

Globethics Repository



Wittgenstein and the practical turn in business ethics

This page was generated automatically upon download from the Globethics Repository. More information on Globethics see <https://www.globethics.net>. Data and content policy of Globethics Repository see <https://repository.globethics.net/pages/policy>.

Item Type	Article
Authors	Deslandes, Ghislain
Publisher	Business and Organization Ethics Network (BON)
Rights	With permission of the license/copyright holder
Download date	2026-07-15 03:29:44
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/178172

Wittgenstein and the Practical Turn in Business Ethics

Ghislain Deslandes

Abstract

The significant influence of Ludwig Wittgenstein in social science is partly due to the central role played by the practical dimension, which is inherent in his philosophy. Nowadays, the latter is drawing strong interest in the academic community, in sociology, in management science as well as in business ethics, a field in which experts strive to establish an ethics opposed to any normativity, directly geared to managerial practices. However, the very same scholars who investigated this "practical turn" and who do not fail to refer to Wittgenstein as a major philosophical source are hardly prolific about his work as a philosopher. Can the main Wittgensteinian concepts serve as a reliable theoretical basis on which to ground business ethics as a practice? To answer this question, we first analyse the relation between facts and values, between rule and practice. We then explore the converging elements existing in Wittgenstein's philosophy as a quest for self-knowledge, before expounding the principles of what might constitute an approach to business ethics as practice. Lastly, we underscore the limitations of such an interpretation as well as to the need to go deeper into these tentative conclusions, both from an empirical and theoretical point of view.

Keywords

Business ethics as practice, Foucault, Managerial Practice, Practices of self, Rule, Wittgenstein.

Introduction

"Someone who, dreaming, says 'I am dreaming', even if he speaks audibly in doing so, is no more right than if he said in his dream 'it is raining', while it was in fact raining. Even if his dream were actually connected with the noise of the rain."

Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, § 676

Wittgenstein is considered as the thinker who, in modern times, most significantly contributed to placing the practical dimension of philosophy at the centre of contemporary philosophical debate (Sluga, 1998; Gay, 1996). This is why his name is so commonly found in the literature dealing with the 'practice turn' which has prevailed upon social sciences in the last few decades (Reckwitz, 2002). His direct influence may be observed for instance in the work of Giddens and his "theory of structuration" (1984) or in Schatzki's *Wittgensteinian Approach to Human Activity and the Social* (1996).

In management science, a similar turn was taken in the field of strategy, initially in the wake of the strategy process research (Jarzabkowski, 2005), as illustrated for instance by Mintzberg, then as part of a trend which chose to consider strategy as no longer being a mere attribute of organizations, but as an activity that should be put in the context of the interaction between their members (Johnson, Langley, Melin & Whittington, 2007; Chia & MacKay, 2007; Carter, Clegg & Kornberger, 2008). Moreover, such a turn has probably affected knowledge management as well as the manner in which the uses of technology within organizations are explored (Miettinen, Samra-Fredericks & Yanow, 2009).

The "practice turn" in business ethics emerged more recently; it is a field in which the objective is to establish an ethics opposed to any normativity, to any idealistic abstraction, to the universality of moral concepts upon which it would be predicated (Colby 1999; Van de Ven & Johnson, 2006). Several scholars have indeed been able to highlight the role played by practice in the ethical exercise of management: in an article published in 1989, Andrews brought forward the

assumption that business ethics courses fail to be attractive precisely because this discipline is disconnected from business practice (a rationale challenged by Klonoski (2003) who instead advocates courses essentially based in the long-established theories of philosophical tradition, a concept which he named 'unapplied ethics'). Then Philips and Nielsen emphasized, in 1993 and 1994 respectively, the contingent and situational aspects of ethical decision-making in organizations. However, the shift from a business ethics in practice to a business ethics as a practice - an ethics by definition opposed to the prior theories, which were moralizing or prescriptive - seem to have been based on more ambitious conceptual foundations in the text written by Clegg, Kornberger and Rhodes (2007). To these authors, who refer to Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* as the main prior philosophical source pertaining to this research trend, the overriding objective is to describe ethics in organizations as an ongoing and unfinished debate between contradictory moral stances, which never lead to any certainty when they are put in context. According to them, organizations have nothing to offer but uncertain, complex and ambiguous situations, which -as evidenced by Jackall's research work- generate "organizational moralities" which are merely "contextual, situational, highly specific, and, most often, unarticulated" (1988, p. 6). With Wittgensteinian overtones, they observe that ethical dilemmas stem less from the dearth of ethical systems predating decisions than from the surfeit of stale ethical doctrines, which collide whenever choices need to be made.

The same authors go on taking the example of a pharmaceutical company committed to ecological values as well as to third-world countries: should it produce less expensive drugs so as to provide for the needs of poorer countries, while running the risk of failing to honour its ecological commitments, or make good on such promises, by producing at a higher cost, thus making it more difficult for poorer countries to afford the medications they need?

