

WITTGENSTEIN'S CONCEPTION OF THE "WILLING SUBJECT"

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"The wonder of wonders, that consciousness is."
(Edmund Husserl)

"The I, the I, is what is deeply mysterious."
(Ludwig Wittgenstein)

Philosophers, whether phenomenologically or analytically oriented, share an interest in the ontological status of the human self and its relation to the world. Followers of Husserl have attempted to formulate a conception of the self as an embodied consciousness, something between a contingent, empirical ego that is just one phenomenon within the world and a pure transcendental ego that constitutes the world and is the source of its meaning. In Merleau-Ponty's terms:

The question is that of man's relationship to his natural or social surroundings. There are two classical views: one treats man as the result of the physical, physiological, and sociological influences which shape him from the outside and make him one thing among many; the other consists of recognizing an a-cosmic freedom in him, insofar as he is spirit and represents to himself the very causes which supposedly act upon him. On the one hand, man is a part of the world; on the other, he is the constituting consciousness of the world. Neither view is satisfactory.¹

Though phenomenologists who have been interested in Wittgenstein have generally concentrated on his later works, his early treatment of the "willing subject" parallels in important respects their own attempts to conceive of a self that is neither wholly a part of the world nor entirely apart from it. Analytically oriented philosophers who interpret Wittgenstein have paid little attention to his willing self, perhaps because it imposes experiential requirements that are not met by Wittgenstein's own formal ontology. In this essay I claim that Wittgenstein's notion of the willing subject suggests the need for a conception of the human self as neither a purely worldly datum nor a timeless, transcendental ego. And I will show that to accommodate such an entity, the ontological categories of the *Tractatus* must be expanded to include a temporal, experiential dimension.

I

In the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein presents an ontology that divides broadly into what determines the world from within and what constitutes the world from without, contingent facts and necessary form. But neither of these categories can account for human action and moral experience as Wittgenstein himself conceives them. The possibility of ethics rests with the existence of a willing subject (5.8.16, 21.7.16).² While the *Tractatus*, consistent with its ontology, makes possible only two views of the willing subject, the *Notebooks* provides a more explicit discussion of each of these alternatives as well as criteria which an adequate conception of a willing subject must fulfill. The critical requirement is one that the ontology of the *Tractatus* cannot meet: the willing subject must be distinguished both from the psychological phenomenon of willing (see 6.423) and from the thinking subject (5.18.6); that is, from the metaphysical subject which Wittgenstein associates with God (see 8.7.16 and 17.10.16).³ The formulation of a non-psychological willing subject distinct from the self as “godhead” will be needed to understand Wittgenstein’s significant ethical position that: (a) happiness is “...doing the will of God,” and (b) happiness and unhappiness are genuine alternatives (8.7.16).

In the *Tractatus* the willing subject is presented either as a psychological phenomenon or as indistinct from the thinking subject. At 6.373–6.374 the will of which the world is independent is reduced to wishes so that “my willing *x*” is itself one momentary fact which in no way implies “*x*,” another fact. The independence of will and world is the independence of two facts, an illustration of 6.37: “There is no compulsion making one thing happen because another has happened.” The fulfillment of a wish is not the result of exercising causal efficacy but “a favour granted by fate” (6.374), an accidental accompanying of a process with a wish (4.11.16). Within the ontology of facts the willing subject appears here as wishes, and so conceived “the will as a phenomenon is of interest only to psychology” (6.423).

An earlier reference to the will suggests a non-psychological alternative. It begins with a passage comparable to 6.37 above: “There is no possible way of making an inference from the existence of one situation to the existence of another, entirely different situation” (5.135). The will’s freedom is then associated with “the impossibility of knowing actions that still lie in the future” (5.1362). The shift from talking in terms of *things happening* (6.37) to *our making inferences* (5.135) is significant. Here the will is not considered as a wish, an event in the world preceding the event wished. Rather, the will is identified with actions (“willing is acting”) (4.11.16), and the impossibility of knowing what actions or events lie in the

