

Contingency and Ethics in Wittgenstein's Tractatus

[Chon Tejedor](#)

Universitat de València

15/12/2018

In recent sessions of the Valencia Philosophy Lab, we have been discussing a number of metaphysical and ethical questions arising from determinism. In this Colloquium talk, I would like to explore, by way of a contrast, the question of which form of ethics – if any – would be available to us if reality were fundamentally contingent, rather than deterministic. By ‘fundamentally contingent’ I mean here a reality devoid of causal necessity: a reality in which facts do not causally or naturally necessitate each other.

Concerns over the possibility of ethics in a fundamentally contingent world permeate Wittgenstein’s early writings. In the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, these concerns culminate in a double conclusion: firstly, that the philosophical commitment to causal necessity must be abandoned for it is essentially self-subverting; secondly, that becoming clear as to the fundamental contingency of the world opens the way for – rather than rules out – ethics.

In the first part of my talk, I will present Wittgenstein’s reasons for abandoning the commitment to causal necessity and for endorsing an alternative understanding of causation. As we will see, Wittgenstein’s abandonment of causal necessity is unconnected to Hume’s empiricist concerns over the lack of relevant impressions, but arises from a series of considerations on the application of logical operations in ordinary language and thought.

In the second half of the talk, I will discuss what form of ethics remains available to us, in the face of a fundamentally contingent world. Although I will keep exegetical discussions to a minimum, we will see that, in the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein *discards* – rather than embraces – the Schopenhauerian notions of transcendental choice, abandonment of desire, and emotive ineffability. What emerges in their stead is an ethics of clarity in our position in the world. It is with this understanding of ethics in mind that Wittgenstein comes to describe the *Tractatus*, in a 1918 letter to Paul Engelmann, as ‘a machine for becoming decent’.

This talk is based on material from my book *The Early Wittgenstein on Metaphysics, Natural Science, Language and Value* (Routledge: Abingdon & New York, 2015).