought to find it?

The solution to this riddle is provided in the discussion of the nature of the miracleness of a matter of facts. According to Wittgenstein, to call something a miracle it has not anything to do with it being «uncommon» or in any way «strange»: since miracleness is a way of expressing the absolute significance of something to us, and we know that no matter of facts possesses an inherent absolute significance, then everything can in principle be considered a miracle. Thus, the importance that we attribute to some facts over others finds place in the way we look at the world, not in what it actually contains: what happens is that we see contingent facts in a light of absoluteness³⁰. However, we tend to behold this light after, or in correspondence with certain experiences that we had the occasion to go through: for example, using Wittgenstein's very images, living our life considering the existence of the world as a miracle might call for an experience that leads us to wonder at the existence of the world itself. Therefore, while to run against the walls of language trying to turn into facts

²⁸ L. Wittgenstein, *Lecture on ethics*, cit., p. 171.

²⁹ *Ibidem*.

³⁰ L. Wittgenstein, *Lecture on ethics*, cit., p. 167.

what a fact is not is hopeless, still this is the only way we have to explore and generate absoluteness in our life, this way developing our world-view. In this sense, we ought to understand Ethics as something pertaining to the world not because it is an actual part of it, but rather as it is one of the conditions of its emergence and formation³¹.

Hence, to say that the world is a miracle can be re-written as ‘the world has absolute value’, which is an absolute judgment. The same can be made with the other experiences brought in by Wittgenstein over the course of his speech; absolute safeness in God may lead to the formulation of judgments such as ‘faith comforts in every danger’, while absolute guilt could give birth to something like ‘one must avoid sin’. It is not difficult to see such expressions as ‘sin’, ‘guilt’, and ‘safeness’ as further instances of absoluteness in our world-view, similar in this respect to ‘miracleness’. In fact, the same distinction that runs between a relative and an absolute use of our language is itself an absolute distinction. Moreover, relativity as well as absoluteness are both «ways in which we consider things», and not actual features of those things; contingency means that we see something as «not necessary», but that is not part of the matter of fact itself: it helps us to consider its content, but it is not an element of it. Therefore, Ethics is a condition for our world to be, a requirement necessary for it to «emerge» as without some «absolute anchorage» there is no world, no contingent state of affairs.

Following Badiou definition of the term, we shall brand these kind of experiences, that is, those that involve a modification or further specification of the «absolute structure» of our world, as «Events». An Event is a «surplus» which is part of a particular «situation» but which exceeds the situation itself³². However, this does not mean that the surplus is some kind of super-object which «stands above» the lower facts: rather, we must intend it as something which plays a part in the definition of what a fact is, without finding place in it. The surplus is a non-object that allows objects to be. In this respect, an event is something that leads to a re-semantization of the world, producing new truths and different ways to look at it³³. The Event promotes a further structuring in the way we organize the world, for example leading us to consider something as a miracle as in the case discussed above.

To understand Wittgenstein’s discourse by employing Badiou’s notions allows us to add a further consideration. To say that the Event is the place where our ethical structure takes shape, it gives us an insight into how we could think of connecting the Moorean definition of Ethics, with the more «common» understanding of this term. In fact, more often than not we think of Ethics as the comprehensive set of all those things and acts, which are concerned with morality and ethical behaviour. Therefore, if we were questioned about what first comes us to mind when thinking of ‘Ethics’, probably we would answer with something related to the sphere of behaviour: a probable answer would be the definition of Ethics as that discipline concerned with the discussion and discovery of what is rightful and what is wrong. At the same time, we usually think of our moral investigations as something devoted to give a solid ground to our moral intuitions: why we should think of human being as provided with dignity,

³¹ D. Marconi, *Il Tractatus*, in *Wittgenstein*, edited by D. Marconi, Laterza, Roma 1997, pp. 56-57.

³² A. Badiou, *L’etica*, Pratiche, Parma 1994, pp. 39-40.

³³ Ivi, pp. 61-63.

what is the foundation of moral duties, why we should or not make any moral distinction between humans and other animals.

