

Varieties of Objectivity: Reply to De Mesel

I

In his thoughtful and carefully argued response to my paper, Benjamin De Mesel aims to establish three points.¹ The first is that my arguments in favour of truth, facts, reality and correspondence invite a similar argument in favour of objectivity in ethical discourse. In brief, my argument was that claims to ethical truth should be accepted, and were accepted by Wittgenstein, while claims to objectivity should be rejected, and were rejected by Wittgenstein, where they could be used to support a realist view. As I understand it, a realist view requires *both* substantial truth and objectivity in ethics, so this amounts to a rejection of such realist views.

Second, De Mesel believes that I employ an overly narrow, and so misleading, conception of objectivity. According to him, this view is distorted by the very Platonist picture that I reject in my discussions of »truth«, »fact«, »reality« and »correspondence«. As a result, De Mesel thinks that there is room for a view that recognises and accepts objectivity in ethics, but that does not involve such misconceptions. If this is so, then my claims that Wittgenstein rejects substantial claims to objectivity in ethics, and that this amounts to a rejection of realist views, begin to look doubtful. In particular, they seem to go too far, and further than is warranted on the basis of evidence we have.

Third, De Mesel believes that I misinterpret the passage that I cite in favour of my reading, and suggests a different way of reading it that could lend support to such a realist view. On this reading, Wittgenstein does not reject the claim to either truth or objectivity in ethics. Rather, he is concerned to reject a particular misinterpretation, which is the one that informs both the Platonist picture and my alternative view.

I will not be able to do justice to the many points raised by De Mesel. I will concentrate on what I take to be his main line of objection, and I will try to explain why I still think that my reading of the passages in question is correct. Of course, the evidence we have is not conclusive. But this observation cuts both ways. I think that there is no convincing textual support for the reading that De Mesel thinks of as a genuine alternative. In fact, I shall claim that one natural reading of his position tends to run into difficulties, some of which are very similar to those of a

¹ I refer to De Mesel (2015). This was a reply to Brandhorst (2015), to which I refer when I discuss my interpretation of Wittgenstein.

Platonist view. However that may be, in the light of what Wittgenstein says, both here and in related contexts, I maintain that he does not accept the claim to a substantial form of objectivity in ethics.

Of course, what a substantial form of objectivity in ethics is will have to be made more precise, and I will try to say something more about this in what follows. In brief, I do not wish to deny that words like »objective« and its cognates have a wide range of uses, and that in ethics and elsewhere, many of these uses are perfectly innocuous. That is a good Wittgensteinian point, and one that I fear I did not make clear enough in my original discussion. So I am grateful for the opportunity to clarify this element of my position, and I think that here, I am in agreement with De Mesel.

What I denied, and still deny, is that Wittgenstein embraced the more substantial kind of objectivity in ethics that a realist requires. I also suspect that some of the uses that De Mesel thinks of as deflationary and innocuous are in fact of that more demanding kind. The basic point here is that Wittgenstein denies that there is room for the question which one of two or more ethical outlooks, or indeed ethical judgments within given ethical outlooks, is right. To say of one of them that it is right is effectively to endorse it. While the latter point is not conclusive, the gist of what Wittgenstein says rules out a realist interpretation of his ethical view. Importantly, it does so independently of a critique of stronger platonist commitments.

II

I take an indirect route towards the problem. What view of ethical truths or ethical facts emerges in the *Tractatus*? As De Mesel points out, within the *Tractarian* framework, it makes no sense to speak of ethical truths, or ethical facts, or correspondence of ethical language with an ethical reality of any kind. Equally, it makes no sense to say that ethics is »objective«. If anything, ethics is »absolute« or »transcendental«, but that also cannot be said. Nothing ethical can be described or pictured. It is shown. It is not »in the world«, but it is not »in the subject« either, where »the subject« would be understood in physical or psychological terms; for that subject is a part of the world. So as De Mesel rightly points out, within the framework of the *Tractatus*, it makes no sense to say that ethics is »subjective« either. Any account of the ethical will be discredited as an attempt to say what cannot be said. To say of ethics *either* that it is »objective« *or* that it is »subjective« would be misleading in relation to the way of looking at it that emerges.

