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"DEATH IS NOT AN EVENT IN LIFE. DEATH IS NOT LIVED THROUGH." (TLP 6.4311) – DEATH AS AN EVENT AND AS THE BOUNDARY OF THE WORLD IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF LUDWIG WITTGENSTEIN*

Abstract: Ludwig Wittgenstein, one of the greatest philosophers of the 20th century, is an intellectual giant whose work is not only proving enduring but is even more flourishing today than during his lifetime. Only one of his works was published during his lifetime, but it made him a legend in the world of philosophy: the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*.

One sentence in the *Tractatus* that urgently requires interpretation is TLP 6.4311, in which he asserts: "Death is not an event in life. Death is not lived through." This sentence is surrounded by other sentences that allow for an analysis of what Wittgenstein refers to as 'an event in life' on the one hand and 'the experience of death' on the other.

Wittgenstein's thesis that 'death is not an event in life' has far-reaching consequences: If death is not an event in life, then it does not belong to the world. Although death is neither part of the world nor an event in life, it forms a boundary for the living and their experience. With death, temporality ends, which also points to this boundary.

The philosopher does not assign any value to death. Death is neither positive nor negative, but simply a neutral event. Life only acquires meaning through death. In view of the reality of death, ethical questions are also considered, because every person must die as a human being and face death itself.

With death, not only life ends, but also the world. The world ceases to exist because the subject ceases to live. Thus, the precondition for the world is no longer given. The existence of the subject ends. Wittgenstein reveals himself to be a transcendental idealist, since the transcendental subject does not belong to the world but is a condition of the world that ends with the death of the subject.

Keywords: *Ludwig Wittgenstein, death, event, life, boundary*

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Ulrich Arnswald (2026). "'Death is not an event in life. Death is not lived through.' (TLP 6.4311) – Death as an Event and as the Boundary of the World in the Philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein." In M. Nyírő, Zs. Lurcza, P. Makai (eds.): *EVENT and Its Mediation: Interdisciplinary Perspectives in Philosophy, Religious Studies, Literary Studies, and Cultural Theory* (300–311). Miskolc: Miskolc University Press, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences https://doi.org/10.70832/EVENTanditsMediation.16

1. Introduction

Many consider Ludwig Wittgenstein to be the greatest philosopher of the 20th century.[1] The Austrian philosopher is undoubtedly an intellectual giant whose work is not only proving enduring but is even more flourishing today than during his lifetime. During his lifetime, only one work was published, but it immediately made him a classic and a legend in philosophy: the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*.

One of the passages most urgently in need of interpretation in Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus (TLP)*,[2] first published in 1922, is the sentence TLP 6.4311, where he claims: "Death is not an event in life. Death is not lived through." This sentence is surrounded by further sentences that allow a closer analysis of what Wittgenstein refers to, on the one hand, as an 'event in life' and, on the other, as the 'experience of death'. Whether this allows for an adequate understanding and description of Wittgenstein's view of death is the subject of the present study.

The article also attempts to examine what, according to Wittgenstein, is accessible to human consciousness under these circumstances and what this means for our approach to death.

2. Two Possible Interpretations of the Sentence "Death is not an Event in Life"

Looking at the first part of TLP 6.4311, the sentence "Death is not an event in life", two meaningful interpretations are theoretically possible, although one would make little sense:

The first possible interpretation would be that death is not a fact at all. This is contradicted by the fact that there would then be little need to talk about it, which would not make much sense, because in life we experience the death of others insofar as they are no longer accessible to us afterwards. Death is therefore something that affects us in life, even if we do not experience it ourselves. Nevertheless, the loss of other people constantly reminds us of our own mortality. In the death of others, we encounter death, even if not as our own personal experience.

Of course, the sentence could be phrased more clearly then as follows: 'The experience of death is not an event in one's own life.' That would obviously be much more precise if Wittgenstein had intended it that way. But precisely this can be

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1 Cf. Duncan Richter, *Historical Dictionary of Wittgenstein's Philosophy* (Lanham / Boulder / New York / Toronto / Plymouth, UK: Rowman and Littlefield, 2014), 1; cf. Joaquín Jareño-Alarcón, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Meaning of Life* (Hoboken, N.J.: Wiley Blackwell, 2023), 9.

2 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (London / New York: Routledge, 1996). All further quotations from Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* are cited according to the usual TLP seal and sentence number and always refer to the edition cited here.

questioned. The fact that he does not do so probably indicates that Wittgenstein wants to refer to something else. There must be a good reason why he deliberately left the sentence in the *Tractatus* unclear. I shall return to this point later.