At this point, let us remark that the reference to Wittgenstein, albeit recur-

rent, is somewhat rash. Then, although no one seems willing to question the decisive impact of his philosophy of practice upon the philosophical foundations of this research trend (see, for instance, Shoter's work on the analysis of dynamic phenomena within organizations (2005)), the reference is nonetheless too allusive; it would warrant better 'elucidation', if we venture to use a typically Wittgensteinian term. Our aim here is to offer such enlightenment while attempting to demonstrate how Wittgenstein's writings – in which ethics never sets itself as a supreme judge, but rather relates to contexts – may indeed help in shaping the conceptualization of managerial ethics on the basis of practices.

For that purpose, we shall focus on three main notions contained in Wittgensteinian ethics: first, the dichotomy between facts and values as expressed in the 1921 *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* and the 1929 *Lecture on Ethics*: if the world comprises all the facts, the latter being ethically neutral, then the so-called values are just illusions. Then, the importance of action: what is of interest to Wittgenstein are the concrete activities in which ethical questions are posed, those in which what is "good" necessarily depends upon the context. And finally, the relation between practice and the rule – a relation in which the rule seems to aim at setting the limits of the future, before knowing the upcoming context. From this conceptual analysis, we may infer that although Wittgenstein renounces to offer a foundation to morality, the ethical question remains fundamental to him, insofar as philosophy is a self-on-self work ("Working in philosophy – like work in architecture in many respects – is really more a working on oneself", CV, p.16). We then bring the discussion into the field of subjectivity so as to compare such arguments with the theories developed by Foucault, who is another anti-essentialist philosopher; his ideas resurfaced in 2009 as a result of the publication of his latest lectures bearing on "practices of the self". In conclusion, we explore not only the limitations of such approaches to ethics "at work", but also the repercussions and potential extensions of these philosophical conceptions on ethical action as a managerial practice.

Facts, values and practices in Wittgenstein's work

Attempting to delineate an ethic that would specifically characterise Wittgenstein's work is certainly an awesome challenge. The first difficulty, which is mentioned in the conclusion of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, is notorious: one is well advised to keep silent about what cannot be established, particularly the ethical propositions which go from one nonsense to another (« Hence also there can be no ethical propositions », T, 6.42). Thus, is it reasonable to revive the issue of Wittgensteinian ethic since its mastermind seemed bent on definitely closing it as early as 1921? The second hurdle lies with the very character of the philosopher: there is the private Wittgenstein and the logician; there is the scholar who recommends keeping silent on the ethical question and the one who considers, in the same time, that everything is ethical in philosophy, that it is the philosopher's activity which reveals his moral character ("Philosophy is not a theory, but an activity", T, § 4. 112; see also Rhees, 1970). The third difficulty is related to the structure of his work, even though the most recent interpretations rather tend to demonstrate its consistency (Pleasants, 2008): there is a first Wittgenstein (the author of the *Tractatus*), but also a second one (the one who wrote *Philosophical Investigations*), then a third one (who devised *On Certainty*). However, the study of Wittgenstein the ethicist offers the opportunity to tackle the ethical question in a different way, by sweeping away the past: former ethical treatises

have nothing to say, and they cannot characterise what they do say (Bouveresse, 1973). In accordance with his philosophical project, Wittgenstein's intent is to denounce mental confusion and, here, to fight common thinking patterns, especially in the realm of morality. How does he manage to achieve this goal? First, by drawing every possible conclusion from the dichotomy between facts and values. Confusing facts and values amounts to deluding oneself about what our values mean to ourselves. As it would make no sense to condemn morally a cloudy spell or the apparition of the sun, telling an historic event does not entitle us to pass moral judgement on this very same event. "All propositions are of equal value." (T, § 6.4). To Wittgenstein, we need to make a fundamental distinction between two types of judgements: on the one hand, relative value judgements, those we resort to most commonly in everyday life (e.g. "This man is a good cook", "That woman is a good mother"); they are no more than factual determinations, which may be described by the means of language, they have a beginning and an end; on the other hand, absolute value judgements. The latter are of a different nature, a nature that cannot be defined theoretically but which, however, is harboured by judgements that mean something about the ultimate meaning of life. They never fully achieve this goal as the locus of ethics is always outside the space of facts: the description of facts, of contingencies, cannot possibly express the slightest absolute value. Ethics is, as it were, outside of the world, beyond the words and the limits delineated by our language (Jimenez, 2008; Glock, 2003). This is why any discourse on values, even when it deals with "organisational values" is bound to be worthless to Wittgenstein.

Despite such a negative conclusion, this first element leads us to the second one: if ethics cannot be spoken about, if it cannot be expressed in propositions, it can nonetheless be applied and displayed through behaviours, actions, lifestyles which, in their own way, testify to this fundamental characteristic of life. "There must be some sort of ethical reward and ethical punishment" Wittgenstein assumed, "but this must lie in the action itself" (T, § 6. 422). Thus the unspeakable would become manifest in our actions or in the contemplation of the facts that make up our life. It shows itself in behaviours ceaselessly tied to the contingencies of life. As in the case of language where any meaning is eventually related with a given use, no ethics can be separated from practice and real moral situations.