When I said that in the later as well as in the earlier work, ethics appears to be something subjective, I did not mean to deny that. First, I tried to say what from the point of view of the *Tractatus* cannot be said. Second, I tried to say what this view might amount to once we leave its peculiar conception of sense and nonsense behind. And it is striking that in the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein links the ethical with the subjective, albeit in a tentative and puzzling way – all the while insisting that none of this can be said. This comes out clearly in a passage from the *Notebooks*: »Good and evil only enter through the subject. And the subject is not part of the world, but a boundary of the world«.² In this sense, then, the ethical is »transcendental«.³ Accordingly, »the world in itself is neither good nor evil«.⁴ As Wittgenstein conceives of them, »good« and »evil« are »predicates of the subject«, not »properties of the world«.⁵ So there is clearly a sense in which the *Tractatus* portrays the ethical as subjective.

At the same time, it is certainly true that Wittgenstein does not embrace a traditional form of objectivist ethics in the *Tractatus*, and it is equally true that he does not embrace a traditional form of subjectivist ethics instead. Looking back at the *Tractatus* from what I take to be his later view, the way in which the ethical is linked to a subjective point of view would seem to be one of the salient features of the earlier account – a truth that had been touched upon, but that had been distorted and misleadingly expressed in the book. And seen from that later point of view, the reasons why this truth had been distorted and misleadingly expressed were essentially tied to the framework and vision of the *Tractatus* – the very framework and vision that had to be transcended to see the world aright.

But the interest of the passage in the present context lies elsewhere. A little thought experiment can show that the account of meaningful language that is found in the *Tractatus* does not *by itself* rule out the possibility of a realist view of ethics. After all, meaningful language is said to picture the facts, and a picture is a model of reality.⁶ So if there were ethical facts to be pictured, there could be meaningful ethical language to picture these facts. It would be a model of reality, just like model cars and dolls in a court of law.⁷ Reality would have some ethical dimension or other, with which pictures of reality would have to be compared to tell whether a given picture of

² Wittgenstein (1979: 79) (2.8.16); cf. Wittgenstein (1961: 5.632).

³ Wittgenstein (1961: 6.421).

⁴ Wittgenstein (1979: 79) (2.8.16).

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Cf. Wittgenstein (1961: 2.12, 4.01).

⁷ Cf. Wittgenstein (1979: 7) (29.9.14), Malcolm (2001), 8.

it is true or false.⁸ And given that this ethical reality could be as it is quite independently of language and of our subjective thoughts and attitudes, it could be objective in the very sense that is required by realist views of ethics as I understand them.⁹

At the same time, it would be a *further* question whether or not this view should be counted as a form of Platonism. Of course, that cannot be decided unless we are told something more, both about the reality that is supposed to be pictured, and about what the Platonist label entails. But it is clear that for all that has been said so far, there is room for a view that would hold that there are ethical facts, and that these facts are part of the fabric of reality just like natural facts. On such a view, there could be ethical truth, and that truth could be objective, given that ethical language pictures the ethical facts as they objectively are.

Moreover, these facts could be thought of as real, or objective, in a number of different ways. They would certainly not have to be thought of as abstract entities or ideal objects, mysterious existences in a mysterious shadowy realm. Again, they would not have to be knowable by intuition, or some other analogue to sense perception, which would render our relation to them more mysterious still. Realism is the view that with respect to a domain of discourse, there is truth, and that this truth is objective in the sense that it is independent of our thoughts about and attitudes towards that truth. So there is no doubt that there could be a realist position of this kind that is not Platonist.

Now there is equally no doubt that Wittgenstein did not embrace such a view at any time. I will not try to speculate about the reasons here. At any rate, it seems to be quite clear that at the time of drafting the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein had a particular view of the world and the contingency of its arrangement. As unclear as that view is in detail, it appears to be informed by a certain conception of science. But the central obstacle to the inclusion of ethics is the idea that everything that is the case is »accidental«.¹⁰ By contrast, Wittgenstein seems to have seen the ethical as marked by necessity, indeed categoricity. This side of his view is more prominent in the »Lecture on Ethics«; but it also seems to inform the conception of ethics as something »higher« in relation to »the world« that is found in the *Notebooks* and in the *Tractatus*.