Let's now look at the second possible interpretation: It could mean that if death is not an event of life, it does not belong to the world either. One only experiences events while alive and conscious. Since death is the absence of consciousness, the person who has died cannot experience his or her own death. It is an end, not a phase that one lives through.

This means that while death is a real occurrence, it is not an event within our lives because we cannot be conscious of it; it is the cessation of all experience. To experience something, one must be alive, and death is the end of that state, making it inaccessible to consciousness. Since experience requires being alive, it is impossible to experience death itself.

However, death thus represents a boundary of what can be experienced in life. Although death is thus not a part of the world and not an event in life, it constitutes a boundary for the living and their experience. The world, for a living person, is his or her visual field or sphere of experience. Death, in this view, is not an experience within that world, but rather the point at which the world itself ends for that individual.

With death, temporality also ends, and this too points to the said boundary. Temporality is therefore a concept that only makes sense in life. In Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, temporality is treated as a form of timelessness, where eternity is not endless duration but timelessness, and "he lives eternally who lives in the present" (TLP 6.4311).

This perspective is linked to the idea of the world as a fact, existing in a moment outside of sequential time, with the present being the only aspect of our 'world' that we experience, and when we die, our world dies with us.

3. Death in the World

At this point, things become a little more complex: Wittgenstein begins his *Tractatus* with the sentence: "The world is everything that is the case." (TLP 1) Since the death of other people exists in the world, death also exists in the world. When we say that someone is dead, it means to us that our experience of that person as an individual has come to an end. All that remains is the corpse, the body of our former fellow human being, but not the person him- or herself. In this context, it becomes clear that a certain way of talking about death makes sense in life.

In TLP 4.024, Wittgenstein says: "To understand a proposition means to know what is the case, if it is true." And this is precisely the case here. We understand what the case is, if the statement is true. Here, Wittgenstein is clearly not referring to death in

the sense of human experience in life, i.e., not to one's own death, which cannot be reflected in a sentence in life, since there is no experience in life that could convey the experience of death to us. If it were, otherwise, it would also be logically inconceivable.

So, when Wittgenstein says, "Death is not an event in life", he is talking about the experience of death as an individual experience of each person. A division into purely objective existence and subjective existence (as a self-aware ego) seems here most appropriate. Wittgenstein, who maintains his focus on individual experience, confirms this view in his *Notebooks*, where we also find the sentence "Death is not an event in life", albeit with the addition "It is not a fact of the world".[3]

The difference between 'in life' and 'in the world' is important because, although it refers to the self, the statement in the *Notebooks* now confirms that it is about individual experience, not the death of others, which also manifests itself in the world, but in a different way. To put it more clearly: Talking about the experience of one's own death in life or in the world is not comparable to talking about the death of others and the associated experience of loss. But the *Tractatus* also returns to this point, albeit in different words: 'Death is not lived through', which is also clear insofar as hardly anyone can expect to experience the death of another person in life.

So, what does that mean? Any conversation about death in life cannot say anything about one's own death as an event. It can only refer to an event that will occur in the future, but whose experience lies outside our world. However, since we cannot talk about something that we cannot experience in this world at all, talking about it makes no sense. In the case of our own experience of death, we do not know what the case is if it is true, so it is pointless to talk about it here in a literal sense.

One might think that this says it all. But this cannot be the case, if only because Wittgenstein understood his *Tractatus* primarily as an ethical text, as he wrote to Ludwig von Ficker in a famous letter:

> The point of the book is ethical. I once wanted to give a few words in the foreword which now actually are not in it, which, however, I'll write for you now because they might be a key for you: I wanted to write that my work consists of two parts: the one which is here, and of everything which I have not written. And precisely this second part is the important one. For the Ethical is delimited from within, as it were, by my book; and I'm convinced that, strictly speaking, it can ONLY be delimited this way.[4]

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[3] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Notebooks 1914–1916* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1979), NB, 8.7.16, 75e. All quotations from Wittgenstein's *Notebooks* are cited according to the usual NB seal and date and always refer to the edition cited here.

[4] Ludwig Wittgenstein, "Letters to Ludwig von Ficker," in *Wittgenstein: Sources and Perspec-tives*, ed. Charles Grant Luckhardt (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1979), 94f.

4. Ethics and Death as a Boundary

Based on this understanding, one must ask the question: Where does ethics come into play here?