A study of the relationship between practice and rule

To the inseparability of ethics and practice corresponds the inevitability of the dialectics of rules in their relation to use. The notion of rule features among the concepts that most intensely concerned Wittgensteinians (Laugier, 2001). "Well we might imagine rails instead of a rule", Wittgenstein wrote in his *Philosophical Investigations*. "And infinitely long rails correspond to the unlimited application of a rule" (PI, § 218). He first opposes this mechanistic view of rules as a factor of homogeneity, of a mythified rule as a predetermined future. "And hence also 'obeying a rule' is a practice. And to think one is obeying a rule is not to obey a rule" (PI, § 202), which cannot be separated from other practices that are not encompassed by the rule. Nothing predetermines the use of rules. Following the rule is by no means a conditioned reflex as it implies an interpretation: "What characterises rules is that they induce judgements and evaluations, they provide justifications and motives, they allow the criticism and correction of actions." (Bouveresse, 2001, p. 496). "Why do we punish criminals? Is it in order to prevent a repetition of the crime?" Wittgenstein asks in *Conversations on*

Freud. "The truth is that there is no one reason. There is the institution of pushing criminals. Different people support this for different reasons, and for different reasons in different cases and at different times. Some people support it out of a desire for revenge, some perhaps out of a desire of justice, some out of a wish to prevent a repetition of the crime, and so on" (LAC, p. 50). Wittgenstein's purpose is not to redefine the meaning of rules, but simply to remark and to underscore the fact that we are unable to rise to the challenge of explaining clearly what we mean by following a rule. To him, rules "leave loop-holes open" (OC, § 139) and the metaphor of "the rails" fail to offer an appropriate representation. The same applies for instance to the practice of judgement, which cannot result solely from the learning of rules: "We do not learn the practice of making empirical judgments by learning rules; we are taught judgments and their connection with other judgments. A totality of judgments is made plausible to us." (OC, § 140). Rules cannot be the only means for guiding individuals. Likewise, it is not, as people tend to think, an independent authority, cut off from its application.

In his research applied to management and economics, Reynaud evaluated this critique of rules by asking the following question: "How am I able to obey a rule?" (PI, 217). To that end, she started in 1992 studying - over a period of eight years - one of the maintenance workshops of the Paris subway system (RATP), within the framework of the implementation of new wage rules intended to increase the productivity of the workers concerned. Her goal is to analyse how the so-called "Agreement on the Experimentation of the Collective Effectiveness Method" (referred to by the acronym of DEC) is likely to transform existing rules and affect the organisation as a whole (2001; 2003). She thus shows that the new rule which is supposed to increase, among other things, the pace of work, stock levels as well as the quantities produced, actually generates behavioural heterogeneity, whereas the incentive theory considers that it should foster homogeneity and entail the same economic consequences. She goes on explaining that "each team forms a social world in itself, caught in a system of habits and uses concerning the organisation of work (for instance, accepting tasks in the order in which they come, without choosing to tackle the easier ones) and the relationship with the shop steward. (...) All of this, as well as many other aspects, might be summarised in one word: the "style" of teams (2005, p. 366). Governing by rules does not seem to be a satisfactory option, as the latter are constantly transformed by the various interpretations which are made of them, by the multiplicity of existing rules (safety-related, occupational, deontological, technical, legal, organisational...) which form an interdependent network and, above all, by the contrasting and changing nature of uses. Between the setting of the rule and its use, springs a wide range of controversies, amendments, meetings and strategic approaches that depend upon the interests, culture and working habits of each of the groups concerned by a rule which, in theory, is the same for all.

Thus, the process that leads to the application of the rule goes through practices, chiefly related to negotiations that in turn transform the rule (which we view as "rails"), to the extent that they lend it its whole meaning. The rule is no longer a "visible part of invisible rails stretching infinitely", as Wittgenstein describes it. The application of rules is a practice, insofar as their meaning is always complemented by some uses. Indeed, rules are always incomplete.

Basically, this research bears out the validity of the hypothesis which actually embraces rules and uses: on the one hand, rules are elaborated while being used, at the very moment when uses rise to the status of rules. Here, Reynaud resorts to the notion

of routines, as for instance, in the case of 'free riders' in RATP's maintenance teams: such regulation is effected through use, as such behaviour would go against prevailing collective working habits, not against rules. Eventually, uses answer the question of 'how to'; rules don't. As far as the expression of rules is concerned, it "gives rise to strategies that generate practices, not uses" (2005, p. 368).