⁸ Cf. Wittgenstein (1961: 2.223).

⁹ I take this to be a standard view; cf. Shafer-Landau (2003), Crary (2007), Enoch (2011) and Scanlon (2014) as examples.

¹⁰ Wittgenstein (1961: 6.41).

I maintain that this view of the ethical collapsed. But I also maintain that Wittgenstein never embraced a realist view of the ethical that would replace it – Platonist or otherwise. In fact, he did much to discourage that view, and a significant part of that discouragement is found in his elucidations of »true« and »correspondence to reality«.

III

Unsurprisingly, Wittgenstein does not use the word »objectivity« in this connection, except in a brief allusion to Plato.¹¹ There, »objectivity« is used to mark a contrast with »relativity«. Plato appears as a representative of a particular thought, often found in the background of ethical theory: »He thought that relativity must be avoided at all costs, since it would destroy the *imperative* in morality.«¹² The question here is where Wittgenstein locates the misconception. It could be that Plato gave a wrong account of *objectivity*, and that objectivity, once seen in a different light, becomes both less mysterious and more effective against the threat of relativity. If so, the point that matters most is how we should understand the notion of objectivity in question. But it could also be that relativity is not a threat, and that the search for objectivity that saves us from that threat is based on an illusion. At some basic level, relativity in ethics might be inescapable, and a form of objectivity that would counter it effectively might simply not exist. If so, the point that matters most is to come to realise that we can live without such objectivity – and have in fact done so all along – without losing our sense of ourselves and of what ethically matters.

There is a truth in both of these responses. But while De Mesel seems to me to be inclined towards the first rather than the second, I think the second is the one that comes closer to the truth. Moreover, I believe that it comes closer to the thought that Wittgenstein struggled to express. It is the natural conclusion of the comments that he made to Rhees, and it is the view that fits best with the other evidence we have.

There is a very general objection to this whole approach to Wittgenstein. It is to insist that Wittgenstein does not advance theses, does not endorse or reject anything that could be thought of as controversial, never denies any claims that other philosophers make. That this cannot be correct as it stands is evident, among other things, from the fact that philosophers have made widely differing claims about what philosophy is, and what it can and should do, and that many of these

¹¹ Rhees (1965: 23).

¹² Ibid.

claims are clearly not compatible with a Wittgensteinian conception of philosophy, however broadly conceived. Why should it be any different when it comes to other claims that philosophers make? There is no good reason to think that, as a matter of principle, Wittgenstein never engaged (or at least tried to never engage) in substantial philosophical argument and controversy. Moreover, it is evident that very often, he does precisely that, and does it with a particular purpose in mind.

Now this most radical line of objection is clearly not the one taken by De Mesel. He agrees that Wittgenstein warns us against a Platonist misconception of the reality, or objectivity, that is supposed to have and to keep a firm place in our understanding of mathematical and ethical language. So the objection is not that I claim that Wittgenstein rules something out that has the appearance of a philosophical thesis. Rather, it is that he does not rule out what I say he rules out. So we must now take a closer look at what is, and what is not, being ruled out when I say that Wittgenstein rules out a realist view of ethics. This brings us back to the question of what »objectivity« could or should mean.

IV

Let me say straight away that I agree with De Mesel that there are uses of »objective« that are neither problematic nor confused. I also agree that these uses are not ruled out as problematic or confused by Wittgenstein, as I interpret him. One obvious example is the use of »objective« that is bound up with truth and falsity itself. Of course, when I commit myself to the claim that a particular judgment of Christian ethics is right, or true, or correct, I can be said to commit myself to the claim that this is how things are, and that can also be expressed by saying that I commit myself to the claim that it is objectively so. After all, I do not regard this as a matter of personal preference. Nor do I conceive of it as something that others are free to ignore. Moreover, I do not conceive of my judgment as something that I feel unsure about, or merely happen to think at the moment, but may cease to think at any time.¹³

Here, talk of objectivity is used to mark a contrast with something »merely subjective«, and that kind of contrast can be drawn in a number of ways. »It does not merely seem to me to be rude,

¹³ In this connection, it is interesting to note that expressivists themselves have emphasised the need for such expressions. What they deny is that they introduce commitments to cognitivism of the traditional kind; cf. Blackburn (1984: 217-220), (1998: 75-83, 294-310).