Wittgenstein does not attach any value connotation to death. Death is neither positive nor negative, but simply a neutral event. However, according to Wittgenstein life only acquires meaning with death.[5] In the face of actual death, ethical issues are considered, because every person must die as a human being and face death itself.

Already during the First World War, while writing the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Ludwig Wittgenstein's search for the meaning of life took on existentialist traits.[6] It is no coincidence that Bruening states: "This notion of a false life has some connection with what some existentialist call bad faith or inauthenticity."[7] The fact that Wittgenstein says nothing about how one should live one's life stems from his postulate that the world is independent of the will of the subject (cf. TLP 6.373),[8] that means that the objective world's factual reality does not depend on individual desires or intentions.

Wittgenstein succinctly sums up the idea that the right and therefore ethical life can only be seen against the backdrop of death in his *Notebooks 1914-1916*: "Fear in face of death is the best sign of a false, i.e., a bad, life." [NB, 8.7.16] For Wittgenstein, this necessitates constant examination of one's own conscience and life. The question always arises as to whether one is living the wrong life instead of the right one and whether one therefore needs to change one's life.

This ethical examination is only necessary in the face of death, because only the boundary of death requires us to reflect on and define our own lives at all. Wittgenstein himself pursues these thoughts, which arise from the perspective of death, in phases, even into his dreams,[9] when he writes: *"I am often thinking about*

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5 Cf. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Movements of Thought: Ludwig Wittgenstein's Diary, 1930–1932 and 1936–1937* (Lanham / Boulder / New York / Toronto / Plymouth, UK: Rowman and Littlefield, 2023), MT 4.2.[37]; MT 9.2.[37]; MT 15.2.[37]; MT 17.2.[37]; MT 20.2.[37]; MT 22.2.[37]. All quotations from Wittgenstein's *Movements of Thought* are cited according to the usual MT seal and date and always refer to the edition cited here. Cf. NB, 8.7.16, 75e.

6 Cf. Ulrich Arnswald, "'A Test of Fire of One's Character' – Ludwig Wittgenstein's Self-Examination by Means of War in World War I." *Journal of Austrian Studies* 57, no. 2 (2024): 84f.

7 William H. Bruening, "Wittgenstein's View of Death," *Philosophical Studies* 25 (1976): 61.

8 Cf. Ulrich Arnswald, "The Paradox of Ethics – 'It leaves everything as it is.'," in *In Search of Meaning*, ed. Ulrich Arnswald (Karlsruhe: Universitätsverlag Karlsruhe, 2009), 10.

9 Wittgenstein even enlisted for service in World War I, not primarily to serve his homeland of Austria, but to learn how to live a good life in the face of death and to purify himself. He wanted to experience physical and psychological extreme situations on the battlefields, which would enrich him as an experience and provide him with insights into how he should lead his life correctly. Cf. Ulrich Arnswald, "'Die Furcht vor dem Tode ist das beste Zeichen eines falschen, d.h. schlechten Leben.'

death now & about how I will prevail in the anguish of death, & the dream relates to that." [MT 9.2.[37]]

The bridge is built in the *Tractatus*, where Wittgenstein says in TLP 5.621: "The world and life are one." So, if this is the case, then the following applies: With death, not only life ends, but also the world. The world does not change, but it ceases to exist because the subject ceases to live. With the death of the subject, the precondition for the world is no longer given. The existence of the subject ends. In this way, Wittgenstein reveals himself in TLP 5.632 "The subject does not belong to the world but it is a limit of the world." to be a transcendental idealist, since the transcendental subject does not belong to the world but is a condition of the world that ends with the death of the subject.

According to Wittgenstein, death is not an event in life (in the world) because:

Firstly, it is the death of the subject, and the transcendental subject does not belong to the world,

and

secondly, the transcendental subject is a condition of the world, so that the death of the subject is the end of the world.

As an interim summary, Wittgenstein's position can now be described as follows: Death is *not* an event in the world; death is *not* experienced; death does *not* change the world but rather causes it to cease to exist.

Here, too, one might want to conclude, but the question would remain open as to why Wittgenstein believes that TLP 5.632 "The subject does not belong to the world but is the boundary of the world." — is true, in other words, how does he know that the subject represents the boundary of the world.

