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# Wittgenstein's Liberating Word: A Meditation on Philosophy and God

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Wittgenstein's Liberating Word: A Meditation on Philosophy and God

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy in Philosophy

by

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This thesis is approved for recommendation to the Graduate Council.

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## ABSTRACT

This project is an attempt to understand the nature of religious belief through the lens of Ludwig Wittgenstein's philosophical perspective. Chapter One outlines Wittgenstein's approach to language and meaning and explores the tension that many contemporary analytic philosophers of religion find in Wittgensteinian approaches to religious belief. Chapter Two addresses concerns Wittgenstein had with Frege's understanding of logic and the limits of thought and ties it to criticism from Wittgensteinian philosophers about the possibility of making *any* sense of religious belief. Chapter Three pulls together the concerns of the previous two chapters and attempts to reconcile them. A schematic outline of religious belief is presented and then put into conversation with work done by Iris Murdoch.

## DEDICATION

*These pages are dedicated to Dr. Royal Mulholland and Ms. Ruth Huston. Each planted in me a seed of conviction that world and spirit, God willing, can be one.*

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## Introduction

But when we look beyond human affairs and the properties of the surrounding bodies: when we carry our speculations into the two eternities, before and after the present state of things; into the creation and formation of the universe; the existence and properties of spirits; the powers and operations of one universal Spirit existing without beginning and without end; omnipotent, omniscient, immutable, infinite, and incomprehensible: we must be far removed from the smallest tendency to scepticism not to be apprehensive, that we have here got quite beyond the reach of our faculties. So long as we confine our speculations to trade, or morals, or politics, or criticism, we make appeals, every moment, to common sense and experience, which strengthen our philosophical conclusions, and remove, at least in part, the suspicion which we so justly entertain with regard to every reasoning that is very subtle and refined. But, in theological reasonings, we have not this advantage; while, at the same time, we are employed upon objects, which, we must be sensible, are too large for our grasp, and of all others, require most to be familiarised to our apprehension. We are like foreigners in a strange country, to whom every thing must seem suspicious, and who are in danger every moment of transgressing against the laws and customs of the people with whom they live and converse. We know not how far we ought to trust our vulgar methods of reasoning in such a subject; since, even in common life, and in that province which is peculiarly appropriated to them, we cannot account for them, and are entirely guided by a kind of instinct or necessity in employing them.

Philo in Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*

## I

In religious thought the duality of immanence and transcendence is ever at play. As Hume suggests, if religious belief presses as firmly as it does on the transcendent nature of God, then how might it have contact, in *any* sense, with the reality that is the reality of God? Whereas pressing firmly on God's immanence, as the Christian tradition has done (perhaps maximally so) in regard to the person of Jesus, threatens to distort the otherness of God by remaking God in our own image. God becomes nothing more than an *object* in creation, which, as many religious traditions hold, is just another way to confess that we've fundamentally misunderstood God's nature.

Religion both makes claim to the deep, to the universal, to the transcendent nature of the world; and yet, also, what makes religion intelligible is its particular practices, its place in history, its claim to an immanent presence in the lives of those who believe. An analysis that emphasizes the transcendent will make the particularity of religious belief seem trivial, perhaps even false. Speaking of the transcendent as an immanent thing in our midst may very well count as a contradiction in terms. Say only that God is love—and be willing to retract even that if pressed—and nothing false will be thought. But still, Christianity is a religion committed to the humanity of Christ—to the revelation that God is not only to be worshipped but is *physically* present in the world. Take whatever minimalist claim one might make about Christian faith—that *God is love*, for instance—Christians see that claim as inseparable from the claim that Christ is God incarnate. In Christ *God is love* is made intelligible.

This emphasis on God's immanent presence among us, though, looks very much to deny the possibility that God might exist outside the particular manifestation of this religious token (Christ) and the religion—and all its history—that followed after him. If, as Christians claim, the

importance of Christ is universal, then mustn't that downgrade other particular articulations of the transcendent? Doesn't the universality of Christ create a conflict among other religious expressions of the transcendent? Can a transcendent thing *truly ever* bear a particular expression without distorting itself? Mustn't we evaluate multiple expressions of the transcendent as in conflict with one another; and if so, by what standard? *Mustn't* we see that there are only problems wrapped in problems here?

Consider this religious picture. Christ is God. Two things ought to be said simultaneously. First, there is something in this picture that is impossible to state. Second, this first point is itself a religious confession. This project will want to claim both that (as the paragraph before this one highlights) religious thought can lead us into confusion—highlighting the kind of confusion that religious belief can facilitate—and also that the religious picture, *Christ is God*, is an intelligible picture. When we approach aspects of our lives that focus on matters of value—whether that be aesthetic, moral, or religious—there is something in that form of life that might be laid bare as *true* without appeal—there is no getting outside language—and *also* there is something in that kind of investigation that (as a matter of course) will forever remain hidden. Thought about value is characterized by these two facts. It's wrapped up in transcendence and immanence.

This project will work to hold both that the words Christians confess are essential to understanding the nature of their way in the world (the lives that they lead, the beliefs that they hold, the way in which they *worship*) and also that *the words* couldn't be less significant. Religious faith is a way of *being*. The employment of any particular word-sign (whether that be “Christ,” “Incarnate,” “Trinity,” “absolute,” “universal,” et cetera) may distort or drown the very religious significance it means to show—it *can* show.



Now this project is a project focused on Wittgenstein and even for those well initiated into Wittgenstein's thought, these concerns must seem very far afield from his interests. Besides the many core issues of his writing this project will consider, this paper will also suggest that there is something like an analogue in Wittgenstein's writing and in the concern of these pages about the impossibility of the transcendent touching our immanent plain—a suggestion that will take a few lines to purchase.<sup>1</sup>

Consider what it takes for a claim to count as true. A strict account will only count a claim true if its being true isn't dependent on the position of the one claiming it. This is an evaluation of truth that stresses its independence. In order for a proposition to count as true we need not investigate the psychological makeup of the claimant. This view of reason (at least of an aspect of it) channels a philosopher for whom Wittgenstein saw himself as a direct respondent, Gottlob Frege. In Frege's *The Foundations of Arithmetic* his first (of three) fundamental principle is this:

always separate sharply the psychological from the logical, the subjective from the objective.<sup>2</sup>

Logic for Frege is the universal domain of thought. Anywhere we might have a thought that represents truly or falsely, the laws of logic must apply. Frege's project in general was to expand that domain into thought about arithmetic (as we we'll see in the second chapter). So regardless of the position (whether physical or psychological) a claimant might find herself *that position*, if we follow the laws of logic, will not determine the truth of the claim. Truth in this sense is universal. Each person capable of thought has the same potential access (ability to evaluate truthfulness) as

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<sup>1</sup> What follows is an articulation of an understanding of Wittgenstein's work through the lens of Frege by Charles Travis. See his "Psychologism," in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Language* (Oxford, 2006). I have significantly adapted Travis' point for my own purposes.

<sup>2</sup> Frege, *The Foundations of Arithmetic* (Northwestern University Press, 1968), p. x.

anyone else. If a claim lacked this universal property its very status as a *true claim of thought* would be discounted. *Wanting* a given claim to be different cannot—if the claim is true in this universal sense—make it thus. The truth of the proposition transcends the particular thoughts of claimants. The upshot of this account is that the truth of a proposition is universally available to all thinkers; no matter what a particular thinker might say or believe, the truth of the proposition stands independent.

On another view of rationality, however, whether a proposition is true or not depends precisely on the position—or context—the claimant stands in. The truth of a claim, on this view, depends on what we are capable of and prepared to recognize as counting as true. What some will demand from a proposition in order to count as true, others will not, and the truth of the proposition will be determined, in part, just by these differing standards—in our agreements and disagreements about what counts as true. Consider Frege’s second fundamental principle:

never to ask for the meaning of a word in isolation, but only in the context of a proposition.<sup>3</sup>

Think of a deck of cards. If I hand a deck over to a friend and ask him to count its number, what number should he give? Frege thinks so far no answer is appropriate: “To have given him the pile in his hands is not yet to have given him completely the object he is to investigate; I must add some further word—cards, or packs, or honours.”<sup>4</sup> My friend might think that I’m inquiring into the total number of cards in the deck, or whether the cards represent a complete deck, or the number of even numbered cards, or the number of the suits, etc. Frege stresses that no answer to the question “How many?” after handing over a deck of cards can be taken as true or false without providing a criterion for answerability—without providing the context in which a

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<sup>3</sup> Frege, *Foundations*, p. x.

<sup>4</sup> Frege, *Foundations*, §22.

question should be evaluated.<sup>5</sup> Wittgenstein will stress the importance of seeing that in our complicated forms of life, though we may have difficulty in making the context for evaluation explicit, our words and our practices *show* the kind of intelligibility they have. For instance, if I were to hand the deck over to my friend and ask him to cut it in two, and he took out his butcher's knife and chopped the deck in half, I would rightly have a case against him. *Usually* I would. If my friend had just arrived from a foreign country, and I knew that our customs were quite unfamiliar to him, it'd be good to see the unexpected outcome of his actions as a cultural miscommunication—that our understanding and expectations lay at a distance from one another.

We can see then that what counts as rational is in part dependent on, as Travis suggests, what “we are prepared, or equipped, to recognize”<sup>6</sup> as such. This brings out the parochial nature of truth. What counts as a true—whether or not we are equipped to enter a true or false judgment—depends on the context in which we find a claim to be evaluated. It depends on our understanding of what counts as true. What it means for a judgment to be right—true—is in this sense dependent on our own parochial norms.

In the evaluation of thought the duality of independence and dependence—the duality of the universal and the parochial—is ever at play. Frege, it's important to note, did not see this interplay as irreconcilable. For instance, even in the question “Give the number of this deck,” once we supply a criterion for evaluation it would be a serious misunderstanding to think of the answer as subjective. For Frege, once the context is understood, if a proposition cannot stand independently—that is, apart from our own psychological particularities—then it will still lose its rational character. Frege saw that all judgments in this way are parochial, but nevertheless still capable of objective evaluation. If a judgment does not respect the first fundamental principle—

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<sup>5</sup> This point is underlined by Weiner in her *Frege Explained* (Open Court, 2004), pp. 54-57.

<sup>6</sup> Travis, “Psychologism,” p. 117.

that is, if it isn't capable of sharply separating "the psychological from the logical"—its claim to be a part of the universal domain of thought (its claim to rationality) must be denied.

Though Frege will appear now and again, this is a project on Wittgenstein. In *Philosophical Investigations*<sup>7</sup> Wittgenstein tries to illuminate the plasticity in our language—that words function differently in different contexts; yet he refuses to fall into a kind of skepticism about the ability, for instance, of our words to be truly known by us and by others. For Wittgenstein there is an important insight in Frege's rigid demand for universal answerability (what we might label the transcendent nature of truth): a claim's truth value stands independent of our beliefs and desires. Our sense that truth stands behind—or rather, over and beyond—our practices is significant and ought to serve as an orienting concern for us. Our sense that truth, sometimes at least, is not a matter of custom, ritual, or habit. That custom, ritual, and habit cannot—by themselves—make something we want to be true, true. Nevertheless, Wittgenstein resists the metaphysical abstraction that many consider necessary to cover the gap. Instead Wittgenstein directs us to our linguistic and nonlinguistic practices as the context in which understanding is made possible. By carefully examining the sense our words have we can see that even though the parochial allows for enormous variability in expression this method of investigation is not a collapse into unintelligibility. In our common, everyday, ordinary language there is strength enough to allow for understanding without appeal to reified ground—whether that be moral or religious, epistemic or linguistic grounding.

There is then two different, interrelated concerns at the heart of this project: a religious concern with the connection between transcendence and immanence; and a philosophical concern in the seemingly irreconcilable demand of the universal domain of thought with the

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<sup>7</sup> *Philosophical Investigations* (Blackwell, 1953). All references to the *Investigations* will refer simply to the section number (e.g., §109).

parochial nature of our forms of language (life). But the value of these two concerns is not found merely in their analogical nature. A fundamental contention of this paper is that religious belief should be seen as fully part of what Wittgenstein calls our complicated forms of life. And thus far from merely constituting a parallel comparison, this paper will use the method Wittgenstein employs to understand logic, language, mind—and *everything* else—to investigate religious belief. This project will argue that nothing beyond understanding the nature of religious practices need be given (need be had) to purchase its *full* intelligibility. The symmetry found between Wittgenstein’s project and an investigation into religious thought is preserved in the concerns launched against both. Just as many doubt whether Wittgenstein’s method escapes a kind of nihilism about meaning, so—as we will see—many doubt whether such an approach to religious thought lapses into an incoherence about the nature of belief in God.

## II

The following three chapters provide the details to the themes just outlined and attempts to make the legitimacy of their concerns intelligible. Chapter One focuses on the sphere of immanence. For Wittgenstein we turn to the ordinary to make sense of our lives, and in this chapter the sense of that turn—Wittgenstein’s method of investigation—is sketched and then applied to the larger theme of the dissertation: religious belief. Philosophy is often characterized by its willingness to abstract from our experience in the hopes of finding the truth that stands behind it, but for Wittgenstein this move may easily lead us astray. Instead of paying close attention to the particular nature of our lives in the world, such an interest may blind us to the multitude of possibilities that stand in front of us. Wittgenstein’s method is meant to articulate *understanding* without appeal to metaphysical speculation. Understanding truth, or the mind, or language, or

whatever other concern philosophy might take up, is an activity that has no need of leaving our immanent plain.

This is just the rub. Whether Wittgenstein's approach is a valid one for making sense of language is, obviously, contentious, but if Wittgenstein does not make use of metaphysical speculation then the suggestion that his method might make sense of religious thought may seem incredulous, as many of the analytic philosophers of religion (AφR) in contemporary American philosophy hold. This chapter—and the dissertation in general—is motivated by the idea that approaching religious belief as Wittgenstein approaches any other area of thought will reveal important aspects of religious belief. Considering AφR's objection to a "Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion" will help clarify not only what it means to understand a given form of life having once undertaken Wittgenstein's method, it will also help clarify important aspects of religious belief itself.

Before considering what it is to understand religious belief, Chapter One opens with a section dedicated to giving an account of *understanding*. Wittgenstein's approach is importantly not theoretical—he does not attempt to give *the* explanation for how understanding works—but rather he asks us to look at what makes it intelligible. (Now, no matter what these next few sentences say, there will be a temptation to think that however obscure the remarks may be—no matter their tentative nature—they will none the less *contain* Wittgenstein's speculative view. This is a concern that this entire project—approaching it from different directions—will attempt to address. It's a concern we might put like this: can we use language to get outside language? Can we understand what understanding is like not only in particular situations but understand what understanding is like as a matter of necessity—as it is in itself? Wittgenstein works to show that the latter possibility rests on a confusion—rests on an illusory picture of thought.) Chapter

One attempts to give an account of understanding by claiming that because we are *masters of language* we make proper use of that concept.<sup>8</sup> By focusing on *mastery* we focus our attention on the varied circumstances for which that term is used and applied.

After articulating the place of understanding as a part of the mastery of language, we turn to religious belief, and though Chapter One briefly gives a positive account of religious belief much of it is a response to AφR. A fundamental reason for philosophy to consider religious belief is to give an account of its truth; and for AφR this means that religious belief must be understood to be true independent of our practices and beliefs.<sup>9</sup> Chapter One argues that there is something both to be affirmed and resisted in that demand; which is just to say, however we understand religious belief (especially the acknowledgment of God's independence) it will only be because we have paid close attention to its role in our forms of life.

The first chapter attempts to underline that it's only by appreciating how integrated and diverse our use of language is that we can see the intelligibility of our practices. But if Chapter One pushes us to acknowledge the sprawl of language, Chapter Two asks us to give an account of its limits. In stressing the great many forms that language can take, how can we be sure that nonsense has not entered through the backdoor—through our tolerance? Religious belief is an especially interesting case to examine this kind of challenge. Religious belief takes ordinary words we're all familiar with—like love—and pushes them extremely. Not only

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<sup>8</sup> “Masters of language” is an inherited phrase from the work of Charles Travis and (partly) Stanley Cavell. See Travis' *Thoughts Footing* (Clarendon Press, 2006) and Cavell's *Must We Mean What We Say?* (Cambridge University Press, 1969).

<sup>9</sup> This paper assumes that AφR have a positive view about philosophy's ability to accomplish this. That belief in God is rational, warranted, justified, etc. Though this paper does not explicitly respond to traditional analytic philosophers who (though writing on religious belief) have the opposite response, much of what is said in Chapter One to AφR equally applies to them.

because Jesus makes startling claims like “Those who love their life lose it,”<sup>10</sup> but also because—as we’ve already noted—Christians claim that God *is* love. How could we possibly make sense of that using Wittgenstein’s method? Kai Nielsen, for instance, argues that Wittgenstein is right to think that language functions differently in different contexts and that language is understood because of the use it has in our lives; and thus because of religion’s transcendent status there is *no possible* use for that kind of language. Nielsen accepts AφR’s understanding of religious belief—that it must be metaphysical—but then argues for precisely that reason religious belief must be understood as nonsense.

If language can allow for a great diversity in use, surely nonsense represents its limit. But what is nonsense? It’s fair to say that much of Chapter One merely *draws* on Wittgenstein’s later work (relying mainly on an inheritance of *Philosophical Investigations*), but Chapter Two very closely examines Wittgenstein’s first—and only—published book during his lifetime, the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. The *Tractatus* is an odd and difficult work, but because of its focus on the status of logic and on the form of language, it touches directly on the question of the limits of sense. Wittgenstein writes that the aim of the book “is to set a limit to thought, or rather—not to thought, but to the expression of thoughts ... .”<sup>11</sup> Wittgenstein understood Russell and Frege as having attempted to determine *the* role of logic and thus also attempted to set limits to thought. Wittgenstein resists this by resisting the assumption that logic can be meaningfully articulated in general. For Wittgenstein though it’s true that logic is *shown* in our use, this does not guarantee a sensible formalized account of it. Or at least, to continue the theme from Chapter One, it does not guarantee an account capable of *grounding* logic.