it is objectively so« says something that we all understand, and it has no metaphysical cloud hanging over it that should scare anyone away. Or consider, »No! This is not a matter of personal choice. And it is not just that *I* want you not to do it. Doing it would be objectively wrong!« This can be a sensible and informative thing to say. Again, there is no philosophical theory bound up with this kind of use of »objective«, unless we give in to the temptation to impose such a theory on the innocuous use of the expression, as we are certainly prone to do. Again, as De Mesel points out, recalling Ripstein, to call some judgment »objective« can be a way of saying that it is unbiased. Again, there is no difficulty in admitting that a judgment is »objective«, for example, when it is undistorted by prejudice, interest or emotion, when it is fair and impartial, or when it gives due weight to the available evidence and other relevant facts of the case.

It is clearly not a Wittgensteinian aspiration to restrict the use of language in any way that would question or ban those expressions, and it is certainly not mine. It is also not what I objected to, or construed Wittgenstein as objecting to, when I said that his target was the kind of claim to objectivity that is the hallmark of a realist view. For what the claim to objectivity amounts to *in that context* is something quite different, and more ambitious, than that.

More importantly, the target in that context need not be an overly ambitious form of Platonism. Finally, my understanding of »objective« is not Platonist or otherwise distorted by that picture, as De Mesel urges. In fact, I take it from the realists themselves, most of whom would not welcome the Platonist label being attached to their view. They are not deflationist either. They make more substantial claims to truth and objectivity, and try to make these claims good in some other way.

V

What, then, is at issue here? De Mesel introduces a number of examples, many of which are based on quotations. He does not suggest that they do not differ from each other. But he claims that these are all examples of legitimate uses of »objective«, and such uses are familiar from ethical, logical or mathematical language. I have already agreed that there are many such uses. Consequently, I am also quite prepared to accept that a deflationist view of »truth« and »fact« extends to »objectivity«, where that expression is used in any one of those innocuous ways.

The crucial question is how far that strategy can take us. Where do the innocuous, »everyday« uses of the word »objective« and its cognates end, and where do the »metaphysical«

uses of those words begin? More precisely, what is their theoretical baggage? Some uses of these words may not be »metaphysical« in any interesting sense, but they may still commit us to assumptions that are difficult to weigh with respect both to their import and their plausibility. De Mesel quotes a wide range of examples to illuminate what objectivity can be. But as they stand, it remains unclear what they commit us to, and what De Mesel says does not shed much light on it. Many of the expressions he quotes are ambiguous. So it remains unclear whether or not they carry some theoretical baggage, and if they do, what kind of baggage that is.

Consider the expressions that he quotes from Alice Crary. She attacks a narrow notion of objectivity that demands a total independence of anything subjective. Accordingly, she thinks that we should replace that narrow notion with a wider one, and that this notion should be »free from an abstraction requirement«. ¹⁴ Free from that requirement, it will also be »free from the idea of a radically abstract vantage point from which to make the a priori determination that any (even problematically) subjective aspects of our lives are excluded from objectivity«. ¹⁵ But what remains once we abandon it, and what is being abandoned? That is anything but clear. Moreover, moral concepts are said to determine »features of the world that, while they need to be understood in terms of our attitudes, are nevertheless fully objective«. ¹⁶ What are those »features of the world«? What is the import of »fully objective«? That, too, remains unclear. Again, she says that »moral concepts trace out objectively consistent patterns«, not in a »neutrally available region of fact«, but rather »in the moral outlooks within which they function«. ¹⁷ But what are those »patterns«? What are we to say about the range of different moral outlooks that employ a range of different concepts, and that are defined by different attitudes and judgments?

I hasten to add that Alice Crary, for one, has much more to say about those questions. She seems to me to come close to the view that John McDowell has done much to articulate and defend, and I discuss the substance of this view in more detail below. Here, the point is that De Mesel uses these expressions to support a claim to modest forms of objectivity. But as it stands, just what kind of objectivity that is, and how modest it can be, remains unclear.

That also comes out in the quote from Holtzman and Leich. They envisage a »moral objectivist« who accepts the claim that moral assessments express personal attitudes, but who

¹⁴ Crary (2007: 84).