Ethics and subjectivity: Self-on-self work vs. Practices of self

To Wittgenstein, what is at stake is the adoption of a form of life, which offers stability and regularity to our habitual facts and gestures, as well as an attempt to live in accordance with one's principles - without ever being able to compare it with other potential forms, the principles of which differ by definition, although none of them can be said to be superior to any other. None is comparable to any other. "The moral issue is essentially a 'personal' matter", Bouveresse explains, "whereby one should take it to mean, not a problem which any one can solve according to personal norms, but a problem posed to one person, which is something quite different from what is commonly called a problem" (1973, p. 143). Ethics is subjective and cannot be shared, even when two individuals use the same words in order to express their moral judgements: this by no means implies that they share the same moral stance. As also argued by Mulhall, "We shall find ourselves forced to acknowledge that morality is a realm of irreducible difference" (2002, p. 295). Consequently, from a moral perspective, no individual is ever capable of offering advice, and even less so the philosopher than anyone else.

On the basis of such reasoning, one easily understands how the universal intent of ethical theories, those which offer 'solutions' to life's ethical problems, is poles apart from Wittgenstein's project, which precisely claims that individual experimentation cannot be extrapolated. What needs to be discarded is not ethics itself, but the inappropriate manner in which tradition, especially in the field of philosophy, took hold of it. The same ethical questions never beset any two persons in the same way, at the same time. This may be where we might distinguish between morality and ethics: the former is, to everyone, rooted in the customs prevailing at a given time and place, the latter is, to each of us, an opportunity to find answers which, precisely, may go counter prevailing customs. It may be interesting to note, here, that in the end, *Lecture on Ethics* is written in the first person of the singular ("What I say 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", LE, p. 239).

The same goes for ethics or religion as for philosophy itself. It is a dialogue between one and oneself, a private affair rejecting a priori any moral law: "the state of a philosopher's attention when he says the word 'self', (...) a good deal could be learned from this." (PI, § 413). Wittgenstein contends that philosophy is precisely what requires from an individual a purification effort vis-à-vis himself. This is what Rigal calls "a self-to-self to ascent" (1997, p. 206). Philosophy is an enterprise which consists in devising, by means of willpower, a personal conception of the world surrounding us. This is why Augustine and Kierkegaard can be said to be great philosophers. Not on account of their religious beliefs, but because such faith did help them live. Their own particular depth could thus be brought to light. "The real merit of a Copernicus or a Darwin was not the discovery of a true theory" Wittgenstein noted in his Notebooks, "but the dis-

covery of a new and fruitful vision" (RM, p. 73). The Cambridge and Skjolden Notebooks, written by the philosopher for his own use provide, according to Cometti, a particularly graphic illustration of "the link that existed, in his opinion, between intellectual work, the quest for self-improvement and for a state expressed by the search for "peace in thought" (2002, p. 176). Cometti views this fear of 'not getting numb' as a preoccupation specifically pertaining to the philosophers in Ancient times.

One finds here traces of a form of solipsism and particularism that goes against utilitarian principles according to which an ethics of commitment seems to be aimed at overriding an ethics of responsibility (Richter, 2002; Bouveresse, 1973). In fact, the feeling of absolute value or of the depth of one's own self is a topic on which the Cambridge professor wrote. Truth itself can be achieved only through 'self-mastery'. This means that Wittgenstein's last work, *On Certainty*, is primarily an effort to revert to oneself: "I act with complete certainty. But this certainty is my own." (OC, § 174); see also Crary, 2005). Assuming that foundations do exist, they can be found only within oneself. Here, we can draw an interesting parallel with Michel Foucault, whose lectures, given towards the end of his life at the Collège de France, have just been published officially (2009; 2008). A similar subject of reflection can be found in them, which Foucault names 'care-of-self-ethic' and which he applies, not to philosophy in general, but to ethics in particular. By devoting a series of investigations to Socrates, to the Stoicists and to the Cynics, he envisioned in this logic of care (which he extended to the care which others feel for themselves) the ethical roots of the western world: "with this notion of *epimeleia heautou* (care-of-self ethic), [we are offered] a rich corpus defining a 'way of being', an attitude, forms of reflection, practices that make it an extremely significant phenomenon (...) in the history of the practices of subjectivity" (Foucault, 2001, p. 13). This relation of truth to self as self-knowledge is thus based on practices that may be quite different in the theories of the two philosophers: predicated on activism and politics with Foucault or much less committed with Wittgenstein, as evidenced by the period he spent teaching young children in a remote province of Austria.

Indeed, the time when Wittgenstein endeavoured to distance himself from Cambridge, long after he relinquished his personal wealth, testifies to such desire. To Wittgenstein, Rigal explains, "the response to ethics (...) materialises in asceticism, then in the appeasement by which a righteous life becomes manifest" (1997, p.198). However, to him, such asceticism is geared to action, and it lies at the inception of everything, including language. In fact, it reminds the practice of the Stoicists to whom the most important question was not "Who are you?" but "What do you do with your life?" (Gros, 2007, p. 104). In this type of stoicism, ethics was enacted at the lowest, but most important, level: the one of daily practices, thanks to which each and every day was an opportunity to ponder over the daily rules of action that were dependent upon individual behaviour and self-control (the Greek *egkrateia* according to Foucault).