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<sup>10</sup> John 12:25.

<sup>11</sup> *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (Routledge, 1922), preface, p. 3.



In fact it's just for attempting to establish rules for logic that Wittgenstein charges Russell and Frege with slipping outside the limits of the expression of thoughts. But if Wittgenstein is right that we cannot talk about logic then, as Russell points out in his introduction to the *Tractatus*, it ought to be quite distressing for any reader to find that the *Tractatus* appears to be consumed with just that activity.<sup>12</sup> Hence its odd and difficult nature. Chapter Two commits a significant amount of space to wrestling with that book but does so with the aim of better understanding the nature of nonsense (and thus the limits of thought in general). The *Tractatus* is important for this project because it also is one of the few texts in which Wittgenstein writes about the status of value. Towards the end of the book Wittgenstein claims enigmatically that logic, ethics, and aesthetics are all transcendental.<sup>13</sup> Wittgenstein writes, "The sense of the world must lie outside the world. ... If there is any value that does have value, it must lie outside the whole sphere of what happens and is the case" (6.41). These propositions—in fact, *all the propositions of the Tractatus*—are understood by Wittgenstein to be nonsense and, in the end, they (the propositions) must be used "as steps" to "climb up beyond them." Wittgenstein sees that the reader "must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it" (6.54). That Wittgenstein instructs his readers to throw away the ladder at the end of the *Tractatus* continues another important theme from Chapter One: the importance of thought that undermines itself.

Chapter One claims that *if* religion is understood (contra  $A\phi R$ ) it will only be because we have understood the form of life from which it emerges. At the end of the Chapter Two we see that asking not merely for an account of what makes it intelligible but for an account of whether it is itself *true* threatens to collapse the project as a whole. As Chapter Two will hopefully make

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<sup>12</sup> Russell wrote a brief introduction (which is usually included in the published form of the *Tractatus*) where he briefly addresses that concern. See *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, p. xxi. All references to the *Tractatus* will refer to the proposition number (e.g., 6.13).

<sup>13</sup> *Tractatus*, 6.13 and 6.421

clear the *Tractatus* suggests that there is something importantly difficult in *talking* about value. The *Tractatus* claims that value must lie outside the world (hence its transcendence) and thus a project such as this one—desiring to give a generalized account of religious belief—may very well be doomed to failure from the very beginning. A project such as this may very well hope to accomplish no more than being thrown away once it's completed.

Chapter Two does not end the project however. Having dedicated a chapter to both the immanent and transcendent, Chapter Three attempts to articulate what it might mean to reconcile them, providing the last analysis of the *sense* of religious belief. This chapter draws on many of the lines of thought that compose the first two chapters focusing them all ultimately on what it might mean to see faith as a transcendent thing. In the final sections the chapter appeals to the work of Iris Murdoch to provide points of contact comparing religious belief to other beliefs of value: ethics and art. Murdoch's terminology is used to give the final articulation of faith for this project.

### III

We end this introduction by considering the title of this project, *Wittgenstein's Liberating Word: a Meditation on Philosophy and God*. What's the criterion for success for this collection of papers? What word does this project have in mind as *the* word that liberates? Before we enter a definite answer to that question, first we ought to consider a more general one: What do we expect an advancement in philosophy to look like? In *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein suggests that philosophers traditionally look for new discoveries as the criterion for success: a theory of mind might take empirical data and refit it to better account for discrepancies in their research community. Such a discovery, though often quite circumscribed, offers an advance in

our *philosophical* (and perhaps even, scientific) understanding of the mind. Wittgenstein resists this approach:

We feel as if we had to *see right into* phenomena: yet our investigation is directed not towards *phenomena*, but rather, as one might say, towards the '*possibilities*' of phenomena. What that means is that we call to mind the *kinds of statement* that we make about phenomena. (§90, Wittgenstein's emphasis)

"We feel as if we had to *see right into* phenomena," this represents Wittgenstein's resistance to the sublimation of language (§89). We assume that philosophical advancement means achieving a "crystalline purity of logic" (§107) that reveals the "*super-order*" of the world (§97, Wittgenstein's emphasis), "as if there were something like a final analysis of our linguistic expression" (§91). This is to say, in other words, that Wittgenstein resists a *metaphysical* approach to addressing the problems in philosophy. We sublime concepts like "phenomena" when we attempt to picture them like discrete facts, as though "phenomena" might be cut off from the rest of our considerations and examined in splendid isolation, in its purest form.

Against the traditional picture of philosophical advancement, Wittgenstein cryptically claims that the job of philosophy is not to "hunt out new facts," but rather to see that "we do not seek to learn anything *new* by it" (§89, Wittgenstein's emphasis). "We want to *understand* something that is already in plain view" (§89, Wittgenstein's emphasis). This dissertation is a project on the virtue of holding thought in tension: holding the tension between the immanent and transcendent, the universal and particular, agreement and disagreement, etc.; but also in holding the tension, for Wittgenstein, between the absolute centrality and value of *words* to

accomplish anything significant in philosophy and also his sometime summary dismissal and suspicion of them.<sup>14</sup>

To bring out the significance of the *use* words have for Wittgenstein, consider another central theme for this project: the importance of context for understanding.

The problems are solved, not by coming up with new discoveries, but by assembling what we have long been familiar with. Philosophy is a struggle against the bewitchment of our understanding by the resources of our language. (§109)

Our task is to ask whether a word is “ever actually used in this way in the language in which it is at home” (§116) and to “bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use” (§116).

Once we get past the sublime picture of logic that holds us “captive” (§115), we see that the common, everyday, parochial use of language is what makes our practices intelligible.

We want to establish an order in our knowledge of the use of language: an order for a particular purpose, one out of many possible orders, not *the* order. For this purpose we shall again and again *emphasize* distinctions which our ordinary forms of language easily make ... . (§132, Wittgenstein’s emphasis)

Our words are important because through the careful use of them (by appealing to various possibilities of sense) we can achieve real clarity. In the first chapter we’ll explore

Wittgenstein’s comparison between words and tools:

Think of the tools in a toolbox: there is a hammer, pliers, a saw, a screwdriver, a rule, a glue-pot, glue, nails and screws. –The functions of words are as diverse as the functions of these objects. (§11)

One point on this passage that’s relevant now is the real sense of change that a close investigation of our words can have for us. Though “we do not seek to learn anything *new*,” (§89) Wittgenstein does think that “this inquiry sheds light on our problem by clearing misunderstandings away” (§90). This clearing away of misunderstandings *can* feel like a genuine discovery.

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<sup>14</sup> The alternate title for this project was: *Words: for and against*.

It [our “grammatical” survey/inquiry (§90)] throws light on our concept of meaning something. For in those cases, things turn out otherwise than we had meant, foreseen. That is just what we say when, for example, a contradiction appears: “That’s not the way I meant it.” (§125)

Wittgenstein’s analysis of language shows that the articulate use of concepts help bring out aspects of the world that go hidden in the broad daylight of language-use.

This highlights Wittgenstein’s paradoxical view. The use of our words could not be more significant for coming to a clear understanding of our practices, but it’s just in the use of our words that the problems of philosophy seem to arise. *Language* is both the cause of the bewitchment of our understanding and also (at least, part of) the means of our liberation. Consider a sentence purposely truncated from a section of the *Investigations* quoted above (§132):

For this purpose we shall again and again *emphasize* distinctions which our ordinary forms of language easily make . . . .

The full sentence, though, means to claim nearly the opposite point:

For this purpose we shall again and again *emphasize* distinctions which our ordinary forms of language easily make us overlook.

It’s both true that by appealing to distinctions in our ordinary forms of language we might achieve a better clarity about our different forms of life, but it’s also true for Wittgenstein that it’s in our use of ordinary forms of language that lead us to overlook its significance.

Wittgenstein:

A main source of our failure to understand is that we don’t have *an overview* of the use of our words. –Our grammar is deficient in surveyability. (§122)

Consider, too, the immediately following paragraph in §11 where Wittgenstein’s compares words to tools:

Of course, what confuses us is the uniform appearance of words when we hear them in speech, or see them written or in print. For their *use* is not that obvious. Especially when we are doing philosophy! (§11)

In response to these deficiencies Wittgenstein thinks that much of traditional philosophical writing turns to the sublime, *the* final analysis that forever sets the issue straight. This move, far from solving philosophical problems, merely capitulates to the “picture” that holds us “captive” (§115). One way of addressing the problem that Wittgenstein seems to be underling here is this. Though, as Wittgenstein says in the *Tractatus*, “all the propositions of our everyday language, just as they stand, are in perfect logical order,” (5.5563) when we step back from our practices in language and attempt to lay out its general conditions—when we attempt to *justify* them—our efforts are often marked not merely by failure but also by a kind of imprisonment:

Here the fundamental fact is that we lay down rules, a technique, for playing a game, and that then, when we follow the rules, things don’t turn out as we had assumed. So that we are, as it were, entangled in our own rules. (§125)

If that’s true—if language is just as capable of taking us captive as setting us free—then how, exactly, does Wittgenstein think we should proceed? What guides us away from nonsense to clarity of thought?

What makes approaching Wittgenstein so difficult is that he nearly never presents a point of view simply to dismiss it (hence the virtue of holding thought in tension). There’d be a kind of austere elegance in merely dismissing the traditional (speculative) approach of philosophers. In this project, for instance, we will confront the temptation to characterize the result of Chapter One as giving good reason to dismiss the concerns of AφR outright. The sense that one has gained the right to so dismiss a philosophical position is *not* Wittgenstein’s criterion for success. Rather he finds the positions he criticizes worthy of criticism because they are so frustratingly compelling.

The problems arising through a misinterpretation of our forms of language have the character of *depth*. They are deep disquietudes; they are as deeply rooted in us as the forms of our language, and their significance is as great as the importance of our language. (§111, Wittgenstein's emphasis)

Consider an historical example. So much of the history of philosophy since Descartes has attempted to *prove* that the mind and body are not separate but, perhaps, one. What Wittgenstein (and philosophers who have inherited his thought, like Stanley Cavell) might resist in this response is the flatfooted refusal to see the “real need” (§108) that dualistic theories implicitly address. There *is* an important sense in how deeply disconnected we sometimes feel/are, not only intrapersonally (“My *body* doesn't seem to be working well today,” etc.) but also interpersonally (“I fear that I might never truly be understood by another,” etc.).

So much of this dissertation, then, focuses on the nature of disagreement, attempting to locate where the *real* disagreement might ultimately be found. In many cases it might appear that what's being rejected in this project is the improper use of words: e.g., that belief in God is (or is like) the acceptance of a matter of *fact*. It'll be tempting to summarize the *conclusion* of this project like this: it's just a fact that God and belief in God is not like a matter of fact. But what this wrongly suggests is that, for instance, AφR is mistaken because they merely hold onto the wrong philosophical *doctrines* and that what this project advocates for is just another, more coherent doctrine of God in its place.

But if that's not Wittgenstein's criterion for success nor the aim of this project, then, again, what is? It's least misleading on this point—on what Wittgenstein thinks constitutes a successful entry into philosophical analysis—to think of Wittgenstein as an existentialist. It's least misleading because more traditional labels (e.g., particularism or holism) can only be given

disingenuously.<sup>15</sup> Consider calling Wittgenstein a particularist. If we want to understand something, Wittgenstein again and again directs us to closely consider the particular use of words and then to compare those words to other aspects of our life with language:

Our clear and simple language-games are not preliminary studies for a future regimentation of language—as it were, first approximations, ignoring friction and air resistance. Rather, the language-games stand there as *objects of comparison* which, through similarities and dissimilarities, are meant to throw light on features of our language. (§130)

That is, Wittgenstein directs us to the “‘*possibilities*’ of phenomena” (§90). Or we might say that Wittgenstein is a holist, since what it means to have recourse to these particular language-games is not an atomistic account of language but rather “language full-blown” (§120). But either of these descriptions quite possibly lead us into the trap Wittgenstein means to push us past, since both seem to give an account of his thought as presenting a new speculative entry concerning various philosophical topics.

Rather, for Wittgenstein, philosophy is a *struggle* against, as he explicitly says in §109, “the bewitchment of our understanding by the resources of our language,” and against, as he implies in §131, “the dogmatism into which we fall so easily in doing philosophy.” Dogmatism and bewitchment are only encouraged by an emphasis in *right doctrine* and in stressing the right/wrong use of particular strings of words. Thus Wittgenstein presents philosophy not as the acceptance of a particular doctrine or set of doctrines but as a way of living. We do philosophy right by addressing questions in a certain way, by a method contextually fit to it.

There is not a single philosophical method, though, there are indeed methods, different therapies, as it were. (§133)

There’s a sense in which an emphasis in developing the right theory removes our ability to appreciate how diverse the use of words can be, and how the right use of words in a given

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<sup>15</sup> That is, they are given and then they are taken back.



situation may only bewitch us in another, one that presents itself as more or less the same.

Doctrines point us in the wrong direction. Thus a “philosophical question takes the form ‘I don’t know my way about’” (§123). It—a philosophical question—starts there. Starts by emphasizing the importance of the philosopher’s responsibility to imaginatively see what we thought had been solved as *strange*; to see what was once given as now open to question.

It’s like a therapy because philosophy is no mere intellectual enterprise. Rather as Wittgenstein puts it, “work on philosophy is ... a kind of work on oneself.”<sup>16</sup> It’s tempting to think that the problems of philosophy are merely the result of a lack of information; but for Wittgenstein the work of philosophy is an interior work. Philosophy “leaves everything as it is” (§124):

It is not the business of philosophy to resolve a contradiction by means of a mathematical or logico-mathematical discovery, but to render surveyable the state of mathematics that trouble us ... . (§125)

Our own selfimposed restrictions and assumptions; our own inarticulate generalizations about the mechanics of belief, understanding, and truth; our own refusal to be present with the complexity that life may present; these are not only the sources of our dissatisfaction but also the fertile ground where meaningful, liberating work can be earned. Thus “the philosopher treats a question; like an illness” (§255).

The real discovery is the one that enables me to break off philosophizing when I want to. –The one that gives philosophy peace, so that it is no longer tormented by questions which bring *itself* in question. (§133)

We begin by recognizing a strain in our words, that though we often find our way easily with them in this particular situation they seem disjointed or even at odds against each other. This estrangement is like an illness because the philosopher cannot lead herself (or anyone else) out of

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<sup>16</sup> *Philosophical Occasions* (Hackett, 1993).

the confusion merely by appropriating more facts and synthesizing them into a new doctrine. A doctor concerned with a patient's wellbeing will see that the treatment of a serious illness cannot be addressed merely by an impersonal assessment of symptoms and a mechanical proscription of a cure; wholeness is found by a doctor who can acknowledge *the person* who is sick. Thus we might draw on and slightly alter Kant's handsome and piercing imperative: acknowledgement is coming to *see* a person as an end and never merely as a means to one.

This brings us back to two important themes already mentioned earlier in this introduction. The connection between Wittgenstein's work and religion is not merely comparative. It's true that much of this project means to approach religious belief *as* Wittgenstein approaches questions about, for instance, logic, meaning, and language; but there's also an important aspect of Wittgenstein's work that itself has a religious character. Or at least bears a family resemblance to one. The kind of work that Wittgenstein asks us to do *as philosophers* is similar to the kind of work this project will argue is fundamental for a spiritual life. The importance of personal struggle and implied striving for authenticity and wholeness; the singular distrust in dogmatism; the significance of thought that intentionally undermines itself; understanding peace as a kind of liberation—these themes are not just present in religious belief they're essential aspects of it. Chapter Three describes these virtues as a kind of spiritual presence. Just as Wittgenstein did not think of philosophy as a matter of coming to discover certain facts but rather as a way of being, so too does religious belief emphasize the transformative power of redemption over the emptiness of legalism and rule-following. This theme, however, merely lurks in the background of this project because it is not a theme interested in the distracting claim about the nature of Wittgenstein's own piety and certainly not interested in arguing for a description of Wittgenstein's work as religious or spiritual. This theme

simply, implicitly juxtaposes philosophical methods with religious conviction as objects for comparison.

The second point addressed by these reflections on the nature of a philosophical investigation is the implication that there are inherent problems in writing a work of philosophy. If philosophy is not about the accumulation of facts and the construction of those facts into theory form, but rather a way of approaching questions, problems, and presumed solutions (a way of being), then any attempt to articulate that picture (especially through the use of words) will have to guard itself against the easy slide into dogmatic posturing. This project attempts to guard itself from being taken as a speculative project by weaving into each chapter the important sense in which many of Wittgenstein's suggestions are meant to be selfundermining. To truly understand Wittgenstein is to see through his work.

This project is a *meditation*. It is less concerned to make a certain discovery in the discipline of philosophy than to work as a tool for self-examination.

## **Chapter One: Immanence**

In Philosophy we are deceived by an illusion. But this—an illusion—is also something, and I must at some time place it completely and clearly before my eyes, before I can say it is only an illusion.

Wittgenstein

**I. An introduction to some of Wittgenstein's basic terminology and philosophical outlook is briefly outlined here. A central theme of this project is to articulate why Wittgenstein did not think of himself as espousing a theoretical philosophy. This section introduces this theme by considering what it means to understand something in general.**

This chapter is an examination of religious belief, specifically aimed at considering what makes it intelligible. We pursue that topic using Wittgenstein's thought as a touchstone. Much of this chapter is reactionary. Wittgenstein rejects the idea that metaphysical propositions can be meaningful; thus this chapter responds to a group of philosophers who assume (and forcefully argue) that religious belief necessarily involves the acceptance of metaphysical theses.