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Crary (2007: 37-38).

¹⁷ Crary (2007: 38).

insists that these assessments make »in addition a further descriptive or cognitive claim«. ¹⁸ The question is: What kind of claim is that supposed to be? What is that »moral objectivist« after, and how deflationist is that »descriptive« or »cognitive« claim going to be?

These are some of the questions that need to be answered. Unless we are told more about this conception of objectivity, about the way in which something that is subjective can also be »fully objective«, and about those »features of the world« or »patterns«, and about that »descriptive« or »cognitive claim«, it is unclear whether, or how, any of this is so much as relevant to the question that I am asking. For I do not deny that moral judgements can have cognitive content. They can be assessed as being either true or false *simpliciter*. I have also said that this assessment has a certain unambitious form of objectivity in tow, and that there are some other uses of that word that carry no metaphysical or theoretical baggage. Consequently, uses of this kind are not candidates for philosophical treatment. Others, by contrast, may be just that. We need to ask some further questions before we can tell the difference between them.

VI

So I will now consider an author who is undoubtedly relevant to the question that I am asking, and who defends a conception of ethical objectivity that is not Platonist, but not deflationist either. That author is John McDowell. His work draws heavily on Wittgenstein, and inspired some of those defenders of a claim to objectivity in ethics that De Mesel quotes. His work also raises many exegetical issues of its own, so it must be approached with caution. Still, I believe that in outline, it is fairly clear how McDowell thinks we should understand a claim to objectivity in ethics that is neither Platonist, nor so deflationist as to be theoretically empty. If I am right about this, it will also emerge how this claim to objectivity goes beyond the one that I have been ascribing to the later Wittgenstein.

With some hesitation, McDowell calls himself a »moral realist«. ¹⁹ That hesitation is due to the fact that he thinks of himself more as an opponent of all forms of antirealist doctrine than as a defender of some other positive doctrine in its own right. But he agrees, or rather insists, that ethics is bound up with reason, that reason is bound up with objectivity »in an unambitious

¹⁸ Holtzman and Leich (1981: 17).

¹⁹ McDowell (1998: viii). A similarly qualified form of moral realism is defended in the work of David Wiggins and Sabina Lovibond.

sense«, and that for this reason, his theme »acquires a metaphysical aspect«.²⁰ Again, that is supposed to be metaphysics in an »unambitious sense«: like the idea of objectivity itself, it is said to involve »nothing more than the idea of getting things right«.²¹ So the next question is what is involved in the idea of »getting things right«, both generally and in the ethical domain.

Here, McDowell introduces, and contrasts, two notions of objectivity that might be in play. The first is objectivity that is an appropriate aim of science. To get things right in this domain is to represent the world as it is independently of a specific, local perspective, and that includes a human perspective: »The investigative stance of science discounts for the effects of features of the investigator, even his humanity«.²² That is why the world as revealed by science does not contain any secondary qualities.

Accordingly, there is a sense in which science conceives of the world in »absolute« terms. In this sense, it aims to give the content of »the view from nowhere«.²³ But it does not give, and cannot give, a description of the world from some fictitious Archimedean standpoint.

As McDowell emphasises, this is not a useful model for our understanding of the objectivity of ethics. If there is such objectivity at all, then it will only be accessible from within a human standpoint. According to McDowell, there is truth and objectivity in ethics. It is essentially bound up with a human standpoint, and in this sense, it involves essential reference to a subject. In fact, McDowell thinks that this objective truth can only be appreciated from within a human standpoint that has been shaped and sustained in accordance with virtue and practical reason, and that to be shaped and sustained in that way involves the acquisition of certain »motivational and evaluative propensities«.²⁴ From within that point of view, manifested in our »second nature«, we can hope to judge, feel, and act as the virtuous person judges, feels, and acts.

While judgment is tied to a point of view, it is still true that the practical intellect of the virtuous person is »as it ought to be«.²⁵ In virtue of her second nature, which is shaped as it should

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² McDowell (1995: 181).