The definition of Ethics employed by Wittgenstein is slightly different: in his definition, the attention rests not on acts but onto «what is valuable»; hence, to investigate Ethics shall not lead us to envision first of all what a rightful behaviour is, but to point out what of Ethical there is. Therefore, if we call «ethos» the totality of the «ethical sphere» of our existence, we can see that an act-focused definition of ethics is more concerned with the actual outputs of our ethos, namely what we ought to do in front of some determinate situations, the way we should solve moral problems or conflicts and so forth. On the contrary, Wittgenstein's definition of Ethics puts a major emphasis on the sources and structures of our ethos, that is, what we find to be valuable; hence, according to this definition, Ethics concerns what is the fountainhead and direction-giver of our outputs and of our morally relevant habits. Thus, this definition underlines that our ethical practices always require the existence of a background of implicit and necessary norms, namely our dogmas and the ethical formulations deriving from them³⁴.

Clearly these two definitions are connected: it is impossible to investigate on the outputs without questioning their source and vice versa. However, I believe that Wittgenstein had strong philosophical reasons to lie more importance on the latter aspect instead of the former. To see Ethics as an inquiry mainly concerned with determining the contents of a number of sets (such as that containing the totality of rightful acts), as well as case of conflicts among their members, generates an attitude more prone to objectifying Ethics' own foundations. In other words, in order to provide a clear distinction between what is wrong and what is right, and to show exactly which moral duties are more important, sooner or later we will find us discussing our pre-assumption as matter of facts, that is, as features of objects that we can obtain directly from the analysis of their nature. For example, we will end up granting special dignity to humans, as an inherent property deriving from their superior brain capacity which, after all, is a matter of facts. This way Ethics would try to affirm its place in the realm of science, finding an incontestable grounding in «bare facts».

Wittgenstein's definition of Ethics is obviously instrumental to the *Lectures*'s arguments: if we understand science as comprising that category of subjects concerned with «sayable» things, then there is no «scientific morality»; if what is valuable and hence ethical is at the same time meaningless, subsequently everything finding place under these labels cannot be the object of science. Values simply spring out of events which, as we previously discussed, are unshowable insofar as they are not part of any situation or state of affairs. Therefore, to stress the interest of Ethics in «what is valuable itself» is Wittgenstein's way to underline the birth of all the «ethical stuff» in the realm of non-sayable, non-scientific personal experience.

However, while an event can never be the object of scientific evaluation it creates a framework for it to be. Even if values and their origin are in themselves unsayable, as we are unable to locate them in our world, it is not like that for particular states of affairs that we can consider in relation to our personal ethical structure. In this case as well, we can turn to the example made by Wittgenstein

³⁴ N. C. Burbules and P. Smeyer, *Wittgenstein, the practice of ethics and moral education*, «Philosophy of education», 2002, p. 254.

himself, as a clear case of what we are talking about: we perceive that there is something wrong about behaving in a beastly way and that the state of affairs connected to such attitude are qualitatively different from those concerning a poor piano performance³⁵. However, we can do this distinction only relating these states of affairs to our ethical framework. Therefore, problems arise if we try to objectify this framework, that is, if we try to translate it in terms of a content. Instead, the framework is a content-generator, something that gives the chance to an ethically-connoted beastly behaviour and a non-ethically-connoted musical performance to be; nonetheless, we do not need to this if we just want to discuss the «moral colouring» of a state of affair, at least to the extent we understand one another.

In other words, if someone shares with me the evaluation of a beastly behaviour as something that is morally relevant, I do not need to strive to «say» which are the basis of my evaluation. In this case, my interlocutor simply participates in my own paradigm and «gets» what I am trying to communicate. Obviously, my fellow may want to discuss with me, and contend the appropriateness of my evaluation of some particular situation as concerning a beastly behaviour: still, if we really share the same assumptions, then we can lead all of our discussions on a «scientific level». On the contrary, if we need to pull into the conversation our basic beliefs, to make myself clear I will have to turn to do what Wittgenstein attempts to perform in the *Lecture*. I shall then try to give my discussant an idea of what I mean indirectly, hoping he will be willing to heed my point and try to imagine the way I see things.