5. Death as the End of Experience

The prerequisite for talking about individual death as an experience is to know what happens when the statement is true. However, when death occurs, the individual whose life has ended can no longer express their experience of this circumstance. Death can no longer be articulated intersubjectively and is thus not a human

– Ludwig Wittgensteins Suche nach dem Sinn des Lebens inmitten des Ersten Weltkriegs," *Contributions of the Austrian Ludwig Wittgenstein Society* 23 (2015): 15; cf. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Private Notebooks 1914–1916* (New York, N.Y.: Liveright Publishing Corporation; London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2022), PN 29.7.16: 185.

experience in life. According to TLP 4.024, there are therefore no sentences that satisfy the requirement: "To understand a proposition means to know what is the case, if it is true."

This means that we associate a person's existence with their life; their non-existence is associated with death. However, according to TLP 6.4311 non-existence is interpreted as eternal in the sense of timelessness from the moment of death. This means that the dead are permanently dead, and this cannot be equated with the loss of existence.

In other words, when someone is dead, they can no longer say anything about the loss of existence; while they are alive, they cannot articulate anything about it because they have not yet had the experience. Thus, death is outside of life and non-existence. However, death remains an event on the border between life and non-existence.

It now follows that: Since death is the end of the world and refers to the individual subject, which as a transcendental subject cannot be part of the world because it cannot gain this experience in the world, death itself cannot be regarded as an event that takes place in the world. Death therefore must lie outside the world and is therefore beyond our experience.

Death is therefore a singular event in every respect: It does not take place in life or in non-existence. However, one cannot say that this moment of experience does not exist. It is the transition from life to death, and thus an immediate event that is neither an event in death nor an event in life, but an event *sui generis* — between life and death.

This allows Wittgenstein to make another statement in TLP 6.431 that seems strange at first glance: "As in death, too, the world does not change, but ceases." Here, he refers in a smooth transition to the preceding sentence from TLP 6.43: "The world of the happy is quite another than that of the unhappy." These are the last two sentences before TLP 6.4311. What he describes here means that there is such an abrupt transition not only between life and death, but also between happiness and unhappiness, that the world changes suddenly and it is impossible to determine where the boundary between happiness and unhappiness lies.

This might be true in terms of the boundary, but hardly true in terms of the experience of happiness and unhappiness, since both can be experienced in the world by an individual — but never at the same time. However, it is also true that the world remains the same regardless of whether someone is happy or unhappy, and this also applies when someone dies, since moral feelings do not change the facts of the world. Only a dead person is no longer part of the world. Their world ends, because TLP 5.631 gives us the reason: "I am my world. (The microcosm.)"

This makes it clear that the end of our world, death, is also not the subject of a world in which everything is that is the case. But it is just as little a part of eternity,

because it is not unlimited in time. Death says nothing about eternity. Death refuses to accept the ontological structure of any given situation. It is an in-between. Therefore, Wittgenstein does not give it either a positive or a negative connotation.

6. World and Life

In TLP 5.621, Wittgenstein equates world and life, when he states: "The world and life are one."

He believes that the boundary between the subjective experience of life and the objective totality of the world is not clearly defined. Such a boundary also arises between the world and language, but this will not be discussed here and has already been elaborated elsewhere.[10] To say that the world exists is also to affirm the existence of life within it and to establish a connection between subjective experience and the world of facts.

Life defines the existence of a subject, since it is their world and thus a world. It can therefore be concluded that a world can only exist if it is the world of a subject, i.e., a human being. Conversely, every subject is always a world unto itself. This reveals the unity of life and the world. TLP 5.621 means that the world and life form a kind of inseparable unity, but at the same time it does not mean that the totality of facts of the world must literally be identical with life, which is the life of an individual.[11]

But if every human being is a world in itself, then death does not destroy the world, since it only exists as long as the subject exists. However, if death takes the subject with it, i.e., destroys the ego, then it can no longer belong to the world, since it has destroyed the ego that constituted the world. Thus, if each person is a unique 'world' or 'totality of facts' in their subjective experience, then death, being outside of experience, does not destroy that world, but rather marks its end.

From this we derive the following conclusion: Death is not an object of the world. Not only is it not experienced, but it is also not even part of the world, since the world is always bound to an ego. With death, the world ends, and the world of the subject lives only as long as the subject lives.

But if death is not part of the structure of factual circumstances in the world, the question arises as to what nature an event can be. It seems like the field of aspect

[10] Cf. Ulrich Arnswald, "Das Unsagbare und die Grenzen der Welt. Ludwig Wittgenstein über Ausdrückbarkeit und Intelligibilität in Relation zu Gadamer," in *Hermeneutik und die Grenzen der Sprache*, eds. Ulrich Arnswald, Jens Kertscher, and Louise Röska-Hardy (Heidelberg: Manutius Verlag, 2012), 113–140.

