

How ethics as a science possible? A comparative study between Kant and Wittgenstein

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Abstract:

The German philosophers Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) and Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951) both are extremely powerful thinker. Their profound thoughts have crowned them as epoch making philosophers. Regarding ethics, Kant's recommendation is: not to take ethics as a science, because ethical judgments are not synthetic a-priori; moreover, these judgments are not based on pure reason. Again, ethical judgments are not meaningless as these are the matter of practical reason. Wittgenstein, on the other hand, also believes that ethical judgments are not propositions at all, because these are not capable to depict the picture of reality. From this it cannot be concluded that ethical judgments are meaningless. In fact, their suggestions are to give a wide opening for ethics in other field, instead of giving an opening in the field of science. Surprisingly, their times, observations, and methods are different. This paper is a comparative study between these two great German philosophers regarding ethics.

Key words: *ethics, science, comparative, study.*

At the outset let us begin with the title of the paper, *How ethics as a science possible? A comparative study between Kant and Wittgenstein*, because one may argues that the title of the paper is not perfectly alright as both of these philosophers denied the possibilities of ethics as a science on the basis of non-scientific character of ethical judgments. It is true that they both have denied the possibilities of ethics as a science. But they deny the scientific character of ethics not for the extinguishment of the flame of ethics forever, but for candler an ever effulgence flame of ethics by using the field other than field of science. Again, it is should be noted here that

- (i) Both of these philosophers do not want bring the sphere of ethics into the domain of epistemology or science, because epistemology or science deals directly with reality; that is why the status of the judgments which are concerned with reality can never be given the same status with those judgments which are concerned with morality.
- (ii) Both of these philosophers believe that the actual nature of reality can never be depicted by the so called metaphysicians as the traditional metaphysics is not science that is to say metaphysical judgments are not scientific judgments.

(iii) The non-scientific characters of ethical judgment do not imply the meaninglessness of those ethical judgments, both of them agree.

(iv) Both of them also agree with the view that the domain of ethics is different and the sphere of the ethics should be given a wider scope.

On the back ground of the discussion mentioned above the aim of this paper is to clarify

- i) What are the criteria to be a scientific judgment, following Kant?
- ii) Why ethical judgments are not scientific, according to Kant?
- iii) What makes a proposition scientific, according to Wittgenstein?
- iv) Why ethical propositions are not scientific, in view of Wittgenstein?
- v) How and why ethical propositions are important although these are not scientific at all, according to Kant?
- vi) How and why ethical propositions are not less important at all although these are not scientific at all, following Wittgenstein?

What are the criteria to be a scientific judgment following Kant?

It is a fact that Kant's contribution towards ethics was so insightful and logical; its relevance has been remained unbroken after more than two and a quarter centuries. Kant introduced his moral theory as an opposite view of Altruistic Hedonism where it is believed that universal or general happiness is the ultimate standard of our morals. But this ultimate standard will successfully be applied, if and only if the principle of "greatest happiness of the greatest number" is applied. The doctrine which is based on this principle "greatest happiness of the greatest number" is named as Utilitarianism. This doctrine is named as Utilitarianism, because in this theory it is believed that voluntary actions should be judged according to their usefulness or utility. Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) and John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) are the chief exponents of this view.

Kant, on the other hand, at first makes a difference between practical reason and pure reason, instead of giving emphasis on pleasure which is the prime criterion to judge whether a voluntary action is good or bad as mentioned by the hedonists. He advocates self-conquest. He says that it is the conscience, which imposes the moral law upon itself through practical reason. Moral laws are a priori. The rightness or wrongness of a particular action will be judged in accordance with moral law. He also says that universal law is the only moral law and an action will be regarded to have a moral worth, if and only if the maxim of this action at the same time be a universal law.

Now let us inter fare into the scientific nature of a judgement. To judge whether a judgment is scientific or not Kant's suggestions is to follow two criteria. One criterion is related to a judgment to be synthetic and the other criterion is related to a judgment to be a-priori. If a judgment is synthetic then it gives us new information and on the other hand, if it is a-priori then it must be necessary. So, novelty and necessity are the marks of a scientific judgment. By a synthetic judgment Kant understands in which the predicate concept lies outside the subject concept. The predicate lies outside the subject concept means the predicate concept is not identical any one of the logical constituents of the subject concept.

