

EARLY WITTGENSTEIN ON DEATH

The purpose of the present paper is to explore some very difficult issues pertaining to Wittgenstein's discussion of Death and its relation to the "I" in the Tractatus and the Notebooks. The discussion will bring out some inherent inconsistencies and thereby reveal the inner tension between the dominant "positivism" of the majority of the Tractatus and the implicit "transcendental Idealism" implicit in its "mystical" later part.

The fundamental difficulty in Wittgenstein's understanding of death is clearly expressed in the following statement from the Tractatus:

6·4311 Death is not an event in life; we do not live to experience death.

This statement leads to a paradox. If we do not live to experience death, two logical possibilities are open:

- A. I never die. I am immortal.
- B. I die, without living my death.

Possibility A is ruled out, though, by the following rejection of its ontological implications.

6·4312 Not only is there no guarantee of the temporal immortality of the human soul, there is to say of its eternal survival after death, but in any case, this assumption completely fails to accomplish the purpose for which it has always been intended. Or is some riddle solved by my surviving for ever? Is not this eternal life itself so much of a riddle as our present life? The solution of the riddle of life in space and time lies outside space and time. (It is certainly not the solution of any problems of natural science that is required).

There is much more to this Wittgensteinian pronouncement than a sheer rejection of immortality. However, taking it as implying at least that much, we are left with possibility B. Possibility B, though, is peculiar. If we do not live to experience death then we surely cease to live before death, namely, we die before we die. But then, do we live to experience this second death? And so on. Wittgenstein's own apparent solution to this paradox is as follows :

6·431 So too at death the world does not alter, but comes to an end.

Clearly the use of the phrase "the world" here can only be understood by reference to the immediately preceding sentence:

6·43 . . . The world of the happy man is a different one from that of the unhappy man.

In other words, the world here is relativized to a personal point of view. This relativization is more clearly expressed in the *Note books* where Wittgenstein states:

(p. 84e) I am my world.

And yet, the personalized use of *the world* cannot be fully detached from the seemingly impersonal use of *the world* in the opening statements of the *Tractatus*:

I. The world is all that is the case.

I·I. The world is the totality of facts, not of things.

But if the world is the totality of facts, my world is the totality of facts as I view them. Thus, my death is not a fact—I do not live to experience this fact, but rather the boundary for the existence of my world. The world "comes to an end" and the "end of the world" cannot of course take place within the world: there is no world to sustain the "end of the world".

However, this concept of a personal world does lead to a concept of a transcendental ego, of the subject. Wittgenstein's undecidedness about this concept is very significant with regard to his thoughts about death.

(Notebooks 79 e) "Good and evil only enter through the subject. And the subject is not part of the world, but a boundary of the world. As the subject is not part of the world but a presupposition of its existence, so good and evil are predicates of the subject, not properties in the world".

Thus, the subject somehow both exists, and does not exist. The difficulty with regard to death is reflected, or perhaps founded in the difficulty concerning the ontological status of the subject. The following paragraph, again from the Notebooks, may make the point even clearer:

(p. 80 e) "Isn't the thinking subject in the last resort mere superstition ?

Where in the world is a metaphysical subject to be found ? You say that it just as it is for the eye and the visual field. But you do not actually see the eye.

The thinking subject is surely mere illusion. But the willing subject exists.

If the will did not exist, neither would there be that centre of the world which we call the I, and which is the bearer of ethics.

What is good and evil is essentially the I, not the world.

The I, the I is what is deeply mysterious.

The I is not an object.

I objectively confront every object. But not the I.

So there, really is a way in which there can and must be mention of the I in a non-psychological sense in philosophy”.

Clearly, these passages are not articulated doctrine, but an expression of a profound, perhaps almost Socratic, search. Wittgenstein first asserts the “I” and then denies “him” as nonsense, and then reinstates “him”. His synthesis is perhaps expressed in the following (p. 82 e) “The philosophical ‘I’ is not the human being, not the human body or the human soul with the psychological properties, but the metaphysical subject, the boundary (not a part) of the world.” And again “It is true that the knowing subject is not in the world, that there is no knowing subject.” (p. 86 e)

Thus, one can understand Wittgenstein as suggesting the following doctrine. The subject is not, since it is not “in the world”. Its existence is not a fact—hence the “end” of its existence is not a fact. Rather, it is a boundary of the world, a presupposition of the world’s existence. When it ceases to be, the world ceases to be. . . (p. 73) “As in death, too, the world does not change but stops existing.”