Before we turn to religious belief, however, we need to briefly introduce some basic themes in Wittgenstein's philosophical outlook. Much of Wittgenstein's work focuses on the importance of paying close attention to the words we use. Since this chapter focuses on religious intelligibility, we begin by considering what allows for understanding in general. This section attempts to make that concept intelligible by appealing to the importance of what we call the mastery of language.

Wittgenstein's approach to understanding is both thick and thin. It's thin in the sense that he rejects the suggestion that only by exploring the hidden, underlying essence of a thing, we will come to know it truly. Wittgenstein's method is not theoretical but piecemeal. What understanding looks like in a given context is not what it will look like in every context. Pursuing that (universal) picture of understanding is what leads us into philosophical confusion. Wittgenstein is, in this sense, a particularist. It's thick in the sense that understanding any particular aspect of language (whether the object of inquiry is the mind, God, or understanding

itself) requires a fluency not with any one particular aspect of thought but a fluency with, more or less, all of it. Wittgenstein, in this sense, is a holist. Language—our use and understanding of it—is not something divided and subdivided into different parts, one part isolated potentially isolated from the next; rather language permeates all of thought.

Wittgenstein's interest is in the *possibilities of sense* that exist in our forms of life. Instead of reducing aspects of our experience to smaller and smaller fields of core “essences” or “truths,” Wittgenstein's investigations are meant to combat our natural inclination for reductionism—or whatever term we might give to it—and allow the varied aspects of our life their full due. What it takes to understand something like religious belief—or *anything else*—will require us paying close attention to the place where the forms of life and the different language-games associated with them find their home.

“Forms of life” and “language-games,” both technical terms that appear in *Philosophical Investigations*, are important concepts for understanding where Wittgenstein thinks we ought to redirect our attention. Against the view that language serves only one purpose (e.g., that a proposition's function is only representational (§11)) Wittgenstein asks us to consider the various ways we actually use language. We give orders, report events, and speculate about the future; we act in plays, sing in choruses, we make jokes, and formulate riddles (§23). Wittgenstein thinks of these different, easily recognizable practices as “language-games” (§7). The use of a language-game implies the practice of circumscribing our language for a particular purpose; accordingly, Wittgenstein likes to compare the use of language with the use of tools.

Tools have different uses in different contexts, but to suggest that understanding how a tool is used we must appreciate its contextual nature is as potentially empty as any slogan can be. This section attempts to put flesh on those dry bones. Wittgenstein sometimes uses chess as a

picture for what he has in mind here. One way to think about the importance of context might be put like this:

In chess, a queen can move in any direction and can feasibly land on almost any space. The direction of her movement and her eventual resting place, though, are affected by the other pieces on the board. In addition, the significance of her resting place is also defined by the location of the other pieces. So, the queen resting on “E1” surrounded by her own pieces means one thing, while resting on “E1” surrounded by opponents means something else.<sup>1</sup>

It’s true that the place of the queen on a chessboard does change the significance of the board.

For instance, if all the pieces are in first position, her place merely indicates that the game has yet to begin, but if not—if instead the queen moves to checkmate her opponent’s king—the

“context” of her position means the game is over. But here “context” is used one dimensionally.

What kind of tool the queen represents (in this case, a piece in a game) does not change.

Consider, rather, what the queen means when placed in these different contexts: in a display window at a store, on a table in a wood workshop, in a basket full of kids’ toys, and printed on paper alone accompanied by a chessboard diagram with arrows showing the different ways she can move.

When we see a queen on a chessboard, those of us who know how to play chess, think about her role in the game (we think of her “chess powers”) and how this ability distinguishes her. If we come across a book on the rules and strategies of chess and find an illustration of a chessboard with only the queen represented along with a diagram of the different directions she can move, we might also think of her role in the game—that obviously is the point—but also see that that role is intentionally being examined or taught. Now if we were to spot a queen in a display window, she likely is meant to indicate to a passerby that traditional board games are sold therein. If we came across a chessqueen in a woodshop we might be especially drawn to the

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<sup>1</sup> This extract comes from a suggestion made by a friend via personal correspondence.

craftsmanship of the piece—how it’s carved and how that carving fits or does not fit with the other artifacts in the shop. The queen, in a basket full of toys, is not likely to strike us as anything more than an object—which perhaps belongs on a chessboard—to be played with as children play with blocks and other toys.

What lesson are we to draw from this? We might attempt this kind of generalization: “How we see ‘objects’—how we use and think about the meanings of words that refer to them—differs greatly depending on how those words and objects appear in different environments.” And this is right as far as it goes. But it’s also right to resist that the context will *greatly* change our sense of the objects under consideration. In each of the above cases we might think about the queen’s chess powers in the traditional way the piece is used to play chess, or when we see that piece we might not be struck in any particular way at all. This analysis is not meant to give *the* rules for what *must* be thought when we see a given object in a given context. Such an approach is one still deeply committed to a theoretical understanding of philosophy. Rather this example means only to suggest that how we see a particular game piece—if we see a *game piece* at all—likely changes in different contexts. This analysis is meant to highlight the possibilities of sense for this object. To give a multidimensional of it. For Wittgenstein the suggestion that words function like tools is meant to turn us from the misleading picture where language finds its significance in abstract, theoretical considerations. Instead of explaining language as a metaphysical “non-spatial, atemporal non-[entities],” Wittgenstein directs us to “the spatial and temporal phenomenon of language” (§108) and reminds us that “nothing extraordinary is involved” (§94).

If nothing extraordinary is involved, then what is involved? We might put his view like this. What allows for language-games is the already established and agreed upon criteria and



judgment that exist in the wider language. This more generalized sense of language and practice is what Wittgenstein calls “forms of life” (§19). Forms of life are characterized by individuals who are, as McGinn describes them, bound “together into a community by a shared set of complex, language-involving practices.”<sup>2</sup> McGinn:

These practices are grounded in biological needs and capacities, but insofar as these are mediated and transformed by a set of intricate, historically-specific language-games, our human form of life is fundamentally *cultural* . . . . Coming to share, or understand, the form of life of a group of individual human beings means mastering, or coming to understand, the intricate language-games that are essential to its characteristic practices.<sup>3</sup>

We might call the collection of the “intricate, historically-specific language-games” the background. And it’s from the “background” that we find our way when attempting to understand language and our different practices. Thus when we attempt to give a theoretical account for what a practice *must* mean or how a word *must* function, when we abstract from our ordinary language and demand that our rules and distinctions hold absolutely, without variance, we unnaturally force a rigidity of what language and understanding must be. Instead, Wittgenstein thinks that ordinary language has the capacity to make sense of our various forms of life by investigating the parochial nature of our judgments.

The rest of this section fleshes out examples of both what it looks like to understand something in particular and also what it might mean to become a master of language in general.

What does it take to understand something? For Cavell, many cases simply require a familiarity with the different, but grammatically closely associated, concepts to discern whether something makes sense or not, and it’s just this ability to be competent judges of sense—a capacity to determine whether a word or sentence or picture is used correctly or incorrectly—that

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<sup>2</sup> Marie McGinn, *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Wittgenstein and the Philosophical Investigations* (Routledge, 1997), p. 51.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

qualifies us as masters of language. Not only can we judge the proper use of *our* words, we are “expected, and expect others, to be able to project them into further contexts.”<sup>4</sup> “We learn the use of ‘feed the kitty’, ‘feed the lion’, ‘feed the swans’, and one day one of us says ‘feed the meter’, or ‘feed in the film’, or ‘feed the machine’, or ‘feed his pride’, or ‘feed wire’, and we understand, we are not troubled.”<sup>5</sup> We’re not troubled because we understand that “something *does* follow from the fact that a term is used in its usual way: it entitles you (or, using the term, you entitle others) to make certain inferences, draw certain conclusions. (This is part of what you say when you say that you are talking about the *logic* of ordinary language.) *Learning what these implications are is part of learning the language ...*”<sup>6</sup>

Consider how various and yet how well understood language-games are in the world of sports. If “sports” is a form of life then “calling a foul” is a language-game (just one language-game among thousands of practices involved in that form of life). For instance, in basketball a foul is not a mistake, or at least, it isn’t always one. In baseball mistakes are usually counted as errors, but in basketball, partially as a result of the fluidity in play, there is often no official status for mistakes. Except, for instance, if a guard removes his pivot foot before getting rid of the ball. *That* mistake is marked as a turnover and the penalty is the loss of possession. In baseball there are no further penalties given as the result of an error (e.g., dropping a clearly catchable fly ball) since the error is itself a benefit to the opposing team. Sometimes missing a shot (in basketball) is a mistake, as when a guard shoots the ball at half-court wrongly believing only seconds remain on the clock, but usually it’s not so considered (since most shots are unobjectionable even if

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<sup>4</sup> Stanley Cavell, “The Availability of Wittgenstein’s Later Philosophy,” in his *Must We Mean What We Say?* (Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 52.

<sup>5</sup> Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, (Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 181.

<sup>6</sup> Cavell, “Must We Mean What We Say?” in his *Must We Mean What We Say?* (Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 11. Cavell’s emphasis.

unfulfilled). Some fouls are mistakes, as when a player accidentally trips an opponent, but then some fouls are intentional, as when an opponent closing-in on an easy layup is blocked from shooting. We might say this is an instance of an *intentional* foul, as it obviously is, but we'll then have to guard against confusing that characterization with its technical use; since in basketball "intentional foul" denotes that the foul was committed flagrantly. It's important to note that mistakes and (nonflagrant) fouls are accepted without prejudice as a natural outcome of the game and, depending on their importance, penalized with greater or less severity.

Conceptually near to "fouls," are "dirty plays," as when, in baseball, a baserunner yells "got it" or "mine" behind the third baseman just before he attempts to catch a fly ball—the intent here is for the baserunner to sound like a teammate, making the third baseman think that another position has the better read, thus causing the third baseman to abort the catch. There is no assigned penalty (which is to say there is no "foul," as they would call it in basketball, but not in baseball, since in that sport a call "foul" reports that the ball has landed out-of-play) for a deceptive play like this, though some reject it as a fair strategy. But for others this dirty play is itself just "part of the game." (Still others, on sports radio, will wonder whether it was a moral failing.)

There are acts which are not errors, fouls, or dirty-plays. Consider the playact of "cheating," as when a player ingests steroids. An athlete might make a certain calculation, on the one hand, about the benefit of taking steroids, and the possibility, on the other, of getting caught, but this is not (grammatically) similar to a player who calculates the cost/benefit of committing a foul. One involves (perhaps not just) a question of professional ethics and moral responsibility; while the other, universally, would not.

There are dives, though that might be considered a specific form of dirty play; there are also acts of bad sportsmanship, which is not an error, foul, dirty-play, or cheating. The point here is not just how multifariously our words can function or how diverse their employment is, but to draw our attention to what makes (understanding) that diversity possible.

Consider this example. Between the pitcher and other teammates (the catcher, coaches, other infielders, etc.), there are explicit signs exchanged throughout the game (the catcher signals for a pitch); but there are also implicit signs. A teammate might signal that the baserunner on firstbase has an exaggerated lead towards second. This sign—a flash of the eyes or slight movement of the hand—calls for the pitcher to check the runner by throwing the ball to first. We can imagine a mother sitting with her son at the baseball game trying to alert him to this interaction. She tells him that since the pitcher is right handed, he often looks towards his third baseman, just before he pitches, to see if the third baseman taps his left knee with his glove; if the third baseman does this, the mother explains, the pitcher will throw the ball, without looking before hand, to check the runner at first. This is a “pickoff” sign. The first time it happens the child is skeptical but after the third and fourth exchange the gesture is beyond doubt.

What must the child already have “in his mind” before he can understand this complex form of interaction—that is, what counts as a criterion for understanding here? In part, he would have to understand what rules govern the pitcher’s actions, why the pitcher would want to throw to first, why the third baseman would want to signal the runner’s position, how a team can score, what fair and foul territory is—this is to say, he would have to understand numerous, basic aspects of the game of baseball. He would have to understand what giving and taking a hint is, why veiled forms of communication are desirable; he would have to understand these aspects before his mother could have any chance at pointing out this particular aspect of the game being

played out before them. That the child can do this, that the child can follow the gesture, demonstrates that the child is well on his way to becoming a master of language.

This highlights the holistic nature of what Wittgenstein will consider as the context or background for what makes understanding intelligible. And though the background is ineliminable, notice that understanding—in the case of recognizing the pickoff sign—is not abstract but straightforward. The mother might have a sense that her lesson has sunk in if her child anticipates the pitcher’s throw to first, for instance. And though the possibility of misinterpretation still exists—as it does for any master of language—there are contexts when that possibility does not register. For instance, just think of the practical impossibility of a devoted basketball fan mistaking a turnover for a moral failing. If the fan does make this mistake in ordinary circumstances it won’t be because he mistook the one for the other but, perhaps, because he simply doesn’t understand the difference between “error” and “dirty play.” Perhaps he doesn’t understand sports, but then, in what sense is he a “devoted fan”?

What it takes to account for understanding is something that takes place against the background of our practices; mastery of language is merely becoming well footed in that background. It must be emphasized that there is nothing mysterious in invoking this title. Part of what makes us masters of language is that we’ve mastered lots of different language-games. Our young baseball fan has the ability to use certain practices as narrowly circumscribed to fit certain purposes, while other practices have a more general role: for instance, the importance and use of veiled forms of communication, the concept of sports in general, representing events to be thus and so, judging truth and falsehood, etc. We move in and out of these games all the time; we project aspects of those games into other language-games we’re already well acquainted with

and into new ones we create for practical and/or imaginative situations. All that it takes to master a language-game is the ability manage the game well.

To draw out this point out Charles Travis contrasts a master of language with a child—a toddler—at an intermediate stage of mastery.<sup>7</sup> Imagine a child and her parents taking a trip on the interstate. To pass the time the parents try to teach their young daughter a version of “I spy.” In their version the first person to say “I spy a blue car” when a blue car can be seen wins the game. Though there are misfires (sometimes the child says “I spy a blue car” when a dark green one passes) usually she wins. Her parents enforce and sharpen the game by, sometimes, intentionally throwing it. When a white car passes they say, in exaggerated tones, “I spy a *blue* car,” only to encourage their child to be contrary and increase her sure footedness.

The child’s use of language is intermediate because even though she understands what “blue” and “car” mean—which is just to say she can apply “I spy a blue car” correctly and, more or less, reliably—her ability is in an important sense limited. Does “I spy a blue car” win the game if the entire car is blue or if only part of it is? Does a mere blue stripe down the side of the car count as making a car blue? What if only the tires are blue? What if the exterior is blue but not the inside upholstery? What if the upholstery is but not the engine? And what counts as a car? Do trucks, eighteen wheelers, motorcycles, segways, miniature hot wheels, old Model T Fords? Often we identify a color by pointing to it. Often what we point to can also be touched but not always since “blue” can apply to a crayon but also to the sky. The ocean is blue but not when held in a glass. I can see blue, I can feel blue, but without the use of mushrooms, I cannot hear blue. For these difficulties, and others, the child does not know her way about. Thus her intermediate status. Nevertheless, given our Wittgensteinian analysis, we say that she knows she

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<sup>7</sup> Charles Travis, *Thoughts Footing* (Oxford University Press, 2006).

names a blue car when she says “I spy a blue car.” To have the ability she exhibits is what it is to understand, in this context, what it is that she names.

Giving a name, for Wittgenstein, is not itself a language-game. Naming amounts to nothing more than placing a chess piece on a chessboard (§49). A word, then, does not determine its correctness.<sup>8</sup> Just as our toddler may understand what “blue” names and yet not understand whether, in a given context, X is blue. How the words are to function in a particular case depends on the conditions for correctness tailored to that language-game (that just is what it is to be a language-game). Which is to say, for any given word the function it may perform is indefinite. Thus Wittgenstein claims that the number of language-games is “countless” (§23). The toddler’s intermediate mastery, then, shares a commonality with our own: our understanding of “blue” does not exhaustively grasp the uses for which it may be applied. And just like our toddler this does not preclude us from truly saying we know what “blue” names. But unlike the traveling toddler our mastery of language is not intermediate; for our ability to understand and judge the conditions for correctness in the use of “blue” extends to enough practical situations for which we may be expected to make a (true) judgment about the appropriate use of that word *in general*.

This point alludes to an earlier one made by Cavell: maturity in language, we might have Cavell say, is possible because “something *does* follow from the fact that a term is used in its usual way: it entitles you (or, using the term, you entitle others) to make certain inferences, draw certain conclusions.”<sup>9</sup> Travis adds a helpful example:

We are driving together to Lyon when a tire goes flat. I get out, jack up the car, and remove the hubcap. You hand me a lug wrench. But when I try to loosen a lug, it turns out that the lug wrench is made of rubber in the middle, and just bends rather than loosening anything. You laugh, I fume. There is something I had a right to expect here. One would have expected you to be helping me. For so you purported. Otherwise there

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<sup>8</sup> This is a point discussed extensively in the next chapter.

<sup>9</sup> Cavell, “Must We Mean What We Say?” p. 11. Cavell’s emphasis.

was no joke. So I was right to expect that in handing me a wrench you were handing me something usable, so far as you could see, in expected ways for the case at hand—something that would, barring the unforeseen, loosen expected sorts of lugs. In handing me the wrench, you aroused expectations it was reasonable for me to have; your handing it to me thus makes you liable for those expectations. It made it reasonable, so right, to expect that much of you.<sup>10</sup>

Travis underlines two important aspects for our concept of mastery. First, as Wittgenstein suggests, it's helpful to think of the function of words like the function of tools (§23). For some acts particular words are well used; for others, not. We can use a hammer to paint with but no one—none of our masters at least—would confuse this with hammering. When a tool is used not just oddly but badly—when a hammer is used to cut cake—the desired outcome is lost. And (please bear with this elastic metaphor) while a hammer can push in hard metal, for some metal, it's no use. So too for our words. We may, then, bristle at this malleability—a given practice may not, for instance, determine what can be said *exactly*—but, still laboring under this analogy, it's helpful to understand that certain words and practices can be used as precisely as need be. Some tools are as precise as a scalpel; others are blunt. But for both it's important to recognize the limitation natural to it. The precision of a bat in the game of baseball is not its intended purpose. It may be true that for a (baseball) hitter no certain spot on the field can reliably be found—no given player can reliably place a ball, by hitting it, on a nickel pinned to the outfield wall—but again, for its purpose, its job does not demand this. A tool may work well in its natural setting but if pushed too far or used in unintended ways it may break or turn lame.