Basically, the two philosophers share the desire not to confine ethical thought within the boundaries of the universe, wishing instead to orientate it towards self-transformation (Hadot, 2003; Hadot, 2002). Wittgenstein's *Correspondence*, quoted in Pierre Bourdieu's *Méditations Pascaliennes*, bears out his refusal to limit the study of logic and language, leading the Austrian-born philosopher to aim primarily at solving real-life problems: "What is the point of studying philosophy, if all it does is to enable you to express yourself in a relatively plausible manner on a few issues of abstruse logic, (...) and if this does not improve the way you think about the important issues of everyday life, if this

does not make you more aware than any journalist of the way you use the dangerous expressions which such people employ in order to serve their own interests?" (1997, p. 53)

With respect to Wittgenstein and Foucault, it may be argued that the phrase 'organisational ethics' makes no sense, or that it does so only in a moral context, i.e. the respect of more or less perceptible norms that are imposed on the individual within the framework of organisations. In such light, ethics in organisations can be understood only thanks to individual ethics, since this concept is tantamount to self-construction by one's own actions. "The shoemaker who feels this 'care of self' must think", Foucault explains, "of what constitutes his task as a shoemaker, much in the same way as the emperor who, since he feels that 'care of self', will undertake and complete tasks which must be imperatively realised only because they are part of the general objective which is himself for himself" (2001, p. 193). What matters to Foucault (because this is what constitutes ethics) is that control of man over himself, that distance between oneself and the constant flow of events. Although he does not pretend that the world of Ancient Greece is not a bygone age, the enunciation of the problem of ethics nonetheless remains a practice of self in a given social and historical context. Such 'technologies of self', which bridge a gap between the individual and the collective (Gomez, 2005), may, in the organisational context, correspond to such dimensions as "self-control, the ability to face stressful situations, a reasoned engagement in experiences likely to generate pleasure or joy" (Pezet, 2007, p. 78; see also Lambert and Pezet, 2005)

Consequences on business ethics as practice

From the above presentation, we can now draw some lessons with regard to business ethics as practice. Needless to say, we are fully aware that our endeavour is fraught with hazards; with Wittgenstein, the most ominous one has always been to construe his work in ways which would have him say the opposite of the very theories he consistently criticised or adopt the stances he stood up against (Laugier, 2001). The second peril is to come out of the closet on ethics, whereas according to him, all theories are bound to fail, whatever their formulation.

Accordingly, we shall have to abide by at least three principles: first, shun any normative discourse, in all circumstances. Then, stress the fact that an infinite plurality of forms of life is at work in organisations and that the monism of olden times - i.e. a single and universal ethical foundation for all - is definitely a thing of the past. Finally, prove that it is action which shapes moral conscience, not the other way round: the way of life sheds light on discourse, in the same manner as the choice of life predates any theory. Thus, whenever it aims at shunning any idealistic abstraction, an organisational ethics inspired by Wittgenstein needs to rely on a return to concrete matters, to focus on situations as they actually occur. Considering ethics as practice, not as science or even knowledge, eventually amounts to saying that it comprises a multitude of dispositions, of know-hows, of things learnt. These are the elements which are relevant to ethics as practice, and it is by leaning on them that ethics becomes manifest, since it is unable to express itself. In this light, numerous testimonies suggest that Wittgenstein considered tales of individual lives, especially in literature (e.g. Tolstoy's novel *Hadji Murad*), in films (his taste for Hollywood movies of the 1920's is well-known) or even in politics (he admired Bismarck) as the best means to solve concrete ethical problems, by withdrawing from facts in order to look at them with an outsider's point of view.

Consequently, a Wittgensteinian approach to ethics will contend that:

- as the world encompasses all the facts in which values are absent, and as the world is unattainable, we can claim that all so-called 'organisational values' are pure illusions.
- in organisations, ethical problems cannot be posed in terms of moral propositions or ideals. Scepticism will need to be mustered in the face of ethical codes of conduct: identifying whatever makes no sense in the discourse prevailing in such contexts could be one of the exercises that may be usefully practiced.
- in organisations, everything is related to the circumstances in which actions are executed; thus the study of organisational ethics has to focus exclusively on concrete moral situations, not on discourse (principle of the unspeakable nature of ethics). What matters here is to understand the behaviour of the individuals who make ethical decisions in the very context in which such decisions are made. Another exercise might be to analyse the oppositions and discrepancies that may exist between, on the one hand, established ethical doctrines, individual ethical choices, official professional codes, and on the other hand, actual social behaviours. The goal of such exercises would be to show the diversity of the forms of life which are at work in organisations.
- a governance whereby rules play a significant role cannot eschew pondering over the manner in which people, either individually or within groups, constantly strive to transform such rules.