future *is* the impossibility of knowing what will be willed. No distinction is made between “future events” and “future actions,” *my* future actions, because I am indifferently connected to all events. To replace the self of wishes we now have a non-psychological self at the limit of the world (see 5.641), a self which follows from solipsism (5.64). In the *Notebooks* the solipsistic self which makes the world “my world” is explicitly seen also to make my will the world-will (17.10.16). The willing subject is then the source for *all* events; “a stone, the body of a beast, the body of a man, my body, all stand on the same level” (12.10.16). The willing subject is so far from a fact in the world that it cannot enter the world contingently to will any specific thing but necessarily wills all things. As the presupposition of the world’s existence (2.18.16), the willing subject would be indistinguishable from the thinking subject, the world soul (15.10.16), the necessary form of the world. Such “acquiescence” to the world-will, the agreement of my will with God’s, is, of course, Wittgenstein’s solution to the ethical problem. Our task now is to prepare for the emergence of the problem so that to “follow God’s will” can be a genuine prescription, not something I must *necessarily* do.

Wittgenstein’s two-dimensional ontology leaves no room for a willing I. Appropriately conceived, the self that acts can be neither a determiner of events from within nor a constitutor of events from without. It cannot be wishes because wishes are just psychological facts existing at some moment in the world. Since facts are independent, there is no efficient causation, no causal nexus in time to allow a will to have the efficacy normally attributed to it. If the willing subject cannot be an efficient cause in the world, the only alternative for Wittgenstein is to make it a transcendental ground, a will common to the whole world without being in the world, part of the world’s eternal form, the limit of the world, like the metaphysical subject. In the *Notebooks* this conception of the willing subject is discussed at some length and is found wanting. There is, first of all, Wittgenstein’s general insistence on the distinction between the thinking and the willing subject and his claim that only the latter *exists* (5.8.16). There is the notion that the will “penetrates the world” (11.6.16). And there is a series of powerful considerations in the long entry of 4.11.16 which sustain an earlier suggestion that a totally disembodied will may not, in the ordinary sense, be a will at all (20.10.16).

Only a willing subject somehow *situated* with respect to the world, in a way to be elucidated, can meet the requirements for willing set forth in the 4.11.16 entry:

1) To will requires knowing that I will. “Otherwise there might arise a question as whether it had yet been *completely* carried out (4.11.16). A willing subject as eternal transcendental ground would have no awareness of a distinct segment of *time* in which a will is actualized.

2) To will requires an awareness distinct from that of entertaining other ideas. If the metaphysical and willing subject were one, there would be no way to make this distinction (4.11.16), and it would hold that: “As my idea is the world, in the same way my will is the world-will” (17.10.16).

- 3) To will requires (a) an object in the world,
 (b) the ability to will *different* things,
 (c) accounting for the fact that I cannot will everything.

A willing self identical with the solipsistic I, common to the whole world (see 15.10.16–17.10.16) – everywhere and nowhere – would not distinguish among objects; no object would be more willable than any other.

4) To will requires a feeling of responsibility for the willed movement. The transcendental will could feel no particular responsibility for any movement except in the indifferent sense in which it is responsible for all movement.

The conclusion to be drawn from these considerations is that the only conception of a willing subject able to meet the necessary requirements is that of a situated subject which “fastens on to the world somewhere, and does not fasten on to other things” (4.11.16). To distinguish between those things I can and cannot will, to avoid the absurdity of holding that a chair can directly obey my will, the will must essentially involve relation to a body (20.10.16). Given the above selected considerations from the *Notebooks*, this conclusion is inescapable. But Wittgenstein wants to resist it:

For the consideration of willing makes it look as if one part of the world were closer to me than another (which would be intolerable). (4.11.16)

For one part of the world to be “closer” to me, I must somehow be *in* the world, which is a possibility already excluded. The willing self cannot be either *in* space and time as facts are or outside all space and time as are God, logical form, and the metaphysical subject. The last three are identifiable; the *willing* subject, in contrast, must be individuated to meet its requirements. Wittgenstein’s inability to find a place for the willing subject through his reflections of 4.11.16 leads him to ask, fifteen days later, “What kind of reason *is* there for the assumption of a willing subject?” (my emphasis) and to answer implicitly with another question, “Is not *my world* adequate for individuation?” Plainly not, for the non-psychological self that makes “the world my world” (5.641) is as much a world-spirit as my spirit (see 15.10.16) and is thus, as we have seen, “mine” in what is, in this context, only a trivial sense.