‘All bodies are heavy.’ for example, is a synthetic judgment; because the concept of ‘heaviness’ lies outside the concept of ‘body’ as the ‘body’ yields two simpler concepts—the concept of extendedness and the concept of substantiality; and the concept of ‘heaviness’ is not identical with anyone of these logical constituents of the subject concept. So, it is synthetic and the predicate concept gives us new information.

Either the predicate B belongs to the subject A as something contained (though covertly) in the concept A; or B lies outside the sphere of the concept A, though somehow connected with it. In the former case I call the judgment analytical, in the latter synthetical.ⁱ

On the other hand, a judgment will be regarded as a-priori if and only if it is strictly universal and necessary. The use of the quantifier, according to Kant, does not give the guaranty to a judgment to be universal. For example, ‘All swans are white.’ is not a universal judgment although the universal quantifier ‘all’ has been used here, whereas, the judgment $7+5=12$ is identical; although no quantifier has been used in this judgment.

In general, a judgment is treated as necessary if and only if the negation of which is self contradictory. ‘All bachelors are unmarried.’ is an example of a necessary judgment; because its denial is self-contradictory. The contradictory judgment of ‘All bachelors are unmarried.’ is ‘Some bachelors are not unmarried.’ that is to say ‘Some unmarried are not unmarried.’ which is no doubt self-contradictory. It is self contradictory as it is in the form $P . \sim P$. But according to Kant this self-contradictoriness is an example of logical necessity and Kant is not too much interested in this type of necessity, because for Kant’s interest lies on the a-priori necessity which is different from logical necessity.

According to him, synthetic judgments are treated as a-priori not for logical necessity, but for a-priori necessity. A judgment will be regarded to have a-priori necessity means the denial of which is counter intuitive that is to say which cannot be constructible in the actual world. For example: ‘No two straight lines enclose a space.’ is necessary, because the denial of this judgment is, ‘There are at least two straight lines which enclose a space.’ is counter intuitive. It is impossible to construct a space which is enclosed by two straight lines as it is known to us that we need at least three lines two enclose a minimum space. In this sense of a-priori synthetic judgments are known as a-priori. $7+5=12$ or ‘Every event has a cause.’ are the examples.

Why ethical propositions are not scientific according to Kant?

Let us apply these criteria of being a scientific judgment on the ethical judgment—‘Truth telling is good.’ Following Kant, it may be said that this judgment is in subject-predicated form. ‘Truth telling’ is the subject and ‘good’ is the predicate of this judgment. The point is this ‘Is it synthetic?’ According to Kant, in a synthetic judgment the relation between subject and predicate is established by the factual experience. It creates doubt whether the ethical judgments are synthetic in the same sense through which a factual judgment is synthetic, because here the predicate good is not a factual term.

In the development of ethics, it is observed that right from the age of Aristotle, Ethical Philosophers have tried to determine the nature of ethical judgments. In this process, a

concept of good i.e. value has been invariably contrasted with what is called the concept of fact. The discussion has given rise to a debate on the issue concerned with the relation between fact and value. The problem which has constituted the central issue here is:

.....whether fact and value are completely and irreducibly different, or whether one can be defined by or identified with the others.

As fact and value are different, ethical judgments cannot be absolutely similar to or identical with factual judgments. For example, the judgment 'The knife is good.' cannot be regarded as absolutely similar to or identical with the judgment 'Ram is good.' because the first one is a factual judgment, while the second one is an ethical judgment. In the first form of judgment, the term good has been used to describe an object knife, but in the second form of judgment, the term good has been used in the sense of morally commendable. The first form of judgment describes the factual or material quality of an object, and hence, it is as good as a factual statement like 'the knife sharp'. But the second judgment is an ethical judgment. The worth of an ethical judgment cannot be determined factually by assigning the judgmental value: truth or falsity. Therefore, the question that legitimately comes up to be addressed is: what will be the justification or rational basis of the moral value judgments?