At the end of the day, it might be possible to summarise the essential meaning of this paper by quoting a comment which Bouveresse once made: "All that the author of the *Tractatus* has ever said or suggested on morality could be summed up, at least in one sense, by a threefold prohibition: never preach, never judge, never establish" (1973, p. 76).

As for the parallel that we have drawn between Wittgenstein and Foucault - since they both considered the demands of ethics as part of a relation to oneself and a return to a concrete way of viewing the world - it would seem to be a fruitful one in order to usher in new orientations, or at least inquire into organisational ethics. More generally, it is part of a current trend, also found in connection with the ethics of virtue, which aims at putting moral motives at the centre of social organisations. It raises, however, numerous questions on the status of this moral issue and the consequences of this solipsism. In fact, these positions could not be more distant from the 'conventional' definition of morality stemming chiefly from the Renaissance period and the age of Enlightenment and tend to its complete dissolution (Robinson, 2003; Flynn, 2005). The 'I' used by Wittgenstein is indeed more psychological than metaphysical; it rejects any form of subjectivism and of private language. As concerns ethics, it establishes a rigorous self-to-self relation, i.e. an individuation process without any subject lying beyond language. Under such circumstances, are we not running the risk of reducing to silence Wittgenstein's collective ethics, let alone making it outright impossible? Can we thus leave the 'I' in front of himself, with no possibility of ever meeting any other individual? Can we simply envision an organisation devoid of any prescription, and to what extent is the silencing of ethics tenable in the face of the many moral problems that present themselves to organisations? For instance, Kierkegaard, to whom any belief was also unfounded, opted instead for a surpassing of ethics; to Ricoeur (1990), the oneself is precisely what allows to envision a relation to others. Contrary to such philosophers, Wittgenstein, after destroying values, leaves an 'I' which is quite lonely and powerless in the face of the reality of others.

Conclusion

In his *Lectures on Aesthetics*, Wittgenstein asks an odd question: "How do I show my approval of a suit?" Is it on account of my particular taste for such or such colour? Because it was designed thanks to the talent of my favourite tailor? Because it was made to my own measurements? Wittgenstein takes us in another direction: "Chiefly by wearing it often". Action always comes first, the practical dimension exceeding any theory.

In this paper, our intention was to examine the 'practice turn' in business ethics in the light of its philosophical history, focussing on Ludwig Wittgenstein's work. We have demonstrated, mainly thanks to the analyses that were developed early in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, that ethics - which cannot be expressed by ordinary language - should not be considered as facts existing in our world. On the other hand, ethics does exist as an absolute value; it may then become manifest only in behaviours, actions and lifestyles. This is how ethics, which concerns a self-to-self relation, can present itself thanks to contextual elements and practices corresponding to different forms of life. We have then drawn the lessons from such delineation of the field of ethics in the sphere of organisations where the analyses of practices and the study of the use of prevailing moral rules may then replace the assertion of values and ideals. We have also shown the limitations of this contextualism, predicated on immanence and post-metaphysical concepts; we have thus stressed its approach to the question of others, which cannot fail to leave practitioners in an isolated state that is precisely the contrary of what is expected by members of organisations.

As we deliberately chose to dwell on theory, we have not concentrated so much on the content of the practices, behaviours and know-hows to which it refers anyhow. This contribution might therefore be fruitfully complemented by an ethnographic study geared to the key instances when, in organisational phenomena, one may catch a glimpse of ethics which can hardly be found in words.

One should also mention that, although the present study draws on Wittgenstein's main works the *Tractatus* has been the essential source of inspiration of this research, which lends it a limited scope. Should some experts or academics wish to go further into this subject, more importance should probably be given to the Wittgenstein of the second period of his work and even of the last.

In terms of research agenda bearing on the philosophical foundations of business ethics, our impression is that it might be interesting to match Wittgenstein's silence on values, on the one hand, with Kierkegaard's paradox and, on the other hand, with the dialectics of 'the same' and of 'ipseity' formulated by Ricoeur.

Concerning the research trend dedicated to business ethics as practice, it would be judicious to explore further the notion of forms of life, in its biological and cultural senses, as such ethics is at work in organisations. Is it true that we are unable to understand the forms of life harboured by others? Are not the lifestyles existing in organisations full-fledged forms of life, sets of culturally accepted social practices, shared by their members? Had we better study the notion in its close relationship to the games of language observed in organisational contexts? In this light, it would be interesting to revert to the author of *Discipline and Punish* in order to compare Foucault's 'games of truth' with these 'games of language', which are typical of Wittgenstein's second period.