²³ Ibid. McDowell refers to Nagel (1986) for the view from nowhere, and to Williams (1978) and (1985) for the absolute conception. Williams (2000) makes clear that the absolute conception is still a *conception* – it aspires to give an account of the world »as it is anyway«, independently of a particular point of view within it. It does not aspire to give an account of »the ultimate metaphysical truth«. For Williams, then, the view from nowhere has effectively become a view from *nowhere in particular*. It locates the investigator, his conception, and his relation to what he investigates, in the conception itself.

²⁴ McDowell (1995: 185).

²⁵ Ibid.

be, the virtuous person has acquired »practical intelligence«, and in virtue of the fact that it is shaped as it should be, that practical intelligence is »equipped to get things right in its proper sphere«. ²⁶ So there is a sense in which that practical intelligence can be said to get things right absolutely, or objectively, even though these features of the world cannot be conceived of in »absolute« terms, and their objectivity cannot be modelled on the objectivity of science.

If this is a genuine possibility, then the fact that objectivity of this kind is invisible to science, does not feature in the »absolute« conception, is essentially tied to a human perspective, and involves certain achievements of culture, thought and sensibility, is no longer an objection to the claim that it exists. Indeed, it can make that claim more credible than Platonist pictures, or blank assertions to the effect that some »realm« of value »exists«.

All the same, McDowell thinks that objectivity in ethics is no mere projection or reflection of a point of view towards the world that is subjective. There is a sense in which our practical intelligence can be equipped to »get things right«. That must mean that it can also fail to get things right, and if there is to be such a distinction, there must be something that counts as getting it right. In this sense, McDowell continues to think that there is a fact of the matter as to which ethical outlook, or ethical judgment within a given outlook, is objectively right. There will be a neutral point of reference when two outlooks clash, even though this neutral point of reference is embodied in a point of view that is essentially subjective. To know which one that is will be the privilege of the virtuous person, who is uniquely disposed to »get things right« in the ethical sphere. ²⁷

Of course, there are familiar problems with this picture. It can successfully avoid some of the excesses of the Platonist tradition. It also has a better explanation of the phenomenon of moral motivation, and it no longer needs to rely on vague and unattractive appeals to intuition, or something more mysterious still. But it runs into similar difficulties as soon as we ask *what it is* that determines which exercise of our practical intellect is objectively right and which one is wrong. Moreover, difficulties such as these arise precisely because this supposed objective standard does not, once again, reflect merely local perspectives. The alternative conception makes allowances for

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ It is noteworthy that in this respect, McDowell (1995: 186 n. 30) explicitly sets himself apart from Bernard Williams. For Williams, there can be ethical truth, but there can be no ethical truth that transcends a particular way of conceptualising the world in ethical terms. So for Williams, there is ethical truth, in particular truth which involves »thick« ethical concepts. But there is no prospect of substantial objectivity in ethics. Cf. Williams (1985), esp. ch. 8.

truth, but such truth remains tied to a partly shared, partly personal ethical outlook, to which there are many alternatives, each with their own alternative standards of right and wrong. On this view, the question which one of these standards is »right«, or which exercise of our ethical capacities allows us to »get things right in their proper sphere« is not a useful one to ask.

McDowell himself tends to dismiss such skeptical questions as »empiricistic naturalism« and »shallow metaphysics«, but this is hardly an argument.²⁸ His own appeal to »logos« which is thought to permeate the world borders on the unintelligible, and his appeal to metaphysics in an »unambitious sense« is at best evasive.

VII

But I am not concerned with the merits or demerits of this view. I am concerned with arguing that Wittgenstein does not hold such a view, and that what he rejects is precisely the realist, objectivist aspect of this conception. If so, there is a sense in which his target is precisely objectivity in ethics as the realist conceives of it, which is what I claim. Moreover, there is no suggestion that this criticism is confined to Platonist misunderstandings. For McDowell as well as for me, there is no point in modelling the claim to objectivity in ethics on the search for some Archimedean point, or some absolute conception that, if it is available at all, is at best available in science. Again, it follows from this line of thought that Wittgenstein is doing more than merely asking questions, as De Mesel also seems to think. He is not merely pondering alternatives. He takes a stance in this dispute, and that stance is critical as well as constructive. But in both dimensions, it goes deeper than a curb on Platonist excess.