What is interesting is that while Wittgenstein is searching for a way to make his audience «reflect», at the same time he is not starting his argument from a case of conflict: no clash of paradigms is in sight in the context of the *Lecture*. On the contrary, what Wittgenstein is aiming to perform is a meta-ethical reflection, that is, an operation which is ethical in nature insofar as it is concerned with our ethos, but that at the same time means to define what Ethics itself is. As mentioned above, he is trying to push his listeners into a conflict with themselves and their convictions in order to foster a change in their ethical framework.

Let us now turn again an eye to the link between experiences and values/moral judgements. If we understand an ethos to be the comprehensive name for all that has anything to do with our moral life, and Ethics as a second-grade enquiry into what our ethos consists in, then we can say that: Events are those «moments» in our life where our moral sphere finds birth and a shape, and is then articulated over time. In this respect, we can imagine a first «major» event that opens up a whole new world of possibilities, with further new experiences piling up in time: following Schulte's wording we can speak of this dynamic by employing the terms of original and derived phenomena³⁶. In the context of the Event taking place, we make experience of what absolute there is, by meeting the very limits of our language: therefore, our ethos not only is given with a room to born and grow, but it is provided with his building bricks as well; at the same time here Ethics finds its (non-)objects. Thus, to act on consequence of our experiences, as well as reflecting on them, allows the interaction and mutual shaping of what is absolute and what is contingent. This way, our ethos comes to its multi-coloured life as we find ourselves judging, valuing moral

³⁵ L. Wittgenstein, *Lecture on ethics*, cit., p. 143.

³⁶ J. Schulte, *op. cit.*, pp. 31-33.

facts, and building up our character and shaping our nature as moral agents. Hence, judgments and the other singular elements or «cogs» of our ethical framework are the branches of the tree planted in the Event.

Accordingly with this picture, we can say that after all there is, though taking into consideration a few specification, science in Ethics. However, this scientificity is a «secondary» feature of Ethics, as we ought to understand this adjective in a «topographic» rather than qualitative way. There is no science, that is, there is no way to «say» what lies at the core of Ethics since as we mentioned plenty of times, we find no object there. However, there is certainly «sayability», where by this we mean ‘intersubjective and direct understanding’, at the level of our established ethos as well as of its outcomes. In other words, we are certainly able to understand someone else’s thought insofar as we are able to share with him a particular point of view encased in a web of concepts³⁷. Therefore, the scientific character of the Ethics is a feature of a certain environment where ethical language happens, rather than an attribute of Ethics itself.

To declare that, while it is not a science, one should not for his life ridicule Ethics in virtue of its nature, it is clearly a statement that involves an ethical use of language; at the same time, it is perfectly clear, at least to someone who get his argument and shares his pre-assumption, what Wittgenstein here means. We can also expect such a statement to play a certain force on someone’s mind insofar as he understands it: even though Wittgenstein affirms that no necessity can be attached to any «Absolute Good»³⁸, still a moral precept can exert authority on us. Moreover, Wittgenstein also states that an Absolute Good would be a state of affairs that anyone would recognize as such, independently of his tastes and inclinations, that is, of his particular history and of the Events that shaped it³⁹. Therefore, it is now clear that just to think of such a thing as an Absolute Good is meaningless. At the same time, we can think of people with a shared particular history, who are capable of acknowledging immediately the «local necessity» of an evaluation, or the rightfulness of a certain moral instruction or conduct, thanks to their package of experiences. This is true not only as regards Ethics, but of other sciences as well: no Tolomean would have understood Galileo’s theory without any previous, indirect introduction to his paradigm.

It appears that the picture I painted here might lead to a certain degree of relativism, with diverse moral paradigms involved in their own structuring and being at the same time disconnected one from another by gaps, which can be crossed through non-rational, non-objective persuasion. We will further explore this possibility in the next section, also recovering our focus on the theoretical figure of the Spiritual Exercise, and taking a closer look as to how this operation ends.

5. Talking Universal

I shall now return to meditate more closely the question that I am addressing in this paper, namely whether we can read the *Lecture on Ethics* as a Spiritual Exercise. So far I considered those that appears to be the intentions lying behind this

³⁷ J. McDowell, *Mente e mondo*, Einaudi, Torino 1999, p. 38.

³⁸ Ivi, p. 151.

³⁹ *Ibidem*.

work as well as the means through which the «would-be exercise» is carried out. I will now turn to analyze one last point, that is, the end the exercise is aiming at.