II

The key to an acceptable conception of a willing subject is provided by several suggestive remarks in the *Notebooks*.

“The will is an attitude [*Stellungnahme*] of the subject to the world” (4.11.16).

“I am placed in [the world] like my eye in its visual field” (11.6.16).

“Only from the consciousness of the *uniqueness of my life* arises religion – science – art” (1.8.16).

From these statements a conception of the willing subject can be formulated, one which finds its place in an explicitly temporal ontological dimension between that of momentary, atomistic facts and eternal, organic form.

The will as *eine Stellungnahme zur* the world – an attitude or a place-taking, orientation, point of view, or even “foothold” (4.11.16) – is a will which is not inside the world but is nonetheless situated with a “view” that can have “one part of the world...closer...than another” and which can change that view to “fasten on to the world” at some different place. Wittgenstein explicitly carries out this visual analogy. If I am placed in the world like my eye in its visual field, I cannot then find my self *in* the world (see 20.10.16). The visual analogy can also be used to distinguish the willing from the thinking subject. After a consideration of this same analogy at 4.8.16, Wittgenstein continues the following day to deny the thinking subject and to affirm the willing subject. The will here is said to provide “that centre of the world, which we call the I, and which is the bearer of ethics” (5.816). Whereas the metaphysical I identifiable with God is not “placed” anywhere in space and time, the willing subject has always some particular perspective:

The situation is not simply that I everywhere notice where I see anything, but I also always find myself at a particular point of my visual space, so my visual space has as it were a shape. (17.10.16)

The willing subject “shapes” the world by adopting different *Stellungnahmen* toward it, thereby affecting not its facts but its limits (see 6.43). In so doing, the willing subject, like ethics itself, is transcendental (6.421), the condition for the possibility of a world, but it is not transcendental in the same way as logic. There are no surprises in logic, nor for God; the form of the world is unalterable: “If all objects are given, then at the same time all *possible* states of affairs are also given” (2.0124). For the willing subject, in contrast, all states of affairs are never given but are always in the *process of being given*.

So arises “the consciousness of the *uniqueness of my life*.” My life can be said to be unique in two ways. First, as a willing subject with a particular perspective, I am distinguishable from a world-spirit; the world is my world not just because “the world and life are one” (5.621) but because, less trivially, my life is uniquely situated, shaping the world with its unique point of view. I am not co-incident with the world atemporally; the world is not given all at once. Second, my life is unique in that it is not another fact in the world but a perspective on facts: in the process of encountering the world’s states of affairs, I do not become co-incident with any one of them in its momentariness but am always aware of each as a fact among others.

The uniqueness of this willing self requires an expansion of an ontology formerly consisting only of actual atomistic particulars and one organic form. The willing self is not identifiable with the pure possibility of logical form or God because it is always “placed,” fastened on to the world somewhere (4.11.16), having the world’s possibilities actualized “one at a time.” Yet the willing self is always more than whatever actuality it confronts at the moment because it is *aware* of that fact as within the context of other possible facts.

III

Le temps est le *sens* de la vie (*sens*: comme on dit le sens d’un
cours d’eau, le sens d’une phrase, le sens d’une étoffe,
le sens de l’odorat).

Claudel, *Art Poétique*

(as quoted by Maurice Merleau-Ponty)

From the uniquely temporal ontological perspective of a willing subject, at the point where possibilities become actualized, ethics can emerge. Ethics is not concerned with consequences of actions in the world (30.7.16); the willing self cannot affect the facts (5.7.16). The alternatives are two, happiness and unhappiness (8.7.16), and “the happy life is good, the unhappy bad” (30.7.16). For Wittgenstein happiness consists in

“fulfilling the purpose of existence” (6.7.16)

being “in agreement with the world” (8.7.16)

“doing the will of God” (8.7.16)

The willing subject, the bearer of ethics through which good and evil enter (2.8.16), can achieve happiness by being in harmony with God, with fate, with the world (8.7.16); that is, with the essence of the world. But what is this essence, this fate, with which one should harmonize? It is clearly in

some sense the eternal, the world's unalterable form:

But is it possible for one so to live that life stops being problematic?
That one is *living* in eternity and not in time? (6.7.16)

Yet it is also the present:

Only a man who lives not in time but in the present is happy (8.7.16).