As a matter of fact, moral philosophers belong to radically different two camps: one holding that moral value or good can be defined in terms of facts, that is to say, fact is the basis of moral value and the other camp holds that facts and value are so different that value can never be defined in terms of facts.

It is observed that ethical judgment, following Kant, cannot be regarded as synthetic in the same sense in which factual judgments are synthetic, because the controversy regarding the nature of ethical judgments has not been solved.

Now let us examine whether ethical judgments are a-priori in Kantian sense. According to Kant, a judgment is a-priori if and only if its denial is self-contradictory. The denial of the judgment—'Truth telling is good.' is 'Some truth telling are not good.' cannot be treated as counter intuitive, because we can easily construct that there are some cases where truth telling is not good.

So, ethical judgments are neither synthetic nor a-priori that is why these are not at all scientific in Kantian sense.

What makes a proposition scientific according to Wittgenstein?

Being one of the great epoch making philosopher in the history of western philosophy, Ludwig Wittgenstein was successful not only to introduce creative philosophical theories but also to build the new tracks through which a philosopher should think an innovative thinking. His contributions to philosophy was so highly fundamental that he managed to get and keep a lot of followers in his both early life and later life, although, it is true at the same time that the most of the philosophical ideas of his early life were rejected by himself by his later philosophical ideas. In fact, his styles of works are so notoriously difficult and esoteric that philosophers have been trying their best to give the highest form of interpretation of the works of this great philosopher, but still now, none of the interpretation can be treated as

satisfactory. Actually, his works are consisted of two parts—one is written and another is unwritten. The written part may be compared as the visible portion of a huge ice berg.

Wittgenstein's approaches, on ethics, would have been remain undiscovered unless and until he claimed in a letter to his publisher, Ludwig Ficker that *Tractatus Logico Philosophicus* (TLP)[1922] is an ethical one; because all most all the points discussed in this book belonged to the domain of philosophy of logic. Only a few lines in this book from 6.4 through 6.54 were used for ethics by Wittgenstein. In *Philosophical Investigation* (PI) Wittgenstein shows less interest on ethics. But in his *A Lecture on Ethics* (LE) he has delivered few lines which are all about the status of ethical judgments.

It will not be wrong to hold that the key factor of modern moral philosophy is the application of analytical method for justification of an ethical judgment. With the aid of this key factor modern moral philosophers make a turn on linguistic analysis of ethical judgments. This linguistic turn in moral philosophy is one of the most crucial movements in modern moral philosophy, because like general linguistic philosophers the moral philosophers then start thinking that all moral problems are rooted in misuse of language and such problem can easily be solved by discovering the technique of using language in a proper way. It has also been observed that the sole task of the then philosophers is to use language in such a way that it would become a deductive system as like as in Euclidian geometry or in Mathematical Science or in Logic or *Principia Mathematica* (1910) to express the reality. Wittgenstein, the famous philosopher has been marked as one of the powerful pioneers of this movement.

In TLP some portions of Wittgenstein views seems to be fore shadowed in Russell's view regarding the relation between language and reality. Wittgenstein, following Russell, believes that the ideal language of *Principia* depicts the structural features of the world and that these fall into two categories—facts and objects. As he says

The world is the totality of facts, not of things. (TLP1.1)

Fact cannot be named. (TLP3.144)

Objects can only be named and cannot be asserted. (TLP 3.221)

Here, Wittgenstein accepts Russell's view in order to search for the real nature of reality through language as Russell also suggests that name means the object it names; it has only meaning and no sense. Wittgenstein also repeats Russell's notion in the *Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy* (1919) that a name is a simple symbol that cannot be analyzed by the definition. As Wittgenstein says,

It is a primitive sign. (TLP3.26)

But Wittgenstein differs from Russell when he introduces his famous picture theory – the thesis that the way of language 'hooks up' with reality is through propositions that are pictures of facts.