Acknowledgments

The author is grateful for comments from participants at the EBEN Research Conference held in Tampere, Finland, 14-16

June 2010. Translation of this article was done by Dr. Lionel DAHAN, Emeritus Professor, ESCP Europe

References

- Andrews, K. (1989), "Ethics in practice", *Harvard Business Review*, September-October 97-104.
- Argyris, C. & Schön, D. (1974), *Theory in practice*, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco.
- Bernstein, R. (1971), *Praxis and action: Contemporary philosophies of human activity*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia.
- Bourdieu, P. (1980), *Le sens pratique*, Les Editions de Minuit, Paris.
- Bouveresse, J. (2001), "Que veut dire « faire la même chose » ?", *Archives de philosophie*, Vol. 24 n°3, pp. 479-503.
- Bouveresse, J. (1973), *Wittgenstein : la rime et la raison. Science, éthique et esthétique*, Collection Critique, Les éditions de minuit, Paris.
- Carter, C., Clegg, S-R. & Kornberger, M. (2008), "Strategy as practice?", *Strategic Organization*, Vol. 6, pp. 83-99.
- Chauviré, C. (1992), *Présentation des leçons et conversations sur l'esthétique, la psychologie et la croyance religieuse*, Coll. Poche, Gallimard, Paris.
- Chia, R. & MacKay, B. (2007), "Post-processual challenges for the emerging strategy-as-practice perspective: Discovering strategy in the logic of practice", *Human Relations*, Vol. 60 n°1, pp. 217-242.
- Clegg, S., Kornberger, M. & Rhodes, C. (2007), "Business Ethics as Practice", *British Journal of Management*, Vol. 18, pp. 107-122.
- Colby, M. (1999), "The Epistemological Foundations of Practical Reason", *Inquiry*, Vol. 42(1), pp. 25-48.
- Cometti, J-P. (2002), *Notes et présentation des Remarques Mêlées*, Flammarion, Paris.
- Crary, A. (2005), "Wittgenstein and ethics: a discussion with reference to On Certainty", in Moyal-Sharrock, D. & Brenner, W. (Eds), *Readings of Wittgenstein's On Certainty*, Palgrave, Basingstoke, pp. 275-301.
- Foucault, M. (2009), *Le courage de la vérité, le gouvernement de soi et des autres II*, Cours au Collège de France 1983-1984, Gallimard/Le Seuil, Paris.
- Foucault, M. (2008), *Le gouvernement de soi et des autres*, Cours au Collège de France 1982-1983, Gallimard/Le Seuil, Paris.
- Foucault, M. (2001a), *L'herméneutique du sujet*, Cours au Collège de France 1981-1982, Gallimard/Le Seuil, Paris.
- Gay, W-C. (1994), "From Wittgenstein to Applied Philosophy", *The International Journal of Applied Philosophy*, Vol. 9 n°1, pp. 15-20.
- Giarelli, J-M. (2002), "On Wittgenstein, the Practice of Ethics, and Moral Education", *Philosophy of education*, pp. 258-261.
- Giddens, A. (1984), *The Constitution of Society. Outline of the Theory of Structuration*, Polity Press, Cambridge.
- Glock, H-J (2003), *Dictionnaire Wittgenstein*, Nrf Gallimard, Paris.
- Gomez, P.I. (2005), "Une esthétique de l'entrepreneur", in Hatchuel, A., Pezet, E., Starkey, K and Lenay, O (eds), *Gouvernement, organisation et gestion : l'héritage de Michel Foucault*, Les Presses de l'Université de Laval, pp. 253-272.
- Gros, F. (2007), "Le souci de soi antique chez Michel Foucault : tentative de comparaison avec le coaching contemporain", in Pezet, E (eds), *Management et conduite de soi – Enquête sur les ascèses de la performance*, Vuibert, Paris, pp. 99-108.
- Hadot, P. (2003), *Wittgenstein et les limites du langage*, Vrin, Paris.
- Hadot, P. (2002), *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique*, Albin Michel, Paris.
- Jackall, R. (1988), *Moral Mazes: the World of Corporate Managers*, Oxford University Press, New York.
- Jarzabkowski, P. (2005), *Strategy as practice. An activity-based approach*, Sage, London;
- Jimenez, J. (2008), *Dossier sur La Conférence sur l'éthique*, Folio Plus philosophie, Gallimard, Paris.
- Johnson, G., Langley, A., Melin, L & Whittington, R. (2007), *Strategy as Practice, Research Directions and Resources*, Cambridge University Press, UK.
- Klonoski, R. (2003), "Unapplied Ethics: On The Need For Classical Philosophy In Professional Ethics Education", *Teaching Business Ethics*, Vol. 7, pp. 21-35.
- Lambert, C. and Pezet, E. (2005), "Discipliner les autres et agir sur soi - Les vies du contrôleur de gestion", *Proceedings of the Critical Perspectives on Accounting*, pp. 1-9.
- Laugier, S. (2001), "Où se trouvent les règles ?", *Archives de philosophie*, Vol. 64 n°3, pp. 505-524.
- Miettinen, R., Samra-Fredericks, D. & Yanow, D. (2009), "Re-Turn to Practice: An Introductory Essay", *Organization Studies*, Vol. 30 n°12, pp. 1309-1323.
- Moore, G & Beadle, R. (2006), "In Search of Organizational Virtue in Business: Agents, Goods, Practices, Institutions and Environments", *Organization Studies*, Vol. 27, n° 3, pp. 369-389.
- Mulhall, S. (2002), "Ethics in the Light Of Wittgenstein", *Philosophical Papers*, Vol. 31; n°3, pp. 294-342.
- Nielsen, R.P (1993), "Organization Ethics, a Perspective of Praxis", *Business Ethics Quarterly*, Vol. 3, Issue 2, pp. 131-151.
- Pezet, E. (2007), "Coaching : souci de soi et pouvoir", in Pezet, E (eds), *Management et conduite de soi – Enquête sur les ascèses de la performance*, Vuibert, Paris, pp. 77-98.
- Phillips, N. (1992), "Understanding Ethics in Practice: an Ethno methodological Approach to the Study of Business Ethics", *Business Ethics Quarterly*, Volume 2 Issue 2, pp. 223-245.
- Pleasant, N. (2008), "Wittgenstein, Ethics and Basic Moral Certainty", *Inquiry*, Vol. 51 n° 3, pp. 241-267.
- Reynaud, B. (2005), "Pour une approche wittgensteinienne des règles économiques", *Revue de métaphysique et de morale*, n°47, pp. 349-374.
- Reynaud, B. (2003), "Le gouvernement par les règles dans les organisations", in Séminaire Condor (contradictions et dynamiques dans les organisations), L'Harmattan, 141-203.
- Reynaud, B. (2002), *Operating rules in Organizations*, Palgrave Macmillan, Houndmills, Basingstoke, UK.
- Reynaud, B. (2001), "Suivre les règles dans les organisations", *Revue d'économie industrielle*, n°97, pp. 53-68.
- Rhees, R. (1970), *Discussions of Wittgenstein*, Routledge & Kegan, London.
- Ricoeur, P. (1990), *Soi-même comme un autre*, Seuil, Paris.
- Rigual, E. (1997), "Wittgenstein, lecteur de Kierkegaard", *Kairos*, n°10, pp. 193-214.
- Robinson, K. (2003), "The Passion and The Pleasure, Foucault's Art of Not Being Oneself", *Theory, Culture and Society*, Vol. 20 n°2, pp. 119-144.
- Schatzki, T. (1996), *Social Practices. A Wittgensteinian Approach to Human Activity and the Social*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