So far, I mentioned that according to Hadot's ideas, a Philosophical Exercise ought to accomplish in its subjects a general change in one's attitude toward life. Hence, the theoretical objects employed by it are intrinsically intertwined with its practical goal, and each one of the aspects of the exercise plays a part in defining the nature and the content of the other. However, while I have been purposely vague about the exact description of such a change, Hadot is thereupon quite explicit: through this activity, the individual puts himself in the perspective of the Whole⁴⁰ or, in the words of one of his disciples, a Spiritual Exercise allows the individual to re-discover his «universal vocation»⁴¹. What I will argue in this section is that we can make perfect sense of the *Lecture's* goal and prove it to be a Spiritual Exercise, if we just keep in mind this definition of the purpose of such an activity.

First of all, we must question what it may mean 'universal' in the context of Wittgenstein's thought. If we mean 'universal' as an useful abbreviation for 'spotless objectivity', then we will have little success in finding anything like this in the work that we are taking into consideration and in fact in any other by the same author. For the same reasons why there can be no science in Ethics, it is meaningless to think of universality as something dispossessed of any particular perspective on the world. If this could be the case, then Ethics would be always scientific, since absoluteness would be such irrespectively of any particular point of view; thus, ethical values would be granted that kind of self-evidence and necessity that we previously denied to them. Instead, we came to the conclusion that absoluteness and hence universality is enjoyable only from a particular angle of sight on the world: because of this, the use of examples and personal experiences is dictated to Wittgenstein. In fact, this was Wittgenstein's very opinion, namely that in Ethics one can never speak as an expert or in third person, being thus forced to always employ first person statement⁴²: talking of Ethics is always something «engaging».

Therefore, absoluteness is context-specific as in fact it is concerned with what makes any kind of context possible, as well as with the «absolutification» of some particular state of affairs, by judging them as ethically relevant. However, we have seen that the nature of our absolute framework is in some way indirectly communicated, as well as transmittable: thus, this «perspectivist-absoluteness» still enjoys some kind of universality insofar as it is in principle communicable to anyone. Hence, we can attempt to say more precisely what we mean when we speak of 'universality' and 'universal' in this particular picture of how we live our world: universal is the absolute framework of our experience, as it is related to contingent facts but in a way independent of them. At the same time, this framework is «the room» of any potential state of affairs, and is teachable and sharable with other human beings by communicating through but beyond our particular experiences. In this respect, «universality» can be better understood as a «push toward» and a «vocation for», namely as the drive felt by the speaker toward communicating his particular framework. This way, the speaker believes to be able to lead his fellow humans to a better comprehen-

⁴⁰ P. Hadot, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

⁴¹ A. I. Davidson, *F. Worms* (edited by), *op. cit.*, p. 58.

⁴² M. Pinalto, *Speaking for Oneself: Wittgenstein on Ethics*, «Inquiry» vol. 54, no. 3 (june 2011), p. 253.

sion of what life is and how we should cope with it, at the same time making room for the «particular-universal» frameworks of others.

The tools employed by the Spiritual Exercise awaken our universal vocation, as they try to focus our attention on what universal there is, in an attempt to foster our self-awareness of its nature as well as our attitude toward it. Obviously, to fly to such hyperurancal heights always means to take off from a particular place: to face the non-meaningfulness of our wonder at the world's existence is possible only starting from my actual wondering, here and now. At the same time, we must be respectful of others and their particularities: we ought to ask them to reach us from their personal position. In these respects, we are offering what is just an invitation to accomplish a movement analogous to ours as we do not want to colonize others' ethical experience and present ours as the only legitimate ones. This is precisely the reason why Wittgenstein does not say «understand my experience», but instead «I hope you had the same, however, please try to take a hints of what I mean since I am sure similar events took place in your life»; in his own words, he is trying to establish a «common ground for investigation»⁴³. In this way, Wittgenstein is both bearing witness to a particular way of looking at the world as well as recommending it to others⁴⁴.