The proposition is a picture of reality. (TLP4.01)

'The proposition is a picture of reality.' does not mean that the proposition is a picture of reality as like as a photograph is a picture of a person. Actually, Wittgenstein wants to mean the propositions are the logical pictures of reality. That is why he says,

At the first glance the proposition—say as it stands printed on paper—does not seem to be a picture of the reality of which it treats. But nor does the musical score appear at first sight to be a picture of a musical piece; nor does our phonetic spelling (letters) seem to be a picture of our spoken language. And yet these symbolisms prove to be pictures—even in the ordinary sense of the word—of what they represent. (TLP4.011)

The gramophone record, the musical thought, the score, the waves of sound, all stand to one another in that pictorial internal relation, which holds between language and the world. To all of them the logical structure is common. (TLP4.014)

Language, according to Wittgenstein is conceived as a kind of map which depicts the pictures of cities, roads, rivers, mountain etc. as the names in a proposition. At the same time, within the proposition, these names are related to each other. Similarly, the objects denoted by the names are related to one another—these ‘hang together’ in the world and their interconnection is mirrored by the names together in a proposition.

It should be mentioned here that according to Wittgenstein, proposition means the logical picture of reality. It has the truth value: true and false and these are also scientific. In this sense of the proposition, Wittgenstein claims, ‘...what can be said at all can be said clearly...’ So, propositions that is to say the scientific judgments belong to the domain of ‘...what can be said at all can be said clearly...’ which means these are the logical picture of reality.

Why ethical propositions are not scientific in view of Wittgenstein?

Following the discussion mentioned above let us peep into the fact whether the ethical judgments fall within the domain of ‘...what can be said at all can be said clearly...’ or not. The nature of ethical judgment seems to be the punching result of *Tractatus Logico Philosophicus* (TLP) and *Philosophical Investigation* (PI). From the per-view of PI, Wittgenstein suggests that there cannot be a fixed meaning of a term. In other words, it is impossible to define a term for giving a fixed meaning. That is why he believes that there is no fixed meaning of the term ‘ethics’. To understand the meaning of the term ethics it should be understood in reference with family resemblance instead of understanding the meaning of ethics through definition, because there are many synonymous terms of ethics. From this point, it follows that moral value terms such as good has no fixed meaning on the basis of its definition, from Wittgenstein’s points of view. The meaning of the term good should be understood with reference to family resemblance as there are lots of synonymous words of the term good. In this connection he says,

I will put before you, you will, I hope, be able to see the characteristic features they all have in common and these are the characteristic features of Ethics.ⁱⁱ

Following TLP it may be argued for Wittgenstein that value lies outside the world which means ethical judgments are not scientific judgments i.e. propositions at all. A proposition is such kind of judgment which can be treated as true or false. If a proposition depicts the fact then it is true, otherwise, it is false. In order to depict the picture of reality, according to Wittgenstein, a proposition bound to be lied inside the world. Whereas value, if it is called as value, it must lies outside the world.

So too it is impossible for there to be propositions of ethics. Propositions can express nothing that is higher. [6.42 TLP]

Same view has been shared by Wittgenstein in his article—*A Lecture on Ethics*. But in this article he makes a distinction between two kinds of value: relative value and absolute value. A relative value judgment can be understood in terms of factual judgments i.e. in terms of propositions. For example: ‘The knife is good.’ is a relative value judgment. This judgment can be justified in case the knife fulfils certain predetermined criteria i.e. it has a sharp blade, it is easy to handle etc. to be a good knife and these criteria are verifiable through the experience. On the other hand, no absolute value judgement can ever be altered into a factual statement, because these absolute judgments lie outside the world, in other words, these value judgments are not propositions at all. In this regard, Wittgenstein says,

Now what I wish to contend is that, although all judgments of relative value can be shown to be mere statement of facts, no statement of fact can ever be, or imply, a judgment of absolute value.ⁱⁱⁱ

One may argue by saying that it is true that ethical judgments do not represent the brutal fact, but these judgments depict the psychological fact that is why these judgments are scientific. In this case, Wittgenstein also denies the psycho-factual origin of ethics on the basis that the state of mind is also a fact i.e. a state of affairs. A state of affairs is corresponded by a proposition. But no ethical judgment can ever be regarded as proposition as there is no state of affairs corresponds to an ethical judgment. In his address, *A Lecture on Ethics* he gives an example of a murder and argues that the physical description and psychological description of a murder never implies the judgment ‘Murder is wrong.’ as a proposition, because wrongness lies outside the world. ‘Murder is wrong.’ is no doubt an ethical judgment, but it can never be treated as scientific judgment as it is not a proposition. In TLP he says,