However, this view of death is fundamentally paradoxical when one considers what Wittgenstein has to say about the mystical vision of the world and we are back to the *Tractatus*:

6.45 To view the world sub specie aeterni is to view it as a whole, a limited whole.

Feeling the world as a limited whole—“it is this that is mystical.”

Thus, it is possible to "view the world as a whole"—though, of course the experience is mystical hence, by the famous 6·522, it is ineffable.

6·522 "There are, indeed, things that cannot be put into words. They may themselves manifest. They are what is mystical".

But if one "views the world as a whole" how can one die? Clearly, when I view the world as a whole, I view it in the sense of proposition (I) and (I.I), as the totality of facts. I constitute the world as my world by viewing it from my personal point of view, to be sure. And yet, one of the sure facts of this world viewed as a whole is the disintegration of my body, as a physical event. But if I can view that fact in the whole, I can also experience it. If I can do that, then I survive death.

Thus, one is returned to the apparent denial of 6·43-12 of immortality with a renewed sense. It relates to an hitherto unquoted part of 6·43-II.

"If we take eternity to mean not infinite temporal duration but timelessness, then eternal life belongs to those who live in the present. Our life has no end just the way in which our visual field has no limit".

In other words, Wittgenstein's views of death do not imply mortality of the transcendental ego. Rather, they indicate that the concept of the transcendental ego, as it does not refer to any object in the world, does not refer to anything which can be found within the space-time continuum. Rather, it does refer to a foundation for the existence of this continuum (exactly like Kant's view of space and time as fundamental ideal forms of consciousness). When one fulfils the "purpose of existence", when one is happy, one transcends time and becomes eternal, and thus immortal. However, his immortality is not a quality he possesses in the world. Rather, it is a quality which he possesses by his capacity to transcend the world and it constitutes his world as different from that of the unhappy man. I quote, again, from the notebooks :

(p. 73 e) "And in this sense Dostoievski is right when he says that the man who is happy is fulfilling the purpose of existence... The solution of the problem of life is to be seen in the disappearance of this problem.

But is it possible for one to live that life stops being problematic ? That one is living in eternity and not in time ?..(75e) For a life in the present there is no death. Death is not an event in life. It is not a fact of the world.

If by eternity is understood not infinite temporal duration but non-temporality, then it can be said that a man lives eternally if he lives in the present."

Thus, Wittgenstein's views of death, and of the self, imply a kind of a very fundamental metaphysics which is completely different from the seeming positivism of the *Tractatus*. The world consists of all the facts, all that is the case. But the world is constituted by an I, who is not in it, who can not come to die in the world, as it is fundamentally non-temporal. As such it is, of course, eternal. However, it is eternal, then it is in a continuous present of constituting the world, being its transcendental presupposition. If so, then the world cannot come into an end, because the transcendental subject is eternal. In short, one can see here an implicit but profound contradiction. Wittgenstein does not deny death, but he denies it as a fact. Death does not occur in my world, or, to be exact, my death does not and cannot occur in my world. Rather, it is the "end of the world." However, if this is so, then I, as the constitutive ground of the world and not a part of it, do exist in time, because the concept of "end" does presuppose time, as it presupposes a change—a change, to be sure, not in the world but in transcendental existence beyond the world (shall we say noumenal ?). However, the mode of existence of the transcendental 'I' is outside space and time. By "living in the present" one becomes eternal. As such, he is timeless, and so can't die.

Moreover, Wittgenstein allows me the ability "to view the world as a limited whole." This world contains all the facts, though from my point of view. One of these facts is that of the death of my body. If I can live that fact—and I must be able to if I can view it, then there is no other ground to assume that I can die. In short, how could a fact in the world—the disintegration of a certain organism, be at one and the same time the very end of that world ? How could the transcendental subject as existential presupposition of the world be destroyed by a mere fact of disintegration of a body which is merely one object in that world ? I will

not endeavour any positive answer to this vexed question, as I have not attempted any positive resolutions to the other difficulties raised in the paper. However, one point can be made out rather clearly: While Wittgenstein expressly forbid (7) discussion of subjects "with regard to which one must be silent", like the one dealt with here, Wittgenstein does manage to discuss quite a lot, and implicit in his various pronouncement is an Idealistic Metaphysics much at variance with the kind of Logical Positivism historically associated with his name.

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