Second, even given the malleability of our words—that for any given word, its function is indefinite—understanding *is* possible. Given our mastery, we have a natural expectation for how words will be used. When we walk into a gas station and see a board set high on the wall with the word “Bathrooms” written on it, we see the board as a sign and we expect that there will be

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<sup>10</sup> Travis, *Thought's Footing*, p. 29.



bathrooms around the corner. Of course, nothing necessitates this (on our part or the board's); it's perfectly possible that the operators of the station meant to do nothing more than list out words they find striking, not as signs but just as, perhaps, decoration. When we turn the corner we may also see boards scrawled with the words "air filter," "kitchen," "fireplace," etc. That that may happen, still, does not negate what we have the right to expect in that situation. Further, that we characterize their "decorations" as odd and misleading shows the perceived right we felt when expecting a different outcome.

What makes us different from our intermediate master is that if someone wants to say, for instance, that the car is blue because the engine is we label that such a person obnoxious—or hilarious (it could only be meant as a joke). *Nobody* thinks that the claim "the car is blue" means to point out that the engine is blue. We *can* recognize right and wrong uses of this word. No one who understands language would say that we change the color of the sky by putting on purple-colored glasses. But even though there are right and wrong uses we should not think that our understanding can withstand any possible objection. We can imagine situations where we're not sure whether to say that a car is blue or not. For instance, a car that from a certain vantage point is blue but from another is orange. Like a hologram. Even a competent user of the color blue might not know what to say in this instance. Even though we might recognize that there are situations when we don't know what color to call a particular thing—there are some circumstances when our ability to play that game fails—and yet no one considers this fact to shake our very skilled ability to use color language in nearly all other contexts. Thus we see our ability to handle significantly elastic concepts (like color) and yet still manage a competent use of them.

These last few pages hardly represent an argument for understanding understanding by appeal to the mastery of language. Rather they introduce how Wittgenstein approaches questions like the one we've asked about understanding. We turn now to apply Wittgenstein's approach to understanding religious belief.

**II. This section turns to the question of religious belief; it details an account of it that assumes a metaphysical posture and outlines how the rest of the chapter responds to that account.**

We've seen a general account of what makes understanding something intelligible; now we ask, what makes religious belief intelligible? We first consider this question negatively by exploring a view of God assumed by many analytic philosophers of religion (AφR). For AφR religious understanding does not come from an examination of the words or practices we find implicitly or explicitly under the description of religious belief. If religious belief is true, on their account, the truth is validated by the nature of the propositions that stand apart (behind—above—*independent*) of our practices. The validity of faith is secured by the true fact that God is. In their view, a Wittgensteinian account of religious belief takes something that demands metaphysical validation and naturalizes it, thus distorting its most fundamental nature. Understanding religious belief this way—as *justified* by religious practices—turns faith into an elaborate, disingenuous, farce.

Whether the claims of the last section—concerning the nature of language and its understanding—ought to be accepted or not is of course an open question, but even if it's correctness is agreed to wholesale, how could it help in an investigation of God? As was underlined again and again, an appropriate investigation of the world—for those following Wittgenstein—looks to the ordinary for what we should say, when, and if *that* course is taken, if

we restrict ourselves only to everyday, nonmetaphysical sources for making sense of the world and of our experience in it, then haven't we necessarily excluded ourselves from the domain of religious discourse and the object of such discourse, namely God? As Hume powerfully articulates,<sup>11</sup> religious practices necessarily demand a supernatural account of the world and there is nothing, as Wittgenstein would mean it, ordinary about that.

Thus, it could reasonably be assumed that an ordinary account of religious practices will necessarily violate Wittgenstein's method in one of two ways. If one is respected the other will be trespassed. First, if anything is a metaphysical object, God must be such a one. And for Wittgenstein, principally, "philosophy must not interfere in any way with the actual use of language" (PI §124). Thus, if we stay true to Wittgenstein's method religion's supernatural subject must be respected as (the metaphysical object it) is. Conversely, though just as principally, Wittgenstein's aim is to "bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use" (PI §116). Thus as Wittgenstein will have it, if religious belief demands a theoretic account of itself, it cannot amount to anything more than nonsense.<sup>12</sup> If we respect AφR's assertion that religious belief must be metaphysical, then our investigation cannot follow Wittgenstein; on the other hand, if we accept Wittgenstein's method what we want to investigate will necessarily escape the tools at our disposal.

Given these two principles, how can we proceed to investigate religious practices under Wittgenstein's methodology? Won't a Wittgensteinian investigation into religious practices either violate the practices themselves (by fundamentally changing their content) or be forced to concede, in whatever limited way, the use and importance of metaphysical explanation for the world?

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<sup>11</sup> In the epigraph of the Introduction.

<sup>12</sup> This is the concern of Chapter Two.

Navigating our way between either horn of that dilemma is the concern of this project as a whole. The argument against AφR has two phases. We begin by first challenging the coherence of AφR's use and understanding of God. Below we explore three different articulations by AφR of what religious belief is like, all of which are united in the assumption that God is like a metaphysical fact. We then closely consider the work that these (super)facts are believed capable of accomplishing, specifically by detailing Wittgenstein's remarks on rule-following (§§III-IV). Sections VI-VII details a twofold argument against AφR's view. On the one hand, treating religious belief like a matter of fact does not solve the problem of indeterminacy that it was supposed to address; on the other, Wittgenstein's appeal to practice is not itself an argument against the religious idea that God is independent of our practices. The Wittgensteinian point here is that that claim—that God is independent of our practices—is *itself* a religious concept, a religious confession. What the rule-following remarks will hopefully show is that there's no silver bullet for grounding our beliefs (not even in the mastery of language). The second phase (§§VIII-X) attempts to say what it's like to take religious beliefs—like God's independence—not as a metaphysical fact but as a religious conviction.

First we turn to outlining AφR's account of religious belief. The call for religious belief to be grounded in metaphysical reality is nearly ubiquitous in contemporary analytic philosophy of religion, across varying (sometimes in conflict) approaches found in their members. Consider, for instance, religious belief as articulated by Richard Swinburne, Nicholas Wolterstorff, and C. Stephen Evans.<sup>13</sup>

For Swinburne, though it's true that for the first several hundred years of Christian belief, many Christians did not consider whether their beliefs were intellectually justified, but instead

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<sup>13</sup> My comments on Swinburne and Wolterstorff are greatly shaped by DZ Phillip's *Religion and Friendly Fire* (Ashgate, 2004).

they believed, often times, on the basis of a specific “revelatory” experience or on authority; but as atheism became a serious intellectual threat in the eighteenth century (and still remains today), many Christians no longer can justifiably take belief in God for granted. To be clear, though, it isn’t that the grounds that must now be sought or given for belief in God simply serve a practical need that may or may not be useful in the future; rather, although it was true *historically* that grounds were often not given, what makes Christian faith reasonable has always been the intellectual justification of their beliefs—whether or not this was recognized in the past or will be in the future. Why? Because, for Swinburne, the truth of “creedal claims...underlie the practice.”<sup>14</sup> According to Swinburne’s understanding, then, the “creedal claims” of the Christian faith operate as grounding propositions, the truth of which stand apart and act as the justification for all religious practice. Thus, though a Christian may pray to God without grasp of or claim to the intellectual grounds of their faith, what provides intelligibility to that practice is the underlying truth of propositions like “On the third day [Christ] rose again and ascended to the Father.”

For Wolterstorff, though, the situation is a bit more complicated, since by Wolterstorff’s own account there is a semblance of agreement between his Reformed epistemologists and “Wittgensteinian” philosophers of religion.

We human beings engage in the practice of evaluating our beliefs as warranted, as rational, as justified, as cases of knowledge, as entitled, and so forth. The Reformed epistemologist doesn’t invent these practices. He finds them, and finds that he himself is a participant in them. And he accepts them. It’s not his goal to criticize them in any general sort of way. .... What the Reformed epistemologist subject to critique was not our practices of doxastic evaluation but the analysis and critique of those practices offered by

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<sup>14</sup> Swinburne, “Philosophical Theism” in *Philosophy of Religion in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Palgrave, 2001), p. 5.

the classical foundationalists. ...On this point, then, there's no dispute between the Reformed epistemologist and the Wittgensteinian philosopher of religion.<sup>15</sup>

Unlike Swinburne, Wolterstorff does not see religious beliefs (at least, some of them) as depending on inferential justification. For Wolterstorff, "rationality is not to be equated with rational grounding."<sup>16</sup> As he points out, Thomas Reid (a philosopher of importance for Reformed epistemologists) emphatically rejected the empiricist's assumption that only by forming inferential beliefs about the content of our sensations can we make propositions about the external world. By contrast, Reid held that

though sensations are indeed evoked by the impact of the external world on us in perception, those sensations *immediately* evoke in us conceptions and beliefs about the external world. The move, from sensations to perceptual beliefs, is not by virtue of some rational inference but by virtue of our 'hard wiring'. *Perception* is not rationally grounded.<sup>17</sup>

The import from this epistemic theory to religious belief is that, for Wolterstorff, when one looks into the starry sky, if one's faculties are working properly, one can see that it is God's work, immediately—which is to say, the belief that God created the starry sky is properly basic under certain conditions. Since rationality is not grounded in reasons, the belief that the sky is God's handiwork is rational, not because of a process of inferential justification amongst propositions, but, simply, because of the belief's immediacy—because some of us are "hard wired" to see the world that way. Thus one's relation to one's beliefs about God is not one of knowing but is, in part, based on a reasonable, spontaneous epistemic experience.

What this shows is that, though the Reformed epistemologist's use of "practices" does not attempt to ground belief in evidential (or as they say, *rational*) propositions, as Swinburne

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<sup>15</sup> Wolterstorff, "Reformed Epistemology" in *Philosophy of Religion in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Palgrave, 2001), pp. 57-8.

<sup>16</sup> Wolterstorff, "Reformed Epistemology," p. 43.

<sup>17</sup> Wolterstorff, "Reformed Epistemology," p. 43.

seeks to do, their concern with “practices” is still epistemological, and thus, for them, our relation both to the world and to God is still fundamentally an epistemic one, even if it’s that needs no account for its warrant. For Wolterstorff our knowledge of God depends on an epistemic practice (which is something, to some degree, out of our hands), but the truth of those beliefs, and this is a point of similarity between Swinburne and Wolterstorff (and, ultimately, C. Stephen Evans), is still independent of our practices. For them, it takes our practices to witness the world as God’s creation, but the propositional form of that belief (e.g. “God created the heavens and the earth”) is a truth that stands independent.

This commitment to the “truth” of religious belief is just the type of realism that Evans finds as fundamentally a part of God’s nature:

The realist in this sense wishes to stress that reality is, with the exception of human beings and those actions and creations and institutions obviously dependent on human activity, independent of the human mind.<sup>18</sup>

Evans wishes to stress that such a commitment is not logically entailed by the robust sense of truth he takes Descartes and Kant to hold (some form of classical foundationalism<sup>19</sup>): for Kant, “reason should be able to treat questions about the powers of the human intellect with both completeness and finality.”<sup>20</sup> Instead, for Evans, though the object of faith is real and independent of the human mind, “such a truth can only be an ideal to be approximated and striven for.”<sup>21</sup> Though belief in God is metaphysical it is only “merely” so.<sup>22</sup> That is, Evans all but concedes to Descartes that the chasm that separates the mind from the world is very wide indeed. If we have any hope to cross it it’s by *faith* alone (as opposed to Descartes’ own

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<sup>18</sup> Evans, “Kant and Kierkegaard on the Possibility of Metaphysics” in *Kant and Kierkegaard on Religion* (St. Martin’s Press, 2000) p. 12.

<sup>19</sup> Evans, “Kant and Kierkegaard on the Possibility of Metaphysics,” p. 19,

<sup>20</sup> Evans, “Kant and Kierkegaard on the Possibility of Metaphysics,” p. 9.

<sup>21</sup> Evans, “Kant and Kierkegaard on the Possibility of Metaphysics,” p. 13.

<sup>22</sup> Evans, “Kant and Kierkegaard on the Possibility of Metaphysics,” p. 5.

indubitable criterion). For Evans, at least, *this* is the proper context for thinking about religious virtues.

**III. This section and the next are linked, both focus on Wittgenstein’s antimetaphysical conception of rule-following. This section begins to challenge the assumption that “underlying truths” helpfully inform (or even warrant) belief in general; we turn to such explanations because we expect that they will solve the problem of indeterminacy but Wittgenstein shows why once a certain—metaphysical—conception of philosophy is assumed that problem cannot be undone.**

Regardless of what one may come to think about the analysis found in this paper, these next few sections hope to make clear the relevancy of Wittgenstein’s overall critique of philosophy for the specific case of the theoretical version of faith given by the philosophers in the previous section. For Wittgenstein, propositions cannot be understood apart from the practices in which they arise, and thus any attempt that has Wittgenstein holding to the basic scheme put forth by AφR must be seen as unintelligible. This will help us see why looking to religious practices for understanding is so important to a Wittgensteinian approach—help us to see how lifeless the “underlying truth” of religious beliefs are.

The connection between their appeal to the “underlying” propositions and Wittgenstein’s objection can most helpfully be seen in the latter’s rule-following considerations (in its most focused form beginning at §185 and extending through §242).<sup>23</sup> In explaining what it means to follow a rule—for instance in performing simple mathematical calculations—the very tendency to appeal to speculative theory exerts a strong hold on us. By closely considering this

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<sup>23</sup> As will be clear, and later made explicit, I’m following the work of Cora Diamond, “Rules: Looking in the Right Place,” (St. Martins, 1989) and Edward Minar, “The Life of the Sign,” (Oxford, 2011) here.



inclination—considering what triggers it and what difficulties it’s meant to overcome—we can see, Wittgenstein thinks, that the turn to metaphysics not only fails to overcome those difficulties but leads us further from what *can* give such an account.

Wittgenstein begins his rule-following sections by asking us to consider what it’d be like to determine whether a particular student has “mastered the series of natural numbers.” We begin by having him add “+1,” starting with 0 and ending at a thousand. Let’s say he passes this test with flying colors, following the “+1” function without mistake a thousand times. Wittgenstein continues

Then we get the pupil to continue one series (say “+2”) beyond 1000—and he writes 1000, 1004, 1008, 1012.

We say to him, “Look what you’re doing!” –He doesn’t understand. –He answers, “Yes, isn’t it right? I thought that was how I *had* to do it.” —Or suppose he pointed to the series and said, “But I did go on in the say way”. –It would now be no use to say, “But can’t you see ... ?” –and go over the old explanations and examples for him again. In such a case, we might perhaps say: this person finds it natural, once given our explanations, to understand our order as *we* would understand the order “Add 2 up to 1000, 4 up to 2000, 6 up to 3000, and so on”. (§185, Wittgenstein’s emphasis)

The tension that the passage trades on is that the pupil’s continuation of the series is clearly wrong, yet what necessitates the pupil to continue the series as we think the function demands? Wittgenstein’s interlocutor objects to the supposed ambiguity in how the pupil might *interpret* +2: “But I already knew, at the time when I gave the order, that he should write 1002 after 1000” (§187). Wittgenstein’s response is telling, “Certainly; and you may even say you *meant* it then; only you shouldn’t let yourself be misled by the grammar of the words ‘know’ and ‘mean’ (§187).

Wittgenstein does not present either the +2 kid or his interlocutor as representing dismissible positions. There is a naturalness in both their responses, hence the tension.<sup>24</sup> The interlocutor wants to insist that the intended procedure for the pupil is “in some *unique* way predetermined, anticipated” (§188, Wittgenstein’s emphasis), but still the calculation admits of this paradox: “Whatever I do can, on some interpretation, be made compatible with the rule” (§198). How can we mean for +2 to be carried out correctly when we cannot rigidly designate, so to speak, a specific outcome for the infinite possibility of applications? Wittgenstein considers a rather mundane example to highlight how deeply interpretation can infect our claim to rationality—our claim to understand and be understood by others:

This case [our +2 kid] would have similarities to that in which it comes naturally to a person to react to the gesture of pointing with the hand by looking in the direction from fingertip to wrist, rather than from wrist to fingertip. (§185)

We could teach our pupil to follow our pointing gesture correctly (from wrist to fingertip) in countless different contexts, and yet the possibility of interpretation still persists. We might take him to the zoo and draw his attention to seals and tigers by pointing to them, saying, “This is a seal,” “This is a tiger,” etc. If he follows our gesture as we mean it, if we test him by asking him to point out particular objects and he does so correctly, we might think our instruction successful. Yet misapplication is still possible. The pupil might only have understood the gesture to apply in public spaces, or on Fridays, or to mammals but not invertebrates, or as meant merely for instructional purposes, et cetera. On some or all of those occasions he follows from fingertip to wrist—the opposite of our desired outcome—however improbably.