It is impossible to speak about the will in so far as it is the subject of ethical attributes. And the will as a phenomenon is of interest only to psychology. [6.423 TLP]

It should not be right to assume that his approaches regarding the justification of ethical judgments seems to be the parallel to the view of emotivists, for whom ethical judgments express emotions only. When it is said that ‘Pain is evil.’ what sort of empirical observation would verify the sentence? What is expressed here is that after undergoing pain that increases blood pressure, pulse rate, heart-beat etc. the pain is disliked. But that does not entail ‘Pain is evil’. In general then, it may seem that ethical judgments cannot be verified or falsified empirically. That is why Wittgenstein denies the presence of any state of affair in the physical or psychological or even in emotional world corresponding to an ethical judgment. He remarks,

And similarly the absolute good, if it is a describable state of affairs, would be one which everybody, independent of his tastes and inclinations, would necessarily bring about or feel guilty for not bringing about. And I want to say that such a state of affairs is a chimera. No state of affairs has, in itself, what I would like to call the coercive power of an absolute judge.^{iv}

How and why ethical propositions are important although these are not scientific at all according to Kant?

It has been mentioned earlier that Kant's ethical theory is opposed to the view of Utilitarianism. The Utilitarian philosophers have been trying to provide a universal rule which is based on experience to judge the action of human beings. This rule is known as the utilitarian principle—'Greatest happiness for the greatest numbers.' Any action of human being can be examined through these rules in order to judge whether it is morally good or not. But Kant suggests that the reason or the rational faculty should be the basis of morality instead of the faculty of sensibility, because the rational faculty is supreme in man. He advocates the cultivation of pure practical reason by suppressing the feelings, emotions and other sensibilities as morality is the matter of pure practical reason. In order to find out the base of the metaphysics of morals he says,

Now intending someday to provide a metaphysics of morals, I issue this groundwork in advance. There is, to be sure, really no other foundation for it than the critique of a pure practical reason, just as for metaphysics there is the already provided critique of pure speculative reason.^v

This part '...just as for metaphysics there is the already provided critique of pure speculative reason.' of the above mentioned quotation is very significant here. It is significant, because here Kant announces that the domain of ethical judgments do not fall within the domain of pure speculative reason. Only the scientific judgments are the subject matter of pure reason. The non-scientific character of ethical judgments does not imply that these are meaningless. Actually, the domain of ethical judgments, for Kant falls within the domain of pure practical reason. Thus, it has been observed that Kant makes room free for ethical judgments instead of making these judgments as irrelevant; it is also true at the same time that Kant does not want to give any cognitive status of ethical judgment.

He also regards conscience as the practical reason. Conscience imposes the moral law itself, Moral law is a-priori that is to say prior to any kind of sense experience and not empirical. An action can be regarded as morally good or not through the maxim which is deduced from the a-priori Moral Law. Virtue is the supreme good which consists in good will. Good will is a rational will, because this will is self imposed following the Moral Law. The Moral Law intuitively apprehended by conscience or practical reason is a Categorical Imperative or an unconditional command. The Moral Law is not a general statement left to the whims of the individuals to be obeyed or disobeyed. It is universal and by practical reason to be obeyed. It is a Categorical Imperative that is why it is unconditional and it ought to be obeyed for its own sake without any consequences. He has also recommended that good will is the only good. According to him,

There is nothing it is possible to think of anywhere in the world, or indeed anything at all outside it, that can be held to be good without limitation, excepting only a good will.^{vi}

How and why ethical propositions are not less important at all although these are not scientific at all following Wittgenstein?