First, there is the obvious fact that Wittgenstein describes the reality that can be said to »correspond« to mathematics, and this kind of reality is not what the realist expects. There is no mention of a standard that becomes accessible from within the practice of mathematics, where this standard would provide some foothold or encouragement for the idea that the way in which we do mathematics »gets things right« in this domain, whereas any other way of doing mathematics would fail by that standard. In fact, that seems to be precisely an aspect against which he wants »to give a warning«.²⁹ Without this assumption, we have a practice in the context of our lives, in a world that shows certain regularities, and this practice establishes standards of truth, of validity, of

²⁸ McDowell (1995: 182, 186).

²⁹ Wittgenstein (1978: II-42).

going on in the right way. That is the relevant reality to which our language corresponds, and the same is true in ethics.

Second, Wittgenstein explicitly denies that the question of which ethical outlook is right is a good one to ask. His response to the suggestion is not that this question can only be answered from within a standpoint that has been shaped by appropriate culture and education. His answer is that »this question does not make sense«.³⁰ For the Platonist, but also for McDowell, there clearly *is* a sense in which either the »Christian« or the »Nietzschean« or, more probably, some other ethics is right. In fact, this is part of the point of the position, if not its driving force.

It is also the question that drives other authors like Parfit and Scanlon, who are discussed in my paper as examples of realists who eschew any further commitments in metaphysical or ontological terms. De Mesel does not mention them, but they would be further, and different, examples of advocates of a realist position who attempt to get around the Platonist pictures that suggest themselves so easily, and also have aroused so much suspicion and hostility. All the same, they seek an answer to the very question that Wittgenstein deems senseless: Which of these various ethical outlooks is right?

Now if all of this is »Platonism«, and De Mesel thinks it obvious that it is mistaken, then this dispute is largely verbal. But I do not think that it is. There is a choice to be made, and that choice has to do with the question of how much a deflationist account of truth and objectivity in ethics can deliver. In my view, it does not deliver realism, and I think that Wittgenstein agrees. More importantly, he seems to think that realism is the wrong response to the question that remains: *How* does ethics »correspond to a reality«?

Third, there are the passages from the »Lectures on Aesthetics«. Here, Wittgenstein takes Moore to task over »qualities«, and the parallel to ethics is quite clear. He also mocks the thought that there could be a »science« of aesthetics, »telling us what's beautiful – almost too ridiculous for words«.³¹ Should such a »science« not include an answer to the question what sort of coffee tastes well?³²

³⁰ Rhees (1965: 23).

³¹ Wittgenstein (1966: 11). Here, it is important not to be misled by specific associations with natural science. This is likely to be a case where Wittgenstein uses the English word »science« to cover the much wider range of the German »Wissenschaft«. »Wissenschaft« can be any systematic and methodical enquiry that can produce definite results. Accordingly, there is a traditional distinction between »Naturwissenschaften« (roughly, the sciences) and »Geisteswissenschaften« (roughly, the humanities).

³² Ibid.

It is perhaps no accident that this rejoinder uses such a clear example of subjective preference, sensibility and taste. Of course, even in the case of coffee, expertise and culture may come in as well – but this is clearly not the point that Wittgenstein is making.

It may be objected to this way of drawing the analogy that our modes of ethical assessment are undoubtedly much more complex than a judgment of preference or taste. There may also be a qualitative difference, not merely one of degree. But by itself, that does not introduce anything objective to which our responses either correspond or fail to correspond. Wittgenstein asks: »What similarity has my admiring this person with my eating vanilla ice and liking it?« To compare them seems almost disgusting. (But you can connect them by intermediate cases.)³³ Just as there is no »science« of aesthetics, telling us what is and is not beautiful, there is no »science« of ethics, telling us what is and is not good.

Wittgenstein also says something interesting about the rules that were »laid down«: »You could regard the rules laid down for the measurement of a coat as an expression of what certain people want«.³⁴ There are two points about this passage that I want to make. First, there is no suggestion that whenever we say that a coat should be cut in a certain way, this is merely an expression of a personal preference. There can be standards that are independent of a given preference, here and now, which is clear from the fact that one may well prefer a coat cut in a different way. Second, there is no suggestion that there is a standard of correctness for the ways in which coats should be cut that goes beyond the rules that were »laid down.« There is the obvious fact that not any piece of clothing would count as a coat. But this leaves much undetermined, which is where the rules come in. And the rules themselves are said to answer, not to some realm of facts about the way coats should *really* be cut, but to our attitudes and expectations.