The problem, then, is this. Any rule is subject to interpretation (both by our own use of it and by the use of it by others) and whatever instruction we give for how to interpret a given rule

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<sup>24</sup> Cf. §209: “‘But then doesn’t our understanding reach beyond all examples?’ —A very curious expression, and a quite natural one!—.”

in the future, the instruction itself becomes subject to the same difficulties—becoming just another rule to follow.<sup>25</sup>

What makes the case of directional pointing different from the application of “+2” is that whereas we might dismiss the pointing gesture as a mere, nonrational “custom,” if anything can rigidly designate proper use and application, surely, a simple mathematical function can. Thus Wittgenstein’s interlocutor insists in our ability to “grasp the whole use of the word in a stroke” (§191) as if by “intuition” (§186). Wittgenstein, again, calls for a specification of what exactly this might mean. In §187 he asks what our use of “know” and “mean” might amount to when applied (or potentially applied) to the infinite contingencies that we experience/may experience in the application of rules. Since this can’t be given, and, equally so, since we cannot move off our belief that the use is “predetermined”—that is, not a matter mere interpretation—we are, Wittgenstein suggests, “seduced into using a super-expression” (§192). Thus, “as a result of the crossing of different pictures” (§191), we attempt to explain the rigidity we expect in the application of a rule with the rigidity we find the operation of a machine.

A machine as a symbol of its mode of operation. The machine, I might say for a start, seems already to contain its own mode of operation. What does that mean? –If we know the machine, everything else—that is the movements it will make—seem to be already completely determined. (§193)

It will only “seem” determinate because, of course, if the machine is actual (a regular empirical object) then it’s just as liable for breakdown in its operation as anything is. Thus, in order to close the gap, we clamor for an “ideally rigid machine which *can* move only thus-and-so” (§194, Wittgenstein’s emphasis). Here we imagine a self-interpreting sign beyond the reach of indeterminacy. For whatever rule we plug into the machine, “in a mysterious sense” (§193), the

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<sup>25</sup> Minar, “Life of the Sign,” p. 282.

outcome for how it will be applied is already present and thus predetermined and correct. An ideal calculator never misinterprets the “+2” function.

Wittgenstein’s response to this challenge is an existential one. Trying to construct, or trying to understand the mechanics of, an ideally rigid machine turns us away from investigating the particular nature of our experience in the world. Wittgenstein thinks that when we deal with the parochial, the actual difficulties that arise in our exchanges with one another—if we turn “towards the ‘possibilities’ of phenomena” (§90, Wittgenstein’s emphasis)—we find resources enough to meet the threat and charge of arbitrariness and indeterminacy of meaning. Yet we are still seduced by the desire for knowledge of “the foundation of all the sciences” (§89), which is not “something that lies open to view, and that becomes *surveyable* through a process of ordering, but as something that lies *beneath* the surface” (§92, Wittgenstein’s emphasis).

Wittgenstein’s response to this challenge is what the first section of this chapter termed *the mastery of language*—a concept that we will continue to build on. Before we fully turn back to our discussion on religious belief, we need to consider an important challenge to this chapter’s appeal to the mastery of language. It’s fundamentally important for Wittgenstein that theoretical speculation come to be seen as unintelligible, but how is it that Wittgenstein’s own use of language avoids such metaphysical posturing? Isn’t “the mastery of language” a way to sneak metaphysics in through the backdoor? Doesn’t Wittgenstein’s use of “practices” and “forms of life” open itself up to the charge it’s merely a replacement for a different form of theoretical explanation? The next section extends our discussion on Wittgenstein’s rule-following passages by considering this charge.

**IV. The relevance of the rule-following considerations is applied specifically to AϕR’s understanding of religious belief. Instead of a pursuing a metaphysical**

**solution to the problem of indeterminacy, by building on the first section of this chapter regarding the “mastery of language,” we explore Wittgenstein’s alternative account, which is not itself theoretical.**

We begin by making the connections with  $A\phi R$  and Wittgenstein’s rule-following considerations explicit. Wittgenstein’s ideally rigid machine is itself an ideal candidate for Swinburne and Evans’ call for a set of independently true propositions which, as they lie beneath the surface, act as the standard for determining whether a given practice is valid (true) or not. If our practices are applied to a preprogrammed machine which contains all true propositions, then the outcome will definitively determine the truth every time. Either the practices do line up to the metaphysical facts or they do not (even though, in Evans’ case, we may not have the epistemic powers to claim knowledge of such facts). The kind of rigidity Wittgenstein pictures as a contrast to his own understanding of following a rule is just the kind of rigidity Swinburne and Evans believe necessary for religious propositions.

For Wolterstorff the ideally rigid machine similarly ends the problem to which his epistemic theory is a response. The metaphor here is even more apt since, mechanically speaking, Wolterstorff’s use of “hard-wired” is perfectly at home in it. For the Reformed epistemologist avoiding the infinite regress of inferential reasoning is just what gives importance to their “hard-wire” concept: if our perceptual capacities are directly linked-in to recognize truth, whether that be of ordinary empirical objects or of God, then the specter of (mis)interpretation and (mis)identification is removed, again, under certain conditions.

Wittgenstein carefully articulates the temptation to turn understanding into a mechanical process partly because he considered adopting it early in his philosophical development. As D.Z. Phillips points out, briefly, after finishing the *Tractatus*, “Wittgenstein entertained an idea of

logical analysis which would end in an immediate sense-datum that does not admit of further analysis. The datum would simply be ‘given,’ yielding its meaning, as it were, ‘all at once.’”<sup>26</sup>

Wittgenstein came, though, to think of that “process” as a magical conception of signs and, ultimately, a distortion of the nature of our practices.

In remarks that were meant to act as precursor to the rule-following considerations Wittgenstein directs us to consider how variously rules act in our life with them. Away from the ideally rigid machine, we’re asked to picture a rule as we do a signpost. Though the signpost “leaves room for doubt” (§85) it is in order “if, under normal circumstances, it fulfills its purpose” (§87). Consider while on errand driving across town early in the morning, coming upon a sign in front of a new restaurant that reads: “Now Open.” Without knowledge of *our* customs one could easily mistake it for being equivalent to the illuminated, neon “Open” sign. But the “Now Open” banner affixed to the building’s overhang, unlike the neon sign inside the window, does not announce that meals are currently being served. Rather it tells us that the restaurant, unlike the week before when it was still under construction, is *now* open for business, though at the moment its doors may be locked.

Behind the difficulties from the rule-following considerations is, first of all, this problem: how do *we* determine what the life of the sign amounts to? Wittgenstein’s response is cautionary but direct:

It is not only agreement in definitions, but also (odd as it may sound) agreement in judgments that is required for communication by means of language. This seems to abolish logic, but does not do so. (§242)

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<sup>26</sup> Phillips, *Religion and Friendly Fire*, p. 71.

Wittgenstein's response is direct because he tells us exactly where he thinks we should look to understand the intelligibility of our claims: in the scope of our agreements (and, thus too, our disagreements) we can see what concepts will and will not allow for.<sup>27</sup>

It's tempting to think that Wittgenstein means to propose an understanding of truth which is merely dependent on the voice of the people. If we *will* that such and such is the case, we thereby make it. But close attention to our "Now Open" sign shows the complexity in Wittgenstein's appeal to community agreement. The restaurateur who hangs the sign uses it in the midst of a life with sign usage. The narrowly circumscribed nature of the sign (e.g. the restaurateur may leave the sign up overnight without confusing passersby—no one will demand that she take it down when the doors are locked) is demonstrated in the reactions by the community in which it is used. Without thought, or we might say, interpretation, we react to different signs (e.g. signs for commercial advertisement, road signs, public notices, etc.) differently. A banner hanging from the soffit is different from a selfstanding, permanent one. When a string of neon lights is not illuminated it tells us that the store is closed, regardless if the letters are fixed to read "Open." The kind of intelligibility that the sign has is *shown* in our reactions to it.

To highlight the importance of "forms of life" for understanding, Wittgenstein sometimes asks us to imagine what it would take to achieve understanding when we become isolated, extremely so, from our ordinary background.

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<sup>27</sup> Think, for instance, of the difference between judgments about simple mathematical calculations and judgments about the value of art. Chapter Three discusses this point in some detail.

Suppose you came as an explorer to an unknown country with a language quite unknown to you. In what circumstances would you say that the people there gave orders, understood them obeyed them, rebelled against them, and so on? (§206)

The details for what Wittgenstein has in mind here are important. In the next section he elaborates:

Let's imagine that the people in that country carried on usual human activities and in the course of them employed, apparently, an articulate language. If we watch their activities, we find them intelligible, they seem 'logical'. But when we try to learn their language, we find it impossible to do so. For there is no regular connection between what they say, the sounds they make, and their activities; but still these sounds are not superfluous, for if, for example, we gag one of these people, this has the same consequences as with us: without those sounds their actions fall into confusion—as I feel like putting it.

Are we to say that these people have a language: orders, reports, and so on?

There is not enough regularity for us to call it "language". (§207)

What it means to count something as an "order" or "report" is determined by the place of those activities in the wider language. If that cannot be determined then our efforts have come to an end. Diamond, articulating the concepts involved in weighing and measuring objects, helpfully brings this point to life.<sup>28</sup> If we come to an unknown country and find the people there using a certain kind of stick with seemingly well spaced markings on it which they lay beside different objects and nearly always, afterwards, remember to make notes in their journal-like materials, could we call such specified activity "measuring"? That is, are those movements necessary conditions for measurement? If we see them moving in those motions, regardless of whatever else we may or may not know, can successfully judge them to be a people with the use of measurement? Diamond:

That rules for doing something or other are rules for the determination of the length a thing has depends upon *the length a thing has* entering their lives in a multiplicity of ways. After training, we engage in a practice marked by the absence of discordant results in the measuring of medium-sized objects. That fact is tied directly to another: that we

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<sup>28</sup> Diamond, "Rules," pp. 16-20.



ask: ‘How tall is he?’, ‘What is the length of the room?’ or ‘How far above the floor are the windows?’ and not just questions like ‘What was the number on the part of the tape nearest to the bottom of the window when you laid the tape against the wall?’ ... We ask the first sort of question, and the answers we get are then relied on by us in many ways: length is in our lives separated from *who* did the measuring.<sup>29</sup>

This passage responds not only to the desire to break apart the concepts of measurement from use, but also to the mistaken implication that “use” *alone* can provide understanding for our given practices.

This later point may seem contrary to the steady stream of analysis made so far in this paper. Haven’t we seen Wittgenstein claim in numerous ways that “use” is how we make sense of the world? The point this objection means to challenge depends on what “use” is thought to extend to. The people from our unknown country seem to make use of our concept of measurement. And yet in Wittgenstein’s own example (§207) he resists drawing the conclusion that such people in an unknown country do share our concepts. Here we might say that whether they do or not—whether we can make that judgment—depends not on some necessary condition being fulfilled (like the use of what appears to be a measuring stick), which is “explicable independent of what ... life is like,”<sup>30</sup> but rather depends on all of life—the “use of language full-blown” (§120)—being within view. It depends on whether we are truly masters of their language.

In order to bring out the full importance of the qualification, let’s return to Wittgenstein’s understanding of the role agreement plays in his rule-following considerations. Just before his remark on the need for “agreement in judgments” (§242), Wittgenstein returns to considering what our dealings in mathematics show us about our own forms of understanding:

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<sup>29</sup> Diamond, “Rules,” (Diamond’s emphasis) pp. 16-17.

<sup>30</sup> Diamond, “Rules,” p. 14

Disputes do not break out (among mathematicians, say) over the question of whether or not a rule has been followed. People don't come to blows over it, for example. This belongs to the scaffolding from which our language operates (for example, yields descriptions). (§240)

So it is not that people have *merely* come (verbally, say) to agreement. It isn't that mathematicians determined how they would go about a certain calculation as the result of a conference or professional poll (though there may be instances of this for special occasions). We see what kind of agreement is to be had in mathematics in the *reactions* mathematicians have in the proceedings of their work. If there is disagreement, as there was with the "+2" kid, we are not left simply to wonder about the inner mechanics of the mind. As Edward Minar writes,

In doing these things [measuring, calculating], we do not simply acquiesce in divergent results; we check our work, we train our pupils to repeat the procedures until they get it right, we try to find an explanation of the problem if they are not managing.<sup>31</sup>

Thus, as Wittgenstein puts it, we "influence him by expressions of agreement, rejection, expectation, encouragement. I let him go his way, or hold him back; and so on" (§208). Without this wider scope, we ignore

the place of this procedure in a life in which following rules of all sorts comes in in an enormous number of ways. ... We are brought into a life in which we rest on, depend on, people's following rules of many sorts, and in which people depend on us: rules, and agreement in following them, and reliance on agreement in following them, and criticizing or rounding on people who do not do it right—all this is woven into the texture of life; and it is in this context of its having a place in such a form of human life that a 'mistake' is recognizably that.<sup>32</sup>

A sign (or rule), then, is not self-interpreting no matter how simple or bare. A particular use it may have on a particular occasion is not enough to determine the place it has or the role it plays in our varied forms of life. Thus, as Diamond imagines, "If there were a bunch of people 'going on' with one number after another in the same way when you said 'Add 2' to them, and we knew

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<sup>31</sup> Minar, "Life of the Sign," p. 290.

<sup>32</sup> Diamond, "Rules," p. 27.

nothing else of their lives, we should have no idea what they were up to.”<sup>33</sup> No “candidate item”<sup>34</sup> whether it be assertion-conditions or necessary conditions or practices, or even agreement, on its own, will serve to justify our practices in rule-following.<sup>35</sup>

Part of Wittgenstein’s response to the challenges of the interlocutor concerning the everwidening threat of interpretation is to point out that not all reactions to following a rule *are* interpretations (§201). Sometimes we follow rules blindly (§219); sometimes we feel as though we grasp the whole application of a rule “in a stroke” (§197); at other times we follow rules carefully and slowly, moving back and forth from the manual to the project being constructed, making sure not to miss a step; sometimes we follow rules (orders) with *great* reservations, et cetera. All of this is why Wittgenstein thinks that following a rule “is a practice” (§202) and that “understanding a sentence means to understand a language” (§199)—hence our use of the concept *the mastery of language*.

In §185 the concern, for the interlocutor, is with the single pupil who fails to follow “+2” correctly, but in the next section the concern has spread to cover judgments in general: “How is it decided what is the right step to take at any particular point?” (§186). Part of what helps articulate the skeptical fear here is to isolate the activity of rule-following away from the concerns which are natural to it. When, instead of seeing every reaction as an interpretation, we see the various possibilities that exist in our life with rules, we can see the pupil not as a philosophical problem but as a particular person for whom we may or may not find a way to break through. Wittgenstein says as much, earlier, when he compares following a rule to a signpost. A signpost sometimes leaves “room for doubt, and sometimes not. And now this is no

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<sup>33</sup> Diamond, “Rules,” p. 28.

<sup>34</sup> Minar, “Life of the Sign,” p. 282.

<sup>35</sup> The next chapter will try to extend this thought by detailing why, for Wittgenstein, it’s impossible to get outside language.

longer a philosophical proposition, but an empirical one” (§85). *This* sign may be defective or illconceived, but how can that justify the move to think that, therefore, *signs* full stop may be inherently, in some shadowy sense, defective?

Though we will return to the application of these comments, instead of immediately pairing each point by Wittgenstein to AφR’s conception of religious belief, this chapter shifts again. It started by considering what understanding in general requires (§I), then considered why religious belief might resist Wittgenstein’s use of philosophy (§II); now we consider what religious belief is apart from AφR’s use of it. Taking Wittgenstein and those who have followed after him seriously means turning to look closely at the context in which religious belief is found. Only when we the world is in full view are we able to make sense of a given claim, and so instead of considering religious belief as a matter of propositional evaluation—as something grounded in abstraction—we turn to where religious practice finds its home: that is, in the worship of God.

**V. After detailing what a metaphysical conception of God looks like (§II) and after presenting both problems for metaphysical commitments in general (§§III-IV) and a way past them (§I), we now turn to a brief outline of what a nontheoretical conception of religious belief looks like by presenting three essential aspects of faith: adoration, struggle, and love.**

As one should expect at this point there is no easy, plainly obvious, entry point to talk about the nature of faith in general. No candidate item for which all other claims can be compared against. Any claim will have a counter point, a need for further elucidation against its contraries. Please, then, allow a few lines to grasp for the right atmosphere in which faith has its grip.

Perhaps one of the first things we might consider in the worship of God is the adoration of God expressed in prayers of thanksgiving for which so much of the Bible and subsequent works and reflections in the Christian tradition are dedicated. Though these terms are not equivalent (worship, adoration, and prayer) they are interwoven: adoration and prayer are themselves forms of worship. The Psalms are littered with them:

Be joyful in the Lord, all you lands;  
serve the Lord with gladness  
and come before his presence with a song.  
Know this: The Lord himself is God;  
he himself has made us, and we are his;  
we are his people and the sheep of his pasture.  
Enter his gates with thanksgiving;  
go into his courts with praise;  
give thanks to him and call upon his Name.  
For the Lord is good;  
his mercy is everlasting;  
and his faithfulness endures from age to age.<sup>36</sup>

Simply because God is who God is, God is worthy of worship. God having created all that is, all that is is seen as a gift. There are particular moments when the giftedness of the world is brought into focus. These occasions, sometimes, are called miracles. They are exceptional moments not because they happen rarely (or without explanation) but because of our ability to see God's work in them, whatever their mundanity. (Think of the birth of a child). John Muir traveling through the Sierras captures just such a moment:

The place seemed holy, where one might hope to see God. After dark, when the camp was at rest, I groped my way back to the altar boulder and passed the night on it, above the water, beneath the leaves and stars, everything still more impressive than by day, the fall seen dimly white, singing Nature's old love song with solemn enthusiasm, while the stars peering through the leaf-roof seemed to join in the white water's song. Precious night, precious day to abide in me forever. Thanks be to God for this immortal gift.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Psalms 100.

<sup>37</sup> Muir, *My First Summer in the Sierra*, p. 65

Here we see a world independent—see what little our ability to produce or secure a certain outcome comes to—and yet even in the midst of this contingency we stumble upon the face of God. In that moment the infinite distance between what is owed to us and what we are given is laid bare; there is no thought of repayment because the gift is of a wholly different order. These are expressions of worship. This is where worship (in adoration, in thanksgiving, in prayer, etc.) is made sense of.