Wittgenstein also says that ethical judgment can never be regarded as proposition, because ethical judgment is not capable to depict the fact. As ethical judgments are not propositions, these are not the possession of having truth value and the cognitive value, because these are neither verifiable nor falsifiable. But these are not the implication that ethical judgements are absolutely meaningless. To explain, let us begin with two opposite kinds of examples:

Example-I : “There is coconut in Iceland.” (CI). This statement is meaningful as we can easily imagine someone going to Iceland, checking every grocery store and kitchen cupboard, and eventually discovering a coconut. In this case, the person’s observations of the coconut in Iceland would verify CI. Similarly, a team of observers may determine after long hard work that there are no coconuts in Iceland. In this case, their observations would falsify CI. Since, such observations are in principle possible, CI is meaningful according to the verification principle. The CI is judged to express something that is either true or false.

Example-II : “Tootie frootie, a rootie.” (TFR). TFR is not meaningful, because it is obvious that there cannot be any empirical observation by which TFR can be verified or falsified.

Now, let us apply this verification principle of meaningfulness to an ethical judgment of the following kind.

Let us take, for example, a statement of ordinary usage: “Murder is bad.” (MB). It is impossible for us to show any state of affair (corresponding evidence) which can establish MB. We can at best give a description of place and time of and the agent responsible for the murder that has taken place. Moreover, we may feel about the pain or rage caused by the murderer. But such descriptions do not entail MB. So, according to Wittgenstein, ethical statements are meaningless. He said,

Ethics, if it is anything, is supernatural and our words will only express facts; as a teacup will only hold a teacup full of water and if I were to pour out a gallon over it . . . ^{vii}

Ethics so far as it springs from the desire to say something about the ultimate meaning of life, the absolute good, the absolute valuable, can be no science. What it says does not add to our knowledge in any sense. ^{viii}

Wittgenstein concludes that ethics is transcendental. ‘It is clear that ethics cannot be expressed. Ethics is transcendental. (Ethics and aesthetics’ are one.)’ [6.421 TLP] The term transcendental is very much significant. In order to clarify the meaning of transcendental let us compare it with the notion of Kant. In *Critique of Pure Reason* Kant has used the term transcendental in order to establish scientific meta-physics. According to him, transcendental meta-physics is scientific meta-physics which consists of a-priori forms of knowledge. In other words, it may be said that which lies before experience are transcendental and these are the subject matter of scientific meta-physics. Whereas, that which lies beyond experience are transcendent and are the subject matter of traditional meta-physics.

Wittgenstein, on the other hand, uses the term transcendental not to mean that which lies before or beyond experience, but to signify that which lies beyond language i.e. beyond expression. Russell in his introductory remark of TLP has tried to mean transcendental as mystical. Thus he rightly points out by saying that

...the whole subject of ethics, for example, is placed by Mr. Wittgenstein in the mystical, inexpressible region. Nevertheless he is capable of conveying his ethical opinions. His defence would be that what he calls the mystical can be shown, although it cannot be said.^{ix}

Wittgenstein indicates another meaning of the term transcendental in *A Lecture on Ethics*. In this sense transcendental means nonsensical. It is not the case that ethical judgements are meaningless owing to non-availability of a suitable substitute (correct statement) yet, but for the reason that it is essentially so. In Wittgenstein's own words,

I see now that these nonsensical expressions were not nonsensical because I had not yet found the correct expressions, but that their nonsensicality was their very essence. For all I wanted to do with them was just to go beyond the world and that is to say beyond significant language. My whole tendency and, I believe the tendency of all men who ever tried to write or talk Ethics or Religion was to run against the boundaries of language. This running against the walls of our cage is perfectly, absolutely hopeless. Ethics so far as it springs from the desire to say something about the ultimate meaning of life, the absolute good, the absolute valuable, can be no science. What it says does not add to our knowledge in any sense. 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.^x

Actually, Wittgenstein has tried to say that the domain of ethical judgments do not fall within the domain of '...what can be said at all can be said clearly.' i.e. in the domain of science. The domain of ethical judgments lies outside the world which signifies the zone of nonsensical or supernatural. According to Wittgenstein, it is true that ethical judgments are cognitively meaningless, but the sphere of the ethical judgments is different and these are nonsensical and again, their nonsensicality is their essence so these ethical judgments are more powerful than the scientific one.

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^{viii} *Ibid. P-6*

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