We have seen that the willing subject *has no choice* but to encounter the world in a particular way: the willing subject can avoid neither (a) a contingent existence at some moment, at some place, nor (b) the necessity of having the world presented to it as already there, a dependence on an "alien will" that actualizes the world in just the way it does, limited by logical possibility (see 8.7.16). To live in eternity and in the present is to live in an eternal present of timelessness (6.4311): "Only a man who lives not in time but in the present is happy."

The willing self confronts both the world of possibility and of actuality; it is the very point of possibility being actualized. The fate with which it should agree can now be seen neither as the atemporal world of form (with which everything necessarily agrees) nor as the momentary particular facts it recognizes (with which it cannot agree but must transcend), but instead as the particular *process* of actualization of possibility which is the course and direction of the world. The ethical choice for the willing self consists in its "way of looking at things" (see 7.10.16). Wittgenstein contrasts "the usual way of looking at things" as in the midst of them with the view *sub specie aeternitatis*, with the whole world as background, the thing together with the whole of logical space. The willing subject, we have seen, is never *totally* immersed in actuality; it is always aware of facts in the *context* of other possible facts. Here Wittgenstein prescribes that the *good* life is one in which the *whole* of logical space is seen in each particular thing, the will's choice being to see more or less of the world's form in its things. In the next day's entry this position is explicitly related to time and again an ethical *choice* is explicated:

...it is equally possible to take the bare present image as the worthless momentary picture in the whole temporal world, and as the true world among shadows.

Significantly, the will should identify with the whole of logical space, with eternity, but it can do so only by seeing the whole in the particular, eternity in the moment. The will can have no effect on either the facts or the form of the world. But though the will cannot change the "sense" of any particular fact nor the sense (meaning, essence) of the world as a whole, it

can see *either more or less* of the world in each of the things it confronts and so, *in that way* make the world wax or wane as a whole by accession or loss of meaning (see 5.7.16).

The happy life, Wittgenstein says, is one which “renounces the amenities of the world” (13.8.16), one which masters the world “by renouncing any influence on happenings” (11.6.16). We can now relate this conception of the happy life to Wittgenstein’s temporal framework. A willing subject, we have seen, cannot be identical with the whole of logical space as God is, but it can view a *thing* as either a thing among things or as the manifestation of a world (8.10.16). To the extent that a subject sees things aesthetically as the development or “explicit-ation” of world-form, it will be less concerned with the thing in its specificity, less concerned with the particular happenings of this actual world, and more prepared to live a life of acquiescence to the will of God. The alternatives to submission to divine will are fear and hope: each is a particular attitude of the willing subject to fate; that is, to the movement and direction – the *sens* – of the world. At the limit the willing subject might be said to renounce willing altogether, to approach the divine state of a purely contemplative subject. Wittgenstein speculates:

But can we conceive a being that isn’t capable of Will at all, but only of Idea...? In some sense this seems impossible. But if it were possible then there could also be a world without ethics. (21.7.16)

The solution of the ethical problem would be seen in the vanishing of the problem (see 6.17.16).

In this paper I have tried to demonstrate that a willing subject is necessary for the ethical problem to arise and for human action to be possible. For such a self to exist requires an expansion of the ontology of the *Tractatus* to include temporal and experiential elements. Wittgenstein’s *Notebooks* reveals his early attention to a more phenomenological mode of inquiry, and his treatment of human action there deserves to become a topic of common interest to contemporary philosophers of normally divergent orientations.

NOTES

1. “The Battle Over Existentialism,” in *Sense and Non-Sense*, trans. Hubert L. Dreyfus and Patricia A. Dreyfus (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), pp. 71–72.
2. All references to proposition numbers in the text are to Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. D.F. Pears and B.F. McGuinness (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1961); references to dates are to Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Notebooks*:

1914–1916, ed. G.H. Wright and G.E.M. Anscombe, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1969).

3. Also see, e.g., Eddy Zemach, “Wittgenstein’s Philosophy of the Mystical,” in Irving M. Copi and Robert W. Beard, *Essays on Wittgenstein’s TRACTATUS* (New York: Macmillan, 1966), p. 368.