Though adoration of God is certainly a central part of a life with God it's important to contrast it with another aspect. The Hebrew word for "Israelite" literally translates to *a people who struggle with God*. There is no doubt that the claim—or call—that Christ has for those who follow him will itself be difficult. Christ tells his disciples that one must be willing to leave both father and mother; that if they pass over the poor and sick, they pass over Christ himself; that if they judge, they too will be judged; that when they throw a banquet they must invite not the wealthy and powerful but the crippled, the lame, and the blind. Christ speaks plainly about the demands of faith in what he called the two greatest commandments: his followers are to love God with all their heart, soul, and mind and are to love their neighbors as they would love themselves.

For such demands, Christ himself saw many who turned away from him. But the struggle of faith is not found only in the rule of life commanded for those who have submitted to the will of God. For instance when Christ tells those he was eating with to not invite their "friends" or "rich neighbors" but "the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind," he adds that if you're invited to a banquet you should not assume the place of honor but rather find "the lowest place" and wait to be called up. Jesus ends by extolling his followers: "For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." This last bit can easily come off

as at best wellmeaning sentiments of practical advice or at worst Machiavellian strategies for manipulating one's way up the social ladder. Attention to the text, however, shows that Jesus is attempting to picture for his disciples what the Kingdom of God is like. In that Kingdom the "objective" indicators for wealth and power do not designate those for whom God will honor.

The struggle in faith comes to this. It's tempting to think that if one wants to be honored in the kingdom of God one must simply become the lowest, but we see Jesus again and again criticize those who treat faith as a defined formula: those who see themselves as spiritual experts because they give long prayers and where long robs (Matthew 23), those who seek to justify their actions by hiding behind the letter of the law (Mark 10). The kind of hardness and rigidity they want from faith, Jesus tells us, only leads to an infection of the heart. They are like white washed tombs: clean on the outside yet dead on the inside. Thus though it is easy to take Christ's maxim to "humble thyself" as another task on the list of things to do for a "great spiritual life," that would only amount to another missed attempt to understand the demand of faith. It would be, as Stephen Mulhall has phrased it in another context, to turn an existential demand into an intellectual problem.<sup>38</sup> There is no objective formula for whether one lives an authentic life in Christ.

These last two aspects of faith must too be counterbalanced. If nothing else was said it may appear that a life of faith means a life of anxiety about one's own worth given Christ's existential demands, but also, given the infinite distance between God's goodness and our own lives, that God's view of us must amount to much less than our view of insects. Against those inferences we turn to a message woven throughout the New Testament. For many in the ancient middle east a prevalent image of God was of a god of wrath and punitive justice: a god waiting

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<sup>38</sup> Mulhall, *Faith and Reason*, p. 50.

to strike down sinners at their most vulnerable moment, a god who stands against humanity as an advisory and merciless judge. Against that image, in John 10, Jesus tells his followers the parable of the Good Shepherd.

“Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.” Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them. So again Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”

So much of what Jesus says in the parable has a literal correlate in the Palestinian tradition of shepherding. For instance, in Palestine, sheep are cultivated for their wool, so the relationship between the shepherd and the sheep lasts for many years, and so it is natural for the shepherd to have individual, descriptive names for his sheep—like “Whitenose,” etc. The shepherd would have a distinctive call (distinctive from that of other shepherds) that only his sheep would recognize; a call that he would use to keep them on the right path.

Jesus says that he is the gate, and as obscure as that sounds to our ears, it likely would have been immediately understood by those listening to him. During the warm months of the year, shepherds would travel far from their hometown in search of food and water to provide for their sheep. Instead of the permanent sheepfold that the sheep usually sleep in, the shepherd would look for an area blocked off by a natural wall, and he would substitute himself as the gate for the makeshift pen. As each sheep made its way into the pen, it would literally have to pass through the shepherd, and the shepherd would take diligent care to check over each one for injuries and sickness, tending to each as it needed.



The picture of the shepherd given by the gospels, both in John and elsewhere, portrays someone who is both affectionate towards his sheep and willing to risk everything for their protection and safety. A few verses later in John 10 we're told that the Good Shepherd will lay down his life for the sheep, and in the Gospel according to Luke, Jesus tells the parable of the shepherd who leaves the ninety-nine to find the one who is lost. Jesus says of that shepherd, "When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.'"

Thus, the good news of the gospel, is in part, that God is for us. God's affection for humanity is like that of a parent's for a child, like that of shepherd's for his sheep. To worship God, to live faithfully as a Christian, is far from entering into a relationship of self-annihilation or fear from an ever looming, abusive overlord. The author of 1<sup>st</sup> John tells us, instead, that "God is Love."

Beloved, let us love one another: for love is of God; and every one that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God. He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love.  
... Beloved, if God so loved us, we ought also to love one another. No man hath seen God at any time. If we love one another, God dwelleth in us, and his love is perfected in us. Hereby know we that we dwell in him, and he in us, because he hath given us of his Spirit. ... God is love; and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him. Herein is our love made perfect, that we may have boldness in the day of judgment: because as he is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love ... .

These claims will no doubt seem to many mere stipulations. As though claiming that "God is love" is something that can be earned by merely stating it as true. This aspect of faith—and the others too—are meant to be taken from the opposite direction. They are not meant to secure the intelligibility of faith, but rather to indicate what it means to talk intelligibly about it; they mean only to describe what the worship of God is like.

This section does not claim to have given anything like the sufficient features of Christianity needed for faith. Nor does this list represent the most important aspects of religious practice: doctrinal and creedal confessions about the incarnation, the trinity, the resurrection of the dead are not being regulated inferior (or secondary) status because of their exclusion. In a way I only mean to say that such confessed positions have sense when set in the atmosphere provided by what the last few pages have reflected on. Importantly though, and perhaps conversely, reflection on the incarnation, trinity, etc., could equally supply the atmosphere needed to think about the sense of religious beliefs discussed in this section (adoration, the force of the call of faith, and the centrality of love and grace). Moreover, this chapter hopes to challenge thinking of religious belief in terms of singularly essential elements (propositions, facts).

**VI. This section and the next are linked. Both sections explore the disagreement with AφR on what belief in God is like. The first section outlines both AφR's disagreement and this project's reaction to that disagreement.**

Though the previous section certainly contrasts significantly with how AφR often talks about faith, we might assume that a vast majority of them agree to both the spirit and even the letter of the last section's characterizations. But if the last section is meant to outline the fundamentals of faith, and if AφR (at least for the sake of argument) accepts them as such, then what is the nature of the disagreement between their approach and Wittgenstein's?

*In their view*, the disagreement isn't about the importance of the worship of God, or what the demands of faith are, or even about the centrality of love for knowing God and following the ways of Christ; rather the disagreement is found in our theoretical commitments about what kind

of being God is and what belief in that being entails.<sup>39</sup> On what kind of being God is Swinburne makes these observations:

God is supposed to be roughly a person without a body, essentially omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly free, perfectly good, creator and sustainer of any universe there may be, a source of moral obligation, eternal and necessary.<sup>40</sup>

And on what belief in that being entails, and how that requirement specifically distances itself from those following Wittgenstein, Wolterstorff writes:

It's on this issue of reference and predication concerning God ... that Phillips's version of Wittgensteinianism clashes most directly with Reformed Epistemology. For the Reformed epistemologist understands himself, when using 'God talk', as referring to God. ... The Reformed epistemologist understands himself as often going on to predicate things of God, these predications then being true or false of God depending on the fact of that matter. ... If there is no such being as God, then, on the account of theistic religious language which is taken for granted by the Reformed epistemologist, theistic religious language misfires in a most radical way. For of course one cannot refer to, and predicate things of, what there isn't.<sup>41</sup>

Though Reformed epistemologists disagree with Swinburne and Evans on a number of points, they all agree that what significantly differentiates themselves from those following Wittgenstein is that their (A $\phi$ R's) understanding of belief in God commits them to believing in an actual, existing fact, and what fundamentally distinguishes this fact is that it isn't dependent on *us* for its intelligibility as true. Belief in God is true whatever our parochial beliefs happen to be. Unlike for Wittgensteinians, so they take it, for whom religious beliefs, like all other beliefs, can only be thought of as true by *appeal* to human, parochial conventions.

It is true that this paper resists the idea of thinking about God as a fact, mostly because it's difficult to see how "fact" language can have any sense when applied to nonempirical

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<sup>39</sup> Framing the discussion this way relies on A $\phi$ R to define the nature of the disagreement; later this chapter will resist their understanding of what the actual nature of the disagreement amounts to.

<sup>40</sup> Swinburne, "Philosophical Theism," p. 8.

<sup>41</sup> Wolterstorff, "Reformed Epistemology," p. 61.

objects. Indeed, this paper will argue that using language this way only obscures the value that belief in God is to hold. They are right to assume that Wittgenstein would deeply oppose some of their basic assumptions, though wrong on just which assumptions he would challenge. For instance, Wittgenstein would want to challenge the idea that only by the use of fact language can we truly talk about a given (though importantly *real*) aspect of our experience. That is, Wittgenstein challenges the idea that language functions only for a single purpose—as though all our words might be reduced to the use of a single tool. AφR assumes that if something is real then it must be thought about as an empirical fact, or at least a quasi-empirical one. For Wittgenstein, however, if there’s a challenge about the legitimacy of a held belief we cannot assume that there will be a single criterion to evaluate it. Instead of holding a universal measure (in this case, “is it a fact or not?”) as the standard for deciding what kind of thing some thing is, Wittgenstein asks us to look at how the language is used in the context in which we find it.

There are two other points to be made here. As the rule-following considerations were meant to suggest, Wittgenstein would also challenge a view of belief that assumed that fact-language represents a silver bullet to solve the kinds of problems we often find in our language about belief. Even if we conceded to AφR that fact-language is appropriate for talking about God, this does not get them out of the problems they assume it will. For instance, even if we concede that religious experiences is “hard-wired” that hardly secures us in assuming that such experiences *should* be deemed *true*. Part of the reason we turn to this kind of rigid determinacy is found in the fear that without it meaning or truth or whatever will be left in the wind; but as Wittgenstein’s exploration of rules show, no matter how rigid we make the criterion for evaluating our beliefs, indeterminacy is still possible. Plugging the indeterminate wholes with

metaphysical facts—though an alluring temptation—does not provide us with the kind of certainty we thought it might.

The converse point is, AφR assumes that only their universal standard can account for understanding, but again as the rule-following considerations were meant to show, thinking of meaning (or truth) as contextually dependent does not commit us to forsaking a claim from intelligibility. Even though it might not be possible to absolutely designate whether a rule was followed correctly or not, that does not give credence to the inference that *no* understanding of how to follow a rule can be given. These two lines of thought will be explored in more depth below.

It's difficult writing this as a response to AφR's concerns, in part, because many of the assumptions made from the outset set us on a rather confusing path. For instance, though this paper will resist thinking about religious belief as the collection of material facts, it's important to see that this is a rather trivial point. Remember, as we claimed in the Introduction, for Wittgenstein there is a sense that the words we use can both be misleading or lifeless and also be *the* key to clearer understanding. They represent a key in the sense that by the careful use of words we find new avenues for intelligibility; words may be lifeless because they—the mere string of letters collected together—have *no* inherent value by themselves.

To translate these concerns into our present discussion, we might say: there's a temptation to think that we can discover whether language about religion is serious or not merely by scanning for the right words. If a theory of religious belief uses the *words* “to truly predicate of God,” “God is a metaphysical object,” “God *really* exists,” etc., then and only then should such an account be taken as a candidate item for truth. As we've seen, for Wittgenstein, it isn't that any particular claim is necessarily objectionable. Thus there's no reason to think that there

will be an inherent problem with “God talk” *referring* to God *as a fact*, or in the claim that God exists independently of our practices, or even, however awkward, that God is a “person without a body.” Mulhall makes just this point when considering whether religious beliefs must be metaphysical or historical:

Whether we want to say ... that such religious beliefs are ‘historical and metaphysical’ depends on precisely what these modifying adjectives imply, and whether they are meant to constitute an exhaustive classification.<sup>42</sup>

What work “reference”—or *any* other concept for that matter—is supposed to accomplish is just *the* point of interest for a Wittgensteinian analysis. So, contra Wolterstorff, a Wittgensteinian approach does not assume that using “God-talk” as a fact of the matter is *necessarily* confused—such a position violates Wittgenstein’s fundamental conception of language!<sup>43</sup>—but rather that any claim is made intelligible by examining how that claim functions in the context in which it’s used.

The next section closely examines the concept of belief with a specific concern for religious belief. It attempts to give a similar treatment to the concept of belief that the first section of this chapter gave to understanding, though more abbreviated. What is the proper context for “belief in God”?

**VII. The next section argues that for AφR the context for “belief in God”—though it mostly goes ignored—is like an empirical or quasi-empirical fact, and that this use of belief is a fundamental mischaracterization of what belief in God is like. Turning to the work of Kierkegaard this section argues that belief in God is not like the acceptance of a quasi-empirical fact but rather is a way of living in the world.**

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<sup>42</sup> Mulhall, “Wittgenstein and the Philosophy of Religion,” in *Philosophy of Religion in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Palgrave, 2001), p. 102.

<sup>43</sup> The next chapter extends this point in its discussion on “logical syntax.”

We proceed by attempting to distinguish what differentiates belief in a fact and belief in God.

This is a topic (or at least a topic closely related to it) that motivates a significant amount of the work of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Danish philosopher, Søren Kierkegaard's work. In *Fear and Trembling* Kierkegaard has the pseudonymous author Johannes *de silentio*<sup>44</sup> write this:

An old proverb pertaining to the outward and visible world says: "Only one who works gets bread." Oddly enough, the saying doesn't apply in the world to which it most properly belongs, for the outward world is subject to the law of imperfection; there it happens time and again that one who gets bread is one who does not work, that one who sleeps gets it in greater abundance than one who labours. In the outward world everything belongs to whoever has it . . . . . It is otherwise in the world of spirit. Here there prevails an eternal divine order, here it does not rain on the just and the unjust alike, here the sun does not shine on both good and evil, here only one who works gets bread . . . .<sup>45</sup>

Johannes *de silentio* draws our attention in this passage to a particular aspect of faith, one mentioned in §V of this chapter: faith is a struggle. Echoing passages like the one found in the Gospel according to Luke where Christ tells his followers not to invite the rich, but rather, the crippled, the lame, and the poor, Johannes *de silentio* emphasizes that worldly power and status do not transfer into a righteousness of spirit. That is, though one may have considerable titles, money, and social influence, that is no indication of spiritual wealth. Similarly, how wealth is accumulated in the material and spiritual world differs. In the material world titles, money, and social influence can all be inherited and stolen, but in the world of spirit, merely by assuming a seat of importance does not make one thus.

This point can be extended in a number of ways. For instance there's an important similarity in the characterization of the material world and the world of objective facts. Like the adult children of the super rich who do not work to eat, we need not work to discover any number of facts about the world. In the "outward," material world matters of fact can be given

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<sup>44</sup> Following Kierkegaard's request, I will refer to Johannes *de silentio* as the rightful holder of the views that follow from the passage below.

<sup>45</sup> Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, p. 57.

over like loaves of bread. Thus, we need not become space explorers to know (some of) the countless facts scientists have discovered about far off planetary objects. In the world of faith, however, knowledge of God is not like that. Belief in God has a *call* on those whom it claims.

Consider our natural responses to facts of the matter. That Pluto is no longer considered a planet but a dwarf one because it meets only two of the three requirements designed by the International Astronomical Union for what distinguishing planets from dwarf planets (Pluto failed to, as it were, become gravitationally dominant), does not necessarily have a claim on anyone. We might be indifferent to its factual status, or even agree to it and yet remain indifferent to its truth! The same reaction makes little sense of one who confesses that they believe in God. To say, “I believe in God though I could care less,” is only to concede a misunderstanding about what “belief in God” comes to. This, again, is to reiterate that “belief”—like all other such concepts—functions in different ways, in different contexts.

Wittgenstein, in his *Lectures on the Foundations of Mathematics*, takes note of the various ways in which belief participates in our forms of life.

What are the criteria that we believe something? Take a particular theory of Eddington’s about the end of the world: in  $10^{10}$  years, the world will shrink, or expand, or something. He might be said to *believe* this. How does he do this? Well, he says that he believes it, he has arrived at it in a certain way, is rather pleased that he has reached this knowledge, and so on. But what could be called actions in accordance with his belief? Does he begin to make preparations? I suppose not —Compare believing something in physics and the case where someone shouts “Fire!” My saying “I believe” will have different properties and different consequences, or perhaps none.<sup>46</sup>

Just as a chessqueen can take on a different significance in different contexts, so too can the lettersigns formed together to spell “belief.” How can we tell? We see in our reactions that the token in different contexts changes. We would be alarmed to hear the director of FEMA say that she believes a hurricane will soon strike Florida and yet not see her—or anyone in that agency—

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<sup>46</sup> *Lectures on the Foundations of Mathematics*, p. 136



take immediate, protective measures; and yet not alarmed to hear a scientist claim she believes in the next several billion years the growth of the sun will eventually overtake the earth and see no change in her behavior. In some contexts, “I believe” is a call to action.

But if we, an interlocutor might suggest, pay attention to grammar, as Wittgenstein would have us do, can't we show that there is a difference between “believing that” and “believing in”? That is, the claim, “I believe *that* Barack Obama is President,” is much different than the claim “I believe *in* the Obama Presidency”? We may believe *that* Pluto is a dwarf planet but we believe *in* the power of love. Why can't “God exists” be a very basic “believe that” claim—a claim without affectation, so to speak?