[11] Cf. Richard McDonough, "The 'Mystical' Phenomenology of the 'Life-World' in Wittgen-stein's Tractatus," *META: Research in Hermeneutics, Phenomenology, and Practical Philosophy* 8, no. 2 (2021): 572.

perception, which Wittgenstein introduces into his philosophy using reversible images. Here, too, it is something more immediate, changing the world in a matter of seconds, which does not correspond to the comprehension of a fact.[12] Death must therefore be something instantaneous and immediate. It does not occur gradually. It is undoubtedly also the end of all capacity for experience.

Death as my death is not one of the events that make up my life. It only definitively ends it. What is decisive for a life is the metaphysical relationship of the self to the world. Because death transcends the existence of a subject, it is possible to give one's life direction, especially in terms of the ethical aspects that so preoccupied Wittgenstein.

We associate a person's existence with his or her life, given that life and world are one. Every person can therefore always determine what they live for. The unambiguous statement 'The experience of death is not an event in one's own life' would therefore have been too clear. It would have removed the reflection on the authorship of life in the face of inevitable death, which is still possible for everyone, because life and world are one, and death does not determine the events of life.

The world is always my world. We can talk about its existence insofar as there is a subject that conditions the possibility of the world. On the other hand, the self is only possible because the world, by definition, requires the subject as a prerequisite.[13] The subject is the epistemological and metaphysical prerequisite of the world. The concept of the world is tied to the subject's perception.

For Wittgenstein, our personal world exists only in our lifetime, and when the individual dies, his or her subjective world also ceases to exist. If the subject is the prerequisite of the world, then the thesis becomes clear that the world does not change at death but comes to an end; if the prerequisite of the world ceases to exist, the world must also end.

With the death of the subject, the precondition for the world is no longer given. The existence of the subject ends. In this way, Wittgenstein reveals himself in sentence TLP 5.632, which asserts that the subject does not belong to the world, but is only a boundary of it, as a transcendental idealist, since the transcendental subject, the I, does not belong to the world, but is a condition of the world that ends with the death of the subject.

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[12] Cf. Ulrich Arnswald, "Zur Analogie von Wittgensteins Konzept des Aspektwechsels und der wissenschaftlichen Metapher als Vehikel der Innovation," *Publications of the Austrian Ludwig Wittgenstein Society – New Series* 26 (2019): 357–373.

[13] Cf. NB, 12.8.16.

7. Conclusion

Wittgenstein argues that 'Death is not an event in life' because we cannot live through it. Thus, death as my death is not one of the events that make up my life. It only ends it. When death occurs, we no longer exist to experience it. Death in this sense is the end of experience in life.

This perspective is linked to the idea of the world as a fact, existing in a moment outside of sequential time, with the present being the only aspect of our 'world' that we experience. When we die, our world dies with us.

Rather, it is the metaphysical relationship of the self to the world that is decisive for life. The idea that 'every human being is a world in itself' suggests that everyone's experienced world is a unique totality of facts. If this individual world ceases to exist upon death, it's not because the world itself was destroyed, but because the subject experiencing it is gone. Therefore, from the perspective of death, one's own world doesn't change; it simply ceases to be experienced. Therefore, death does not change the world but rather brings it to an end.

Life can be given direction because death transcends the existence of a subject. This enables reflection on life and thus the question of ethics, of what constitutes a meaningful life. Every human being can therefore consciously give their life direction. The fulfillment of the purpose of existence encompasses the pursuit of the absolute, as Wittgenstein explicitly propagates: "And the only absolute is, to battle through life toward death, like a fighting, a charging soldier. Everything else is wavering, cowardice, sloth, thus wretchedness." (MT 20.2.[37])

Since the realization of one's own impending death leads one to question one's own way of life, ethics develops as the art of living correctly. If it were otherwise, it would have eliminated reflection on the authorship of life in the face of inevitable death, which is still possible for everyone because life and the world are one and death does not determine the events of life.

Our personal world exists only during our lifetime. When a person dies, their subjective world also ceases to exist. But if the subject is the prerequisite for the world, then Wittgenstein's thesis that the world does not change upon death, but rather comes to an end, is understandable. This is logical, because if the prerequisite for the world ceases to exist, then the world must also come to an end.

With the death of the subject, its existence ends and the prerequisite for the world is no longer given. Wittgenstein reveals himself as a transcendental idealist. For the ego, the transcendental subject, does not belong to the world, but is a condition of it, which inevitably ends with the death of the subject.

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