I take it that this is not all that realists would want to say about this kind of situation. Admittedly, few people are realists about the standards for the measurements of coats. But the situation is essentially the same in ethics – and in ethics, realists abound.

VIII

It is time to summarise conclusions. I have argued that there are uses of »objective« and its cognates that are perfectly innocuous, as De Mesel says they are. There is no reason to think that

³³ Wittgenstein (1966: 12).

³⁴ Wittgenstein (1966: 5).

these uses are problematic for Wittgenstein, or should be seen as problematic from a Wittgensteinian point of view. Quite the contrary: These are examples of »everyday uses«, and as such, they are in order. But there is a temptation to turn them into, or to try to support them with, some theoretically ambitious or »metaphysical« use – and that would be a mistake.³⁵

The interesting question is how, and where, to draw the line between them. I have accepted such uses as telling the difference between »seeming to be so« and »being so«, and more generally, the kind of objectivity that is bound up with the distinction between »true« and »false« itself. Again, there can be uses that mark an »objective« ethical judgment as something unbiased, fair or reflective, and of course there can be many other uses of this kind. That, too, is something that Wittgenstein would not, and need not, deny.

I do not agree, however, that agreement reaches further, to a point where we can talk of »correspondence to reality« as a moral realist conceives of it. While talk of »objectively consistent patterns« or »objective features of the world« is ambiguous as it stands, I have used McDowell as my example of a realist who makes demands for objectivity that Wittgenstein would not encourage or endorse. McDowell stresses that in ethics, objective truth is tied to second nature, and therefore not comparable to science. Still, he is entitled to an answer to the very question that Wittgenstein dismisses out of hand: »Which one of these different ethical judgments or ethical outlooks is right?« That also seems to me to be true of Alice Crary, who is somewhat more forthcoming in admitting that her metaphysical commitments are indeed commitments, and that she wants something more than different outlooks that conceptualise the world in different ways, with no neutral and objective standard to adjudicate between them.

In any case, as these examples show, my conception of the objectivity in question is not tied to some Platonic misconception, nor to the futile search for some Archimedean point, nor to the attempt to look at everything from some imagined vantage point beyond every human conception. Pictures of this kind are not even adequate in science, but epistemic fantasies. As McDowell shows, there could be substantial objectivity in ethics, even if it is not the kind of objectivity to which physical theories aspire, and I agree with that. The relevant contrast is drawn within our conceptions, contrasted with science, and that corresponds to the comparison that Wittgenstein himself has used.

So I continue to believe that the reality that »corresponds« to ethics is the reality of human life. Moreover, I continue to believe that this is not the kind of correspondence to reality by which

³⁵ Cf. Wittgenstein (2009: § 116).

we could hope to establish some objective standard of correctness, either for ethical judgments, or for the ethical outlooks of which these are a part. Whatever one may think of mathematics, it is obvious that there are real alternatives to the way in which we live our lives, and that includes our basic ethical conceptions.

Finally, De Mesel says that Wittgenstein does not explicitly deny the possibility of objectivity in ethics. That is true enough. In my view, it is likely due to the fact that Wittgenstein would not wish to deny that the word has a range of »everyday« uses. Just as he did in his discussion of a »correspondence to reality«, he would have made distinctions, offered more detailed descriptions, and pointed out the differences that we sometimes overlook, had he addressed the issue. So a blanket denial is not what we should expect.

Apart from that, he nowhere says that there is objectivity in ethics either. So in any case, this argument from silence cuts both ways. More importantly, the latter silence is quite easy to explain in the light of my interpretation. By contrast, it is much less obvious why Wittgenstein should *not* say that there is substantial objectivity in ethics, or that he would at least not wish to rule it out, if so much of what he says so strongly suggests that he does not believe this, while he clearly thinks that the question is important. In the light of my reading of Wittgenstein, we have no need for this conception of substantial objectivity in ethics. In fact, his thinking shows alternatives to it. When we look at it from this perspective, Wittgenstein can teach us that the yearning for this kind of objectivity is what we need to overcome.

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