There are a lot of moving parts here. Before we consider the suggestion that we might *believe that* God exists like we *believe that* the Higgs Boson does, we need first consider a deeper challenge. The suggestion we've seen from AφR is not only that religious beliefs are like empirical beliefs, but also that the truth of God is a metaphysical one. And thus that we might find the claim “God exists” to be intelligible apart not only from religious conviction but from *any* context. Challenging AφR on this point is not meant to challenge the idea that God does not stand independent of our interests or even that we might think about God in a rather cool, detached way; rather, the challenge takes exception to the idea that our use of the lettersigns “God” has a sense *apart* from our understanding of how that word is used in language, as Swinburne specifically claims it does.

Consider, for instance, the simple “belief” claims of straightforward empirical observation. To what degree does context play in a claim like this: “I believe that ‘elm’ is the name of a tree”? Can't we evaluate that claim independently of *our* context? Here, though, we've returned to the problem of measurement Wittgenstein considers in his meditation on rule-

following. What are we to say if we come upon a strange land with people following strange customs but whom, nonetheless, seem to be making precise measurements? If we come upon someone in a strange land who points to a tree and says “This tree is an elm,” can’t we infer with confidence that this person has given that tree a certain name—or at least that he believes something about that tree? What Wittgenstein stresses is that “naming,” or any other such activity, cannot be made sense of in isolation and that that practice exists amongst innumerable other practices. However minimal “I believe that ‘elm’ is the name of a tree,” might be, we make sense of it amidst our conventions of naming, and acquaintance with trees, and the regularity of spatial objects, and the difference spatial objects like trees and rocks have from other aspects of our experience like daydreaming and wishing, et cetera. Phillips continues this thought,

Suppose someone says, “I believe there are trees” when he is entirely unacquainted with trees. He is looking forward to seeing his first tree, or his first picture of a tree. Here, what his belief amounts to has its sense within the context of his acquaintance with physical objects, with descriptions of physical objects, and with acquiring knowledge of new physical objects. Someone may say, “I believe there’s something called ‘trees’, but I don’t know what it is”. This is simply a confession that there is something the person believes he can find out about, but its grammar, as yet, is unspecified. As a result, what believing in it would amount to is, as yet, also unspecified.<sup>47</sup>

Against AφR’s protestations, this chapter wants to claim that God’s existence—what kind of thing God is—cannot be considered apart from the kind of practices from which it’s found. We began this section considering what belief is like in the spiritual (as opposed to the material) world, and considered a challenge to that account by suggesting that religious belief might be understood apart from a “spiritual” context. This challenge led us to reaffirm the importance of context for any claim, regardless its “type” of discourse. The objection is not that Wittgensteinians think that reference to God is incoherent, or that God must be dependent on our practices, or that “God exists” is nonsensical, or many of the other formulations, but rather that it

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<sup>47</sup> Phillips, “On Really Believing,” in *Wittgenstein and Religion* (Palgrave, 1994), p. 50.

is only within our forms of life that any particular discourse, or language-game, or word, or phrase, et cetera, is able to be made sense of. And if that is true, we must give close attention to what context our concept of God might have sense.

There is a sense in our use of “belief” that allows for us to believe *that* some fact is true and yet remain indifferent and unchanged by it. We believe *that* Pluto is not a planet. For many of us whether it is or isn’t considered as such makes little difference to how we regard it or even to how we might integrate that fact into our lives. But is religious belief—belief concerning God—like that? The position of this chapter is both that AφR assumes that belief in God can be like that and also that viewing religious belief in that way fundamentally misrepresents what religious belief is like.

AφR assumes the possibility of that kind of disinterested acceptance of God’s reality because for many of them they see religious belief as quasi-empirical. For instance, Swinburne talks straightforwardly about understanding God as a person “without a body,” and though Wolterstorff repeatedly denies the sense in thinking about God as a visible object his position is not wholly dissimilar to Swinburne’s. For as strongly as Wolterstorff criticizes Phillips for not explicitly arguing for what phrase he thinks more appropriate than “God is a referring object,” Wolterstorff does not say much as to what kind of being he thinks God is.<sup>48</sup> Wolterstorff in passing does refer to that which is being praised as a “being,”<sup>49</sup> and later says that

We [Reformed epistemologists] understand ourselves, when using theistic language, to be saying things which imply that there is a being such that it is identical with God.<sup>50</sup>

It’s obvious that the frustrations expressed by Swinburne and Wolterstorff about the kinds of criticism launched against them by those submitting their analysis to Wittgenstein’s methods is

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<sup>48</sup> See Wolterstorff’s discussion in “Reformed Epistemology,” pp. 57-62.

<sup>49</sup> Wolterstorff, “Reformed Epistemology,” p. 59.

<sup>50</sup> Wolterstorff, “Reformed Epistemology,” p. 62.

genuine. For instance, Swinburne vents some of this frustration when, after *imagining* (though what exactly he has in mind, he does not say) a particular criticism one might make of some Wittgensteinian position, he writes, “One is told that one’s account of the philosophical claim is far too naïve, and that to produce head-on arguments for or against such claims is a naïve way to deal with them. One is finally left with the impression that one can only understand what the writer is saying if one endorses it.”<sup>51</sup> Though it seems that this is a criticism that could be made of philosophers in general, the “ridicule” launched upon AφR of which Wolterstorff complains does not seem totally undeserved. At least, if it’s fair to characterize the criticism made of their positions as “ridicule,” Wolterstorff is right to object to it, but the criticisms are in response to a refusal by AφR to appreciate a very basic Wittgensteinian point. For instance just after claiming that God is best understood as an invisible person Swinburne continues on,

Inevitably, to talk of the source of all being involves using words in somewhat stretched senses—just as, in a humbler way, does talk about photons and protons. But it needs to be made to some extent clear just what the stretching amounts to in each case, and to be made plausible that when words are used in the stretched sense, the claims about God made with their aid are coherent. It’s no good saying ‘all our talk about God is metaphorical’. For if anyone is even to have a belief that there is a God, let alone have grounds for that belief, there must be some difference between that belief and the belief that there is no God . . . . And to explain to a non-believer what that belief is, one must use words which she understands. That involves making it clear when words are being used in stretched senses and—insofar as it can be done—what are the boundaries of these senses. The claim that there is a God may of course not be a fully clear claim, but unless it is moderately clear, *it* cannot provide backing for the practice of religion nor can arguments be given for or against it.<sup>52</sup>

Here Swinburne’s characterization is the same as Wolterstorff’s complaint. If belief in God is metaphorical there is nothing, truly, for such talk to refer to, and thus, as Wolterstorff writes, with a touch of exasperation, if there was no God “then we would cease using ‘God talk’—other

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<sup>51</sup> Swinburne, “Philosophical Theism,” p. 16.

<sup>52</sup> Swinburne, “Philosophical Theism,” p. 9. My emphasis.

than to join our atheist friends in exclaiming, ‘Thank God it’s Friday!’ What’s the point of talking about God saving us if there’s no God to do the saving!’<sup>53</sup>

The frustration from the Wittgensteinian perspective though is found in AφR’s refusal to give more than a few words about what non-metaphorical talk in God amounts to. Swinburne recognizes that such claims like “God is supposed to be roughly a person without a body” is stretched, but what could he possibly mean by suggesting that that language is stretched *just* as our language about photons and protons is stretched? Is God supposed to be invisible *just* as those elementary particles are invisible, namely only to the naked eye? As though with a large enough micro/telescope one might be able to see the effects of God in just the same straightforward, empirical way one might see the effects of a proton? Or is it stretched in the sense that when we say the sun “rises” what we really mean is that the earth’s rotation will eventually make the sun’s rays visible again? This later sense is just the sense we might use to correct someone who naively thinks that they see “blue” when *in reality* all they see are light waves reflected at a particular frequency.

In either case that protons are objects does not seem to be quite the stretch that “God is an object” is. When Wolterstorff writes that “there is a being such that it is identical with God,” one wonders what sense that might have if not for the language of *empirical* objects or mathematical concepts. And however we identify, for instance, the process of picking out an empirical object it’s difficult to see how that might help in identifying the “sameness” of the proposition “God exists” with the object which is God, since, as they also want to claim, such an object is necessarily beyond space and time.

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<sup>53</sup> Wolterstorff, “Reformed Epistemology,” p. 62.

Wittgenstein directs us to consider how language and the difficulties we encounter in our everyday experiences enter into our lives in the world. Wolterstorff claims that theistic language must affirm that “there is a being such that it is identical with God,” but our understanding of identification language-games is not complicated or shadowy or stretched. We know what it’s like to identify one person (or an object) as the same as we saw before. How is identifying God like this? In a letter to Peter Winch, Rush Rhees comments on the temptation to think of God as this quasiempirical object—as Rhees says, “a substantive”:

This question of the identity of God, the question of how you know whether the word means the same now, or whether different people mean the same by it, is important. . . . If one lays emphasis . . . on the fact that ‘God’ is a substantive, and especially if one goes on, as I think you might, to say that it is a proper name, then the natural thing will be to say that it is a proper name, then the natural thing will be to assume that meaning the same by ‘God’ is something like meaning the same by ‘the sun’ or meaning the same by ‘Churchill’. You might even want to use some such phrase as ‘stands for’ the same. But nothing of that sort will do here. Questions about ‘meaning the same’ in connexion with the names of physical objects are connected with the kind of criteria to which we may appeal in saying that this is the same object—‘that is the same planet I saw in the south west last night’, ‘that is the same car that was standing here this morning’. Supposing someone said ‘The word “God” stands for a different object now.’ What could that mean? I know what it means to say that ‘the Queen’ stands for a different person now, and I know what it means to say that St. Mary’s Church now is not the St. Mary’s Church that was here in So-and-So’s day. I know the sort of thing that might be said if I were to question either of these statements. But *nothing* of that sort could be said in connexion with any question about the meaning of ‘God’. Now this is not a trivial or inessential matter. It hangs together in very important ways with what I call the grammar of the word ‘God’. And it is one reason why I do not think it is helpful to say that the word is a substantive.<sup>54</sup>

AφR thinks that appealing to God, as a metaphysical transcendent being, is what allows for the understanding of our religious practices. This “person without a body” is the truth which underwrites the importance religious belief has. That without being able to judge whether “God exists” is true or false—*independently* of everything else—there’d be no point to any religious activity, like prayer. Again as Wolterstorff exclaims, “What’s the point of talking about God

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<sup>54</sup> Rush Rhees, *Rush Rhees on Philosophy and Religion*, p. 45-6.

saving us if there's no God to do the saving!"<sup>55</sup> Swinburne makes the same point in a more general way, "Yet the practices of the religion only have a point if there is a God . . . ."<sup>56</sup> Again the point is not that "God exists" is senseless but rather, it's no help to think that pointing to a mental state in the mind is what counts as the referring proposition (occurrent or not) for explaining anything about the nature of the belief itself. Wittgenstein:

How do you know that you believe that your brother is in America? ... Suppose we say that the thought is some sort of process in his mind, or his saying something, etc. — then I could say: "All right, you call this a thought of your brother in America, well, what is the connection between this and your brother in America?" ... Why is it that you don't doubt that it is a thought of your brother in America? (LRR, p. 66)

An important point Wittgenstein is alluding to here is that it does not help to answer the question "Why is it that you don't doubt that it is a thought of your brother in America?" by saying, "Well I believe it." What it means to believe here is exactly what's in question. So, similarly it's no help to respond to the question, "Why do you believe in God," by responding, "Because God exists," or as Wolterstorff puts it, because "there is a being such that it is identical with God."<sup>57</sup> "God exists" may very well be a true claim but what Wittgenstein is pushing for here is for us to turn to the context in which that claim has an application. Without recourse to the religious tradition—the natural home—where we find "belief in God" the use of the sign "God" is lifeless.

This section and the last have tried to articulate where exactly a Wittgensteinian might find fault with in AφR's conception of religious belief; though it's not difficult to appreciate the sense, from AφR's perspective, that this Wittgensteinian critique still seems to miss *the* point that so frustrates AφR. Even if it's right to say that belief in God only makes sense within our practices and even if it's right to say that that belief does not look like belief in empirical facts,

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<sup>55</sup> Wolterstorff, "Reformed Epistemology," p. 62.

<sup>56</sup> Swinburne, "Philosophical Theism," p. 4.

<sup>57</sup> Wolterstorff, "Reformed Epistemology," p. 62.

doesn't the Wittgensteinian position mean that religious belief amounts to nothing more than a *construction* of our practices? The next three sections represent the second phase of the argument against AφR. Though still largely devoted to AφR's concerns, these sections detail what it would be like to deny a metaphysical picture of God but keep, for instance, the strong (and *religious*) requirement of God's independence. These sections also extend the sense in which AφR's picture of God corrupts the religious claim that belief in God necessitates. Each of the following sections takes up one of the three "essences" of faith explored in §V.

**VIII. The last two sections were primarily negative, focusing on the AφR's problematic account of belief in God; this section and the next two attempt to highlight the importance of religious practice in the belief (and worship) of God. This section focuses on the first essential aspect of faith outlined in §V: the adoration of God. This section considers what it might mean, as a part of religious practice, to think of God as independent and wholly other. It then highlights how AφR's own construal of religious belief fails to account for this essential aspect.**

AφR vigorously defends itself as being *the* defenders of the reality of God. Part of the assumption of their defense is that without recourse to metaphysics, the independence of God cannot fully be granted. For them of utmost importance in our understanding of God is that God is not dependent on *our* customs. Again the position of this paper is not to suggest that such a requirement is necessarily unintelligible. What this paper does object to is the idea that AφR can speak intelligibly about *God's independence* apart from a religious context. "God exists" or "I believe in God" are *religious* claims. This is not to suggest that *religious* claims cannot be compared to or critiqued by other claims (e.g., scientific ones)—Wittgenstein sees languages-games as helpful *because* they can be used as objects of comparison—but only to underline that



if we are to see those claims as having life it will be because we've made an attempt to understand the context from which they came. Phillips does this in full force:

It is part of our talk about mountains that we say that they existed before men. It is not part of our talk about banking to say that it existed before men. Banking is a human institution created by men. Within religion, things are said about God of a time which precedes man's existence. That does not mean that God existed before men in the sense in which mountains, rainbows or rivers did. These are all empirical phenomena and my beliefs concerning their prior existence allow me to ask questions about what they look like, how long they had existed, whether some of these empirical phenomena have ceased to exist, and so on. Nothing of this sort makes any sense where God's reality is concerned. ... What kind of language do we hear in these beliefs? Here is an example: "the earth was without form, and void: and darkness was upon the face of the deep ... the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters." That is not like saying that any kind of object moved on the face of the waters, We know that from the way we might speak *now* of a place being filled with God's presence, of God being found in the deep. Ask yourself what might lead you to speak this way, or what disagreement about this way of talking might amount to.<sup>58</sup> ... The "before" involved, in unlike the case of mountains, rivers, etc. is not a temporal "before." We are told: "Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever thou hadst formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting, thou art God." All things have their meaning in God, for the believer. That is why God is not a maker, but a creator. The sense of these religious beliefs is not given independently of the mode of projection in which they have their natural home.<sup>59</sup>

As Phillips puts it, we find in the Bible a picture of God that is not merely a fantastically large, very old, and powerful creature (a *super* being). The difference between God and God's creation is not one of degree or quality. It isn't that God just happens to be more powerful than any other being, but that God is qualitatively different from that which God created. That God is the source of all being is not (only) to suggest that God is a being who has created other beings but that all other beings cannot exist without God. When God tells Moses, "I am what I am," God is not proclaiming God's nature to be extremely consistent, comparatively, but rather, wholly other.

This is why language in reference to God is not to be easily passed over. Against the proclaimed need to offer one's self in sacrifice and worship to God, consider this (paraphrased)

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<sup>58</sup> I take up Phillips' suggestion to ask what might lead us to speak this way or disagree with such speech in the third chapter.

<sup>59</sup> Phillips, "On *Really* Believing," p. 53.

response found in the midst of the never ending chatter of the internet: “When will society overcome the need for king worship?” We might infer from this a broader point: servitude to another being is positively medieval. Now that humanity has progressed, now that democracy is the rule of law (or at least its norm), we no longer need hierarchies of being. We now live in a society of equals, no longer in need of rule by greater men. Democracy has, so to speak, killed off God.

This brings into sharp relief that even the acclamation that “God is King” or that “Jesus is Lord” is, as St. Thomas would say, analogical. God is not King of the Universe in the same way the King of France is King of France. The difference between the King of France and “God is King” isn’t that God is much more powerful. They’re not alike in the sense that “God is King” is just a *stretched* or exaggerated expression. This is why all predicative language in reference to God must be understood in a qualified (religious) sense.<sup>60</sup>

The story of Job underscores this qualitative difference.<sup>61</sup> After Job’s friends plead with him to curse God, though he refuses to do so, his faith does waver, as he asks, “Why has God done this to me?” Here Job seems to picture God in just the creaturely way this paper has argued is a misunderstanding. Job questions God as though God were not much more than a man, as though God might stand accountable to the understandings of creation, as though God were more or less an equal. Job presupposes that he may at least understand God if God were to lay out God’s reasons for what God had done, as though they might “come together in judgement.”<sup>62</sup>

The Book of Job ends with God, instead, asking questions of Job:

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<sup>60</sup> Mulhall, “Wittgenstein and the Philosophy of Religion,” p. 100.

<sup>61</sup> I’m following Phillips’s characterization here. See his *The Concept of Prayer* (Routledge, 1965), pp. 99-101.

<sup>62</sup> Job 9:32. Quoted in Phillips, *The Concept of Prayer*, p. 99.

Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth? Declare, if thou hast understanding. Who hath laid the measures thereof, if thou knowest? Or who hath stretched the line upon it? Whereupon are the foundations thereof fastened, or who laid the corner stone thereof; When the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy?<sup>63</sup>

To say, “The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh, blessed be the name of the Lord,” is not to invite thinking about God as though God is a being with moral agency, sometimes working for the betterment of *some* of God’s creatures and sometimes not. It isn’t that events come before God needing God’s approval before they pass into the world—as though God were some very powerful store clerk in charge of allowing or not allowing items to come on the self. Thus to know the will of God is not to look for some explanatory system which might lay bare either the universal structure of the world or the particular events of one’s own life. It is to put one’s life into the hands of God; to say, regardless of what comes one will not abandon the worship of God; to see all things as gifts from God.