- Shoter, J. (2005), "Inside the Moment of Managing: Wittgenstein and the Everyday Dynamics of Our Expressive-Responsive Activities", *Organization Studies*, Vol. 26(1), pp. 113-135.
- Sluga, H. (1998), "What has history to do with me? Wittgenstein and Analytic Philosophy", *Inquiry*, Vol. 41, pp. 99-121.
- Van de Ven, A.H. & Johnson, P.E. (2006), "Knowledge For Theory and Practice", *Academy of Management Review*, Vol. 31(4), pp. 802-821.
- Veyne, P. (1998), *Le dernier Foucault et sa morale*, *Critique*, Vol. 468, pp. 933-941.
- Wittgenstein, L. (1933), *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Kegan Paul, London.
- Wittgenstein, L. (1966), *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford.
- Wittgenstein, L. (1969), *On certainty*, Translated by G. E. M. Anscombe & G.H. von Wright, Harper Torchbooks, New York.
- Wittgenstein, L. (1980), *Culture and Value*, Translated by Peter Winch, Blackwell Publishers, Oxford.
- Wittgenstein, L. (1990), *Remarques mêlées*, Flammarion, Paris.
- Wittgenstein, L. (2001), *Philosophical Investigations*, Translated by G.E.M Anscombe, 3rd version, Blackwell Publishers, Oxford.
- Wittgenstein, L. (2007), *Lecture on ethics*, TS 207 diplomatic version, Edited by Edoardo Zalmuner, E. Velentina Di Lascio and David Levy, Verbarium Quodlibet, Macerata, Italy.

Abbreviations used:

CV : Culture and Value

LE: Lecture on Ethics

OC: On Certainty.

PI: Philosophical Investigations

RM : Remarques mêlées

T: Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus

Author

Ghislain Deslandes, DBA, Ph. D. in philosophy, is associate professor at ESCP Europe. His teaching activity has focused on the media and cultural management, organizational identity management and business ethics. His research interests cut across different fields, especially management, philosophy and communication. Ghislain Deslandes is a member of La Société Française de Philosophie, as well as of the EMMA (European Media Management Association) and EBEN (European Business Ethics Network). He is the author of a number of articles, business cases and has recently published *Le Management des Médias* (Coll. Repères, La Découverte).

Contact:

Ghislain Deslandes

Associate Professor

ESCP Europe

79, Ave. de la République

75011 – Paris

Tél : +33 1 49 23 20 69

e-mail : deslandes@escpeurope.eu