The Ethical and the Religious

In the last sentences of *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Ludwig Wittgenstein expresses his view on the Higher, i.e. the ethical and the religious. For the Higher, Wittgenstein maintains that there can be no propositions about ethics and about religion, but the Higher does exist outside the world, and shows itself during a human life. From this standpoint, Wittgenstein concludes the *Tractatus* with a final message on philosophical studies, “Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent” (7 of the *Tractatus*).

The starting point of Wittgenstein’s arguments about the ethical is his view of the world. According to Wittgenstein, the world consists of facts, and a fact is a complex of objects arranged in a definite way. In this sense, facts in the world are *accidental* and *contingent*. For objects that constituent a fact may be combined in many ways, and a fact are dependent upon the ways in which the constituent parts are combined. Ethical propositions, on the other hand, are judgments of *absolute* values and the *utmost* important. The absoluteness of ethics is reflected by that one *must* absolutely abide by ethical values, noncontingent upon facts in the world. Therefore, ethical propositions cannot be concerned with facts and hence with the world. In other words, there is no ethics *in the world* because there is no absoluteness in the world. Hence, the values of ethics come from outside the world, and “ethics is transcendental” (6.421 of the *Tractatus*). However, ethics does exist. For it shows itself in a human life; one may feel what is the good and what is the evil through events in the life.

Ethical propositions in everyday life typically have some form of oughtness. For instance, one may say that “Thou shalt not kill innocent people.” When analyzing propositions of this form, the oughtness must be analyzed and decomposed into things in the world, because propositions are in a projective relation to the world. However, everything in the world is *accidental* and *contingent* as argued above, so any ethical proposition of this form of oughtness cannot stand a representative connection with the world. For example, one may analyze the above proposition as “If one kills an innocent person, then he or she will be punished,” but any punishment one can imagine, e.g. being put into prison, is contingent and does not capture the absoluteness of ethics; that is, one may or may not regard an action or event as a punishment to him or to her. Wittgenstein argues in 6.422 of the *Tractatus*, that “the punishment must be *unacceptable*,” and hence absolute. It follows, therefore, that there can be no ethical propositions.

Wittgenstein also addresses two religious questions of philosophy in the *Tractatus*, namely, God and afterlife. Wittgenstein’s starting point is again the isomorphic relation between propositions and facts, which constitute the world. According to Wittgenstein, God is not in the world; for “God does not reveal himself in the world” (6.432 of the *Tractatus*). Hence, the divine reality is not a fact in the world. Therefore, God and divinity cannot be reflected in propositions, and hence propositions cannot deal with the divine reality.

Whilst God cannot be expressed by sentences, Wittgenstein argues that God is because God *shows* himself in the world. Wittgenstein says, in 6.44 of the *Tractatus*, that “Not *how* the world is, is the mystical, but *that* it is.” The explanation of the world must not be in the world. The world, according to Wittgenstein’s theory, is the totality of facts, and hence the explanation of facts must not be a fact. For if it were, then there would be an infinite, non-terminating chain of explanations of facts. Therefore, the explanation of the world must lie outside the world, which hence shows that there must be God, i.e. the Higher. Moreover, according to Wittgenstein, the world is *limited* and *finite*, because facts which constitute the world are determined by the internal structures of objects. Hence, there is a boundary of possible states of affairs, i.e. the logical space, beyond which is the impossible. The human feeling that the world subsists as a *limited*, *finite* totality, then, implies that there is some *absolute*, *necessary* dependence of the infinite, and therefore that God is.

For afterlife, Wittgenstein argues that the question of afterlife is *not* whether there is a continuation of life after death. The question of afterlife, according to Wittgenstein, is really whether the riddle of life, the mystical, can be clarified and solved after the spatial-temporal existence. The solution of the riddle of life, e.g. the ethico-religious matters, must lie *outside* the space and time, and hence not in the world. Even if the life is temporally immortal, the eternal soul will still be in the time. Hence, there cannot be the clarification and the solution of the riddle of life even if the human soul eternally survives after death.