Hence, to strive to sincerely communicate what «universal there is» leads immediately to a «universalist behaviour»: to search a common ground with other human beings in order to understand what we share, implies an invitation to communicate with and care for the others. In other words, the point of the *Lecture* as well as of any other Spiritual Exercise is to establish a communion among different subjectivities, through the condision and the taking care of the absolute and universal side of our life. We can see this attitude condensed in the last few sentences of this work, which we have already mentioned above. Wittgenstein declares Ethics n o t to be a science, since to try to describe universality «directly» is as hopeless as trying to run against the walls of a cage. At the same time, he declares his unconditioned respect for such a hopeless tendency⁴⁵. This is the distilled essence of any Spiritual Exercise: by reflecting on the dogmas that Wittgenstein is offering us, as well as implementing them in our lives, we can take care of ourselves avoiding the angst resulting from a wrong location of Ethics in our world, that is, by mistaking it for a content of the world.

However, to accomplish this task we must re-consider how we look at the world, and we can do this only through a dialogue with ourselves and the others. Therefore, even though we know that Ethics is no science, we find ourselves to somehow «share it», as well as being able to improve this way our understanding and articulation of it. Thus, we are encouraged to keep our eyes and ears open, in order to be able to gain new insights as well as trying to share ours with others: this way, we are placing ourselves in the spot of universality, that of communication and respect born out of caring for ourselves and our fellow humans.

As we have previously seen, our framework shapes ethically the state of affairs that compose our world, and we know that at these levels a certain degree of scientificity is possible. Acting «universally» means to feel an urge to see whether or not we hold anything in common with others on this level: however, in order to verify this, we need to share our frameworks, that is, to be in com-

⁴³ L. Wittgenstein, *Lecture on ethics*, cit., pp. 153-155.

⁴⁴ M. Pianalto, *op. cit.*, p. 259.

⁴⁵ L. Wittgenstein, *Lecture on ethics*, cit., pp. 213-215.

munion one with the other. In fact, to act like this will probably lead to a mutual explication, so that eventually we will come to have something in common, just in virtue of the facts that we were able to put into continuity our respective world-views. Therefore, universality as respect toward the attempts made in order to understand Ethics, as well as the push toward communicating and sharing it, is the end of each Spiritual Exercise as it is at the same time the presupposition and goal of any sincere «meeting of mind». Hence, respect and the will to be in communion as much as possible with anyone else is at the same time an attitude, an end, and the content of the therapy that we see Wittgenstein explicating on himself and his audience.

Thus, the *Lecture on Ethics* seems to be pervaded with an absolute/relative dynamic. On the one hand, we find dogmas that, insofar as they pertain to the framework of our world, are absolute and shed light on the relative facts that our world contains; hence, these facts emerge out of and are composed inside this frame. On the other hand, we find that the frame itself is influenced by what happens on the «contingent level» in our lives: while it is not composed of state of affairs, different ethical attitudes, different values, witness for different «connotations» of their respective frameworks. In this sense I believe that Donatelli is right, in claiming that for Wittgenstein Ethics is basically a relation entertained by the subject with his world, where both extremes of this relational chain are affected by what happens at the other end⁴⁶.

To wonder at the existence of the world is an experience that involves a mixture of contingency and absoluteness, since this feeling has to arise out of our consideration of something. Hence, it is important to understand that the ethical «tuning» of the world is not a «projection» on a set of state of affairs that was otherwise mute and silent, and standing there waiting for someone to evaluate and give meaning to it. Our world has a meaning or it is not: its absolute framework is conjoined to it and there can be one only if the other is as well; the «life of ideas» finds in the «real world» her reason-to-be⁴⁷. However, not all meanings are equal, as they are the result of the wellness of our relationship to the world: this is what is at stake here, to help us to re-shape our framework so to provide us with a better understanding of our world, one that is the blossoming of a pacific attitude toward ourselves and the others. In fact, as noted by David Lewy in his introduction to the *Lecture*, what demands for respect according to Wittgenstein is our «ethical drive», and not what he labels as «ethical chatters»⁴⁸. In other words, we must build our ethical endeavor on our push toward universality and communion, and we ought not to cling to the singular elements of our frameworks, believing them to be absolute in a way that would eventually block us from communicating with other subjectivities.

