

# *Wittgenstein and Ethics* by Anne-Marie Søndergaard Christensen

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Anne-Marie Søndergaard Christensen, *Wittgenstein and Ethics* (Elements in the Philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024. 78 pp.

This Cambridge Element presents an accessible and stimulating introduction to Wittgenstein's remarks on ethics from the *Tractatus* on, ending with a brief coda on Wittgenstein's influence in ethics (itself a fine topic for another Element). In this review, I focus on Christensen's reading of the *Tractatus*, since Christensen's views there are potentially controversial and the views Christensen criticizes include ones I have defended.

Christensen describes her reading as distinct from both metaphysical and resolute readings in taking the parallel between ethics and logic as its starting point (p. 9), but given the prominence of that idea within many resolute readings and her sympathies for the basic commitments of resolute readings, one could think of it as a resolute reading. I will focus on four connected claims that form the heart of Christensen's reading: that Wittgenstein has a "strikingly untraditional conception of

ethics" (p. 18; cf. p. 5, p. 8); that when Wittgenstein writes that "there can be no ethical propositions" (*TLP* 6.42), he is not talking about propositions *of* ethics, but philosophical propositions *about* ethics (p. 19, p. 21); that for Wittgenstein ethics is a formal condition of having a world, concerning "the way the world [has] to be organized in order to be a world" (p. 25); and that Wittgenstein aims to enable us to overcome the temptation to think we can change the world "simply by wishing it different" (p. 31).

That first claim is clearly correct in some sense. But starting from that perspective obscures the relevance of what Wittgenstein says to ethics, which depends on a conception of ethics that is strikingly *traditional*. In the *Tractatus*, for instance, Wittgenstein's argument for thinking that there can be no ethical propositions depends solely on the claim that ethical value is not accidental, familiar from Plato's *Euthyphro*.

In the “Lecture on Ethics”, Wittgenstein draws a contrast between absolute and relative value that is Kantian through-and-through. It is thinking through that traditional conception that leads Wittgenstein to the conclusion that there can be no ethical propositions. Christensen takes Wittgenstein’s conception of ethics to be *un*traditional partly because it includes such a broad list of topics, including the meaning of life and god (p. 18). But these topics are not unrelated to the traditional conception: the ideas that ethical value is essential for life to be meaningful and that only god could provide adequate grounds for morality are relatively common, to judge by my students.

The second claim is that Wittgenstein does not reject as impossible everyday moral talk (which Christensen claims is “obviously meaningful” [pp. 20–21]), but only “attempts to state philosophical insights about ethics” (p. 19) or “*philosophical* enquiries into ethics” (p. 20), which Christensen describes narrowly as an investigation into the conditions that make value possible (see p. 19, p. 20). Christensen argues for this claim as follows: first, Wittgenstein explicitly refers to ethics (in the “Lecture on Ethics”) as “the enquiry into” what is valuable; second, Wittgenstein does not lay down criteria of meaningfulness for sentences, but relies on our everyday capacity to distinguish sense from nonsense, and ordinary moral sentences are undeniably meaningful from that perspective; third, Wittgenstein claims that the propositions of everyday language are in perfect logical

order as they stand (pp. 20–21). But these arguments are open to disagreement: it is, for instance, quite consistent with the latter claim to hold that what seem to be everyday moral propositions (including Christensen’s example [p. 20]) are either not ethical or not propositions. Moreover, it is the idea of ethical value itself, not philosophical statements about ethics, that Wittgenstein argues is problematic: it is the very idea of value that is not accidental (*TLP* 6.41), of an ethical law (*TLP* 6.422), or of a value that is not relative (LE, p. 41). In each case, the problem is not limited to philosophical statements about ethics. Wittgenstein’s arguments are arguments against any proposition invoking such concepts, including ordinary moral talk.

The third claim, that ethics is a formal condition of the world, is again clearly correct in some sense. But Christensen develops it in two, seemingly different ways. On the one hand, Christensen holds that ethics shows itself in the organization of the world as a whole for a subject (p. 29): to will anything (including by saying something) is “to see it as a valuable or meaningful object of will, something that is worth attending to, worth saying or doing” (p. 29), giving it a central place in the “organization of the world” (p. 29), and hence ethics is “*completely dependent on and is at stake in every single thing that a person actually says and does*” (p. 30). I agree (Dain 2018, 23–24). On the other hand, given her commitment to the meaningfulness of ordinary moral talk, Christensen also wants to say that ethics shows itself specifically in “talk

about what we find right or wrong, valuable or meaningful”, and in “the organization of these ways of talking” (p. 26). One may wonder if it can be both.

The final claim is that Wittgenstein’s philosophical therapy in relation to ethics consists in overcoming “the temptation to think that one can bring about change in the world simply by wishing it different” (p. 31). For Christensen, a criterion of adequacy for any reading of the *Tractatus* on ethics is that it not offer practical ethical guidance, or anything addressing “existential challenges, facing everyone, of how to transform oneself or live rightly” (p. 16), something she criticizes James Conant and Michael Kremer for doing. But again, though there is something clearly right about this, one may wonder here if Christensen’s commitment to the second claim above leads her interpret that criterion too narrowly, diluting the significance of Wittgenstein’s thought in this respect.

These aspects of Christensen’s reading seem to me potentially controversial, then. Nevertheless, Christen-

sen’s book represents a valuable contribution to the literature, and I have no doubt both that Christensen would have much to say in response to these criticisms and that many will want to take up her views and explore them further. Moreover, there is much else in the book that is spot on, especially concerning Wittgenstein’s later work. Overall, it provides a stimulating and important introduction to this aspect of Wittgenstein’s thought.

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### **References**

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