6. The Shape of Things to Come?

So far, I argued that the *Lecture on Ethics* is a work that, thanks to its features, can be rightfully ascribed to the genre of the «Spiritual Exercise». At the same time, I hope to have indirectly strengthened Pierre Hadot's entitlement to claim the whole of Wittgenstein's philosophy as pertaining to this kind of philosophical ac-

⁴⁶ P. Donatelli, *op. cit.*, p. 75

⁴⁷ A. I. Davidson, F. Worms (edited by), *op. cit.*, . 49.

⁴⁸ D. Lewy in L. Wittgenstein, *Lecture on ethics*, p. 76.

tivity. In this respect, I wish to add a few more reflections regarding the links between this work and Wittgenstein's two capital writings.

My opinion is that the *Lecture* theoretically lies somewhere in between the *Tractatus* and the *Investigations*. On one hand, I believe that Wittgenstein's account of Ethics, as well as his general understanding of its place inside our experience, it is perfectly consonant with that expressed in his first book. The metaphors employed in the beginning of the *Lecture* recalls the contents expressed in the *Tractatus*, especially those contained in 6.4 and 6.41⁴⁹, and the idea that what is valuable can be no part of the world because of its non-accidentality, is something present in both works. At the same time, the statement that the world of the happy one must be quite another from that of the unhappy one, it seems to make the case for the view that Ethics plays a part in shaping our world and thus that it pertains to the structure of it⁵⁰. In conclusion, the account of what the Mystical is, as well as the final warning to stay shut about what is unsayable, both resonate with the meaninglessness of the sentences expressing experiences of absolute values, and the final recognition that there is no science in Ethics⁵¹.

What about the latter part of Wittgenstein's work? What about the *Investigations* specifically? In this case the links are obviously more obscure and we can find them only by considering retrospectively Wittgenstein's production, and conceiving it in its unity rather than following a scheme that traces a distinction between a first and a second stage in it. In this respect, I believe that we can see at least two threads connecting these two moments. The first thread, is the one I discussed in the very beginning of this paper, namely the presence of a «Therapeutic Ideal». This is the will, on Wittgenstein's part, to express his own thoughts as a way to help others to clarify the way they see their world, and to help them to reconcile with any perceived illusion, such as the idea that absoluteness can be found in some particular state of affairs.

Secondly, we can establish a relation thanks to the fact that the *Lecture* is much less «absolutist» than the *Tractatus* and pays greater homage to how the language is actually used. I think that we can trace back to this attitude, the fact that Wittgenstein relies so much on metaphors and examples in order to make his point. At the same time, while the logic underlying language is one in the *Tractatus* and are many in the *Investigations*, in the *Lecture* we oscillate among these two views. Wittgenstein implies that there might be many ways to address Ethics, all of which he respects, and at the same time he hints at the fact that there may be other «experiences of ethical values» beside his own that might actually do the work. Moreover, I think that it would not be wrong to understand Wittgenstein's exemplifications as the attempt to initiate his audience to a certain (*ante-litteram*) Form-of-Life, by trying to give «a taste» of what that Form-of-Life is, like someone who tries to explain what music is by playing a few notes on an instrument⁵². Taking into consideration all these points (which I have only briefly examined and deserved a much more profound assessment) I believe that we can rightfully locate the *Lecture* as a midway point between two of the most important philosophical works of the 20th century.

⁴⁹ L. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*, cit., p. 183.

⁵⁰ Ivi, p. 185.

⁵¹ Ivi, pp. 187-189.

⁵² P. Donatelli, *op. cit.*, p. 158.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, I think that it emerges how the *Lecture on Ethics* deserves a much more thorough read than it is usually given. We should pay more attention to this piece of writing, as it is immensely deep and dense with implications: it does show in brief and in clear light, how much the end of Wittgenstein's philosophy was therapeutic and ethical in essence, as well as evidencing a «slice» of his post-*Tractatus* intellectual development. At the same time it gives more grounding to Hadot's understanding of the thought of its author, and because of this to his broader interpretation of philosophy whose main concept, that of the Philosophical Exercise, was elaborated starting from his reading of Wittgenstein.

Moreover, I believe that the visions expressed in this text regarding the nature of Ethics as well as the way we ought to relate to it are extremely interesting and prolific. They employ elements that are extremely uncommon to the way we normally consider moral philosophy, and may help us in dispelling some of the «usual, leading-to-nowhere questions» that are often asked and pursued in this context.