When Christians pray they do not mean for their prayers to be a causal manipulation of what happens in the world. As though they have access to a supernatural fix for the ills and inconveniences they experience in the natural order. They pray, *Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven*. Or as the prayer attributed to St. Chrysostom says, “Fulfill now our desires as may be best for us.” Christians do lift up prayers of desperation, pleading with God that some great evil may not happen. That God is not blamed if the evil does happen shows that the prayer is, in part, a confession; a laying down of one’s life before God, a submitting of one’s will to God’s ultimate purposes. And that one may lose faith in God as the outcome of some event, shows that seeing *everything* as a gift from God may become meaningless. To see that confession as diminished (e.g., that all of the created order is a gift) is to find oneself at a

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<sup>63</sup> Job 38:4-7. Quoted in Phillips, *The Concept of Prayer*, p. 99.

distance from one's faith. It is a type of sham worship to worship God because you think that God has manipulated the world to bring *you* favor.

Of squabbles over the use of one phrase or word over another Wittgenstein advises, "Say what you please, so long as it does not prevent you from seeing how things are" (§79). Though there's nothing necessarily objectionable about the words AφR uses to talk about God, we've seen their use does seem to lead them astray. To think that religious language functions like language concerning "facts of the matter" fails to appreciate the sense in which religious belief is not conditional in the way that our beliefs about facts of the matter are. Though Wittgenstein made very few remarks on religious belief (and published none), several of them relate directly to this point.

Suppose, for instance, we know people who foresaw the future; make forecasts for years and years ahead; and they described some sort of Judgement Day. Queerly enough, even if there were such a thing, and even if it were more convincing than I have described, belief in this happening wouldn't be at all a religious belief. Suppose that I would have to forego all pleasures because of such a forecast. If I do so and so, someone will put me in fires in a thousand years, etc. I wouldn't budge. The best scientific evidence is just nothing.<sup>64</sup>

AφR's distortion of religious worship here is two fold: it both makes the worship of God seem like a contingent response and also offers no obligatory reason to worship such a being. First the latter point. If God is a fact of the matter and if, as some AφR think, the reasons for accepting this fact were undeniable this in itself is no reason to worship such an object. It isn't that God just happens to be the most powerful creature we know of and that something with God's particular features (say, necessity) is worthy of worship. If indeed we did discover a necessary being this discovery would of course be astonishing. We may well rethink our understanding of the world and our place in it, but why think that an object of necessity should be worshiped?

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<sup>64</sup> Wittgenstein, "Lectures on Religious Belief," in *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief* (Blackwell, 1966), p. 56.

Rhees makes just that point<sup>65</sup> and then contrasts it with the overall project of providing “proofs” for God’s existence.

Descartes asked whether there were any reality corresponding to his idea of God, as though he thought this were like asking whether there were any reality corresponding to his idea of a tree. But what is there religious about believing in the existence of an object, in that sense? Or in worshipping it? (If you believed the tree was a holy tree, there might be some reality in that—but that is not the reality of the tree as a physical object.)<sup>66</sup>

Regardless of whether faith is hard-wired or evidentially justified, the gap created by AφR’s metaphysical picture of God cannot be closed. Wittgenstein’s remarks on rule-following show that the indeterminacy that exists in our beliefs, in our rules, in our lives, cannot be completely snuffed out. Even if AφR claims to have settled the matter (either about God’s existence or our relationship to God) nothing follows from that as they expect it might. This only highlights that in the Christian tradition that God *is* is what makes God worthy of worship.

This is, in part, why the “object talk” about God is so misleading. The value of “facts of the matter” are contingent on the kind of needs they purport to fulfill, if any, but the worship of God is wholly other. No matter how great a gift some object may be its value is not absolute. A present may have more value if it was given by a special friend under special circumstances, but the same present may lose all its value if the friendship falls apart or the broader context in which it was given turns lame. (Apologies in advance for the graphic nature of this example.) Imagine receiving a pacifier from a friend at the birth of one’s child. The value it has is not found just in the pacifier’s utility, but whatever extra value it presents could easily become meaningless if the child tragically dies after birth. This of course is not a necessary causal outcome but the larger point stands since, however unlikely, it should be clear that gifts of this nature are only contingently valuable.

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<sup>65</sup> Rush Rhees, “Religion and Philosophy,” in *Rush Rhees on Philosophy and Religion*, p. 5.

<sup>66</sup> Rush Rhees, “Religion and Philosophy,” p. 7.

Phillips translates this point into a religious context. Consider making the case for the worship God for either of these two reasons:

(1) We should believe in God. He is the most powerful of all beings. We are all to be judged by Him in the end. He is to determine our fate. In this argument there is only one concept of power: worldly power. *As it happens*, God is more powerful than we are, but it is the same kind of power.

(2) Many battles are fought. At times it looks as if the good is defeated and evil triumphs. But there is no reason to fear: the ultimate victory is God's. Here a common measure is applied to God and the powers of evil, as if God's victory is demonstrable, something recognized by good and evil alike. ...<sup>67</sup>

If the worship of God depends merely on certain historical outcomes coming out as many interpret the bible to foretell, or if the worship of God depends merely on the universe displaying a certain conceptualization of “fine-tuning”—if these act as the grounds for faith—then the worship of God has been relegated to a certain kind of crass probabilistic contingency. These probabilistic contingencies—like the value of gifts—only have value under certain circumstances, namely on the ability of some to determine their truth or on them not being outdone by greater acts of power. Since “fine-tuning” is supposed to be a genuinely discoverable thing, the discovery of its falsity should also be possible. Our relation to faith, though, cannot allow for these kinds of contingencies. Belief (conviction) based an empirical hypothesis like this is not a candidate for true faith.

To think of God as an object, a special kind of being, however powerful and everlasting, but nonetheless understood as a fact of the matter, is to participate in a kind of idolatry which obfuscates religious belief's defining characteristic: the worship of God. Idolatry because it makes God an object among many and to worship a thing, no matter how great, is a violation of a central religious value. Idolatry also because it makes the worship of God contingent on God

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<sup>67</sup> Phillips, “Religious Beliefs and Language-Games,” in *Wittgenstein and Religion*, p. 59.

supplying certain outcomes or God out bidding the power of all other beings (quantitatively as it were). When Christians confess that “God created the heavens and the earth” this isn’t to make an unusual claim about the causal origins of the world we live in; rather it states the religious conviction that all things depend on God—that by God’s will “they were created and have their being.” Religious belief is, in part, found as a response of wonder, a response of worship to God for the gift that life—the world—is.

**IX. This section extends the outline of the second aspect of faith in listed in §VI: faith as struggle. It considers, specifically, the significance of arguments for God’s existence: what they can and cannot accomplish. The epistemic connection AφR attempts to establish is shown to distort the kind of relationship Christians are called into.**

The last section elaborates on the theme that AφR’s understanding of religious belief gets the worship of God wrong, this section tries to show that it also gets the person who worships God wrong. The last section tries to show that because AφR misunderstands what God is like, they cannot allow for *why* God is to be worshipped; this section tries to show that because AφR misunderstands what kind of thing faith is, they cannot make sense of the life of faith that believers are *called* to.

Consider, for instance, an enduring argument for belief in the existence of God: the ontological argument. Those familiar with Anselm’s ontological argument are just as familiar with the criticisms made against it.<sup>68</sup> In the *Proslogion* Anselm defines God as that which nothing greater can be conceived. Since even the fool recognizes the concept of God, if attention

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<sup>68</sup> I’m following Mulhall in his characterization of Anselm’s argument, its difficulties, and Malcolm’s response to the traditional approach to understanding Anselm. See Mulhall’s *Faith and Reason* (Duckworth, 1994), chapters 1 (pages 9-11) and 3 (pages 60-62).

is paid to this concept, the existence of God will be seen as a greater perfection than God's nonexistence. There are lots of things for which we can conceive in the understanding but do not exist in reality (unicorns, golden mountains, etc.). The concept of God, however, has an added quality. Since God is that which nothing greater can be conceived, if God exists only in the imagination and not in reality, God would not be that which nothing greater can be conceived since it's manifestly better (a greater perfection) to exist in reality than to exist merely in the understanding. One of the problems with this reasoning is that, as Kant and others following him have argued, existence itself is not a predicate. If two people describe the best typewriter they can imagine, they might list out any number of characteristics (some even beyond belief, like a typewriter which never breaks down or which only writes interesting sentences, etc.); if we suppose that their lists came out, however improbably, identical except for the single difference that one added "a typewriter that exists," would we think that they've described two different versions of the greatest conceivable typewriter? It might be better for *me* that such a typewriter exists but how does it make the typewriter itself better that it exists? So the complaint goes with the argument for God's existence: if we could list out all the predicates rightly descriptive of God but then also add that it is a greater perfection for God to exist in reality than just in the understanding it does not *necessarily* add anything to the description of what God is, even of the greatest conceptual version of God.

Norman Malcolm argues, however, that Anselm's *Proslogion* is not the strongest argument that he presents on this theme.<sup>69</sup> In the *Monologion* Anselm argues that God's existence is not just of the greatest quality conceivable but that God's existence itself is necessary. Mulhall summarizes the difference this way,

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<sup>69</sup> Malcolm, "Anselm's Ontological Argument" in *The Philosophical Review*.



God is a non-dependent and unlimited being: there are not and could not be any limits to his powers, and he does not and could not depend on anything else for coming into or continuing in existence. This is what is meant by claiming that he is a being than which nothing greater can be conceived; his superiority just is, in part, his essential freedom from limitation. But such freedom distinguishes him from entities of the ordinary sort; and since their dependence and limitation is a reflection of the logical possibility of their non-existence, we must conclude that God differs from them in that respect as well, i.e. that his non-existence is not logically possible. He is, in short, an eternal being, one to whom the qualities associated with contingent, spatio-temporal existence necessarily do not apply; it is not even that he endures endlessly, for it makes sense to say of something that has always existed and will always exist that it might not have existed, and that would be to impose a limitation on a being conceived of as absolutely without limits.<sup>70</sup>

There is a right way and a wrong way to take this, as Mulhall stresses and as this chapter has tried to stress more generally. The right way is to see that the kind of being that Christians worship is not anything like the worship of a very special object. God is qualitatively different in every respect compared to facts of the matter. The wrong way is to think that given the correctness of this elucidation on the grammar of God—what it logically makes sense to claim and not to claim of God—the rationality, or meaningfulness, of the worship of God is therefore settled.

This is just why “God talk” as analogical to “fact of the matter talk” is so objectionable. Part of what it means to submit to the demands of faith is that one struggle with God—with what kind of claim God has made on one’s life. Thinking about belief in God as a fact of the matter removes the importance of this virtue. Consider someone in the grip of a conspiracy theory: e.g., that Neil Armstrong never stepped on the surface of the Moon. Now however difficult it may be to provide the unobjectionable evidence needed to disprove such suspicions, there is a fact of the matter about whether Armstrong did or did not land on the Earth’s moon. The strength of one’s conviction about this conspiracy depends on one’s relation to the facts, and here talk about justification and rationality (or warrant or whatever) are manifestly appropriate. (Of course the

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<sup>70</sup> Mulhall, *Faith and Reason*, pp. 61-2.

difficulty about *conspiracy theories* qua their conspiratorial nature is that strong evidence against them only seems, psychologically at least, for the “true believer,” to bolster the suspicion that the conspiracy itself goes very deep indeed.) Psychological difficulties aside, given certain conditions (epistemic, among others) one may consider the fact settled. But there are numerous difficulties in attempting to translate that kind of discourse into religious language.

First the procedure for determining whether “God exists” itself lends credence to the idea that faith in God can be found meaningful or not as a matter of course. This is, in part, to repeat a mistake we’ve already considered: that belief in God can be fully separated from the context of religious belief in general. What it means to believe in God cannot be separated from questions like the ones Jesus, just before his crucifixion, lays upon St. Peter, the cornerstone of the church:

When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my lambs.” A second time he said to him, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Tend my sheep.” He said to him the third time, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, “Do you love me?” And he said to him, “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my sheep. Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go.” (He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.) After this he said to him, “Follow me.” (John 21)

To think that it can be so separated is to think that what “belief” amounts to can be determined apart from the context in which it’s found. “I believe in God” is a statement of conviction, much like “I believe in *you*” is vote of confidence. “I trust in God,” “I have given my life over to God,” “My life is a sacrifice given wholly over to God.” *This* is where religious belief finds its home.

Here an interlocutor may have a right to interject. We might summarize the preceding paragraph this way: we see here that religious belief does not allow for the kind of assurances (or suspicions) afforded by facts of the matter.

*Interlocutor:* Why not, though? What prevents us from saying that though you can't, as they say, *right-off* prove God's existence—that any such argument may require some form of recourse to the depth of religious life (an ability to see the proof as participating in the *religious* forms of life)—but then why not think that, given such a starting point, we can meaningfully talk about the factuality of Christ's resurrection or our ability to see God's handiwork in the created order or in the ontological necessity of God's existence? Why can't we have our cake and eat it too?

It makes no sense to deny that if Jesus Christ was shown to have never been born on planet earth that this historical fact would rightly falsify (or at least greatly alter our conception of) much of what's followed under Christ's name. The similar point on the opposite end of the spectrum, however, does not seem to hold with as much clarity: what if it could be proven, beyond doubt, that Christ was conceived not by Joseph, or by any other *man* as it were, but by the Holy Spirit? Perhaps the central point of *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* is to bring that kind of reasoning to grief. To bring the hope that such a proof promises to grief. The problem is that, as Wittgenstein would put it, even if we were to grant whatever proof could be offered the highest conceivable level of indubitability, that “indubitability wouldn't be enough to make me change my whole life.”<sup>71</sup> Partly because, as the previous section argued, even the best scientific evidence is valueless, or value-neutral, in regard to religious worship, and if that value is lost—if we confess that “Christ was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary” but drop the picture of Christ as someone to be worshipped—the creed itself becomes meaningless. But also, and more importantly, because offering up such a proof as a/the “candidate item” to justify/ground/warrant religious belief is *just to* strip away the forms of life that surround and make sense of religious confession.

The point then is this. The call for a factual account of religious belief cannot meaningfully be separated from the desire to give independent credence to religious belief

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<sup>71</sup> Wittgenstein, *Lectures and Conversations*, p. 57.

irrespective of the distinctive nature of religious practices. If it is not considered independently—that is, if the argument is given *as a part* of the atmosphere for what makes religious belief meaningful—the sense of it *as a proof* drops from underneath it. The cosmological proof no more proves the world’s causal dependency on God than does the creedal exultation, “God created the heavens and the earth.” This is why, though Rhees does criticize the idea that a proof of a necessary being hardly explains the worship of such a being, when the grammar of “God” is given within the context of a religious form of life, there is no objection to that kind of investigation as *grammatical*. Within the atmosphere of religious belief a meditation on God’s nature can have life.

*Nothing* can guarantee that one’s faith in God is as God demands it. This complaint fits analogously with Christ’s scathing criticism of those living in whitewashed tombs. Nothing prevents the possibility of waking up convinced that one had been using the language of faith to cover for what one comes to believe are deeper insecurities; or, in a moment of unguarded honesty, coming to realize that one had never really believed but had only made confessions in order to appease one’s parents; or that the “love of God” might dissolve into a meaningless chatter over speculation about “heavenly worlds,” et cetera. This is why Christians are told to pray “without ceasing,” not because they must continually prove their worth, but because living a sacrificial life for God means *daily* sacrificing oneself to God. One’s desires, one’s conception of one’s own self-worth. Coming to see that what one may have meant to act in self-sacrifice but ended up only full of pride and judgment, coming to see that what prevents the love of God from filling one’s life is a stubborn unwillingness to accept the unconditional acceptance and forgiveness of God. The spirit of God is left to reprove.

The disagreement with AφR's use of religious language is this. What belief in God appears to come to for AφR is something that generally resembles the kind of certainty or doubt mirrored in coming to believe a mathematical or empirical fact. What faith in God is like though is not like running actuary tables; faith *should not* be treated like a probability calculus or like a mathematical proof. The kind of rigidity that such a conception seeks to establish is just the kind of assurance faith works against. What it means to love God, to love oneself, and one's neighbor is a kind of vulnerability and mercy, and if we're pursuing that kind of relational position then we won't have any room for talk about facts. As Johannes *de silentio* might put it, *One must work to eat in the world of Spirit*. Seeing religious belief in this light makes that the problem of God-facts (their demand and solution) "completely disappear" (§133).

**X. The discussion on the disagreement with AφR is brought to a close. Though there is a significant distance between Wittgenstein's method and AφR's theoretical commitments, this section attempts to show that the disagreement, ultimately, is a narrow one. Since §VI this chapter left it to AφR define the nature of the disagreement concerning religious belief, this section however attempts to redefine just where a Wittgensteinian might think AφR goes off the rails and what consequence should be drawn from that.**

Looking over these pages it must seem that the distance between AφR and the Wittgensteinian method is irreconcilable. We know that AφR thinks that the difference is found in, as they characterize it, the Wittgensteinian's refusal to use "God" as a referring expression. And, for AφR's part, they certainly do think the distance between them and their rival Wittgensteinians is great. For instance Wolterstorff speculates on how other theists (e.g. religious believers not

academically or philosophically trained, or at least not especially so) would react to a Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion:

My own guess is that almost all of them, if they saw the issue, would say that they meant to be using theistic language as I and my fellow Reformed epistemologists use it, not as Phillips uses it. Almost all of them would feel profoundly disillusioned if they came to the view [which Phillips' endorses].<sup>72</sup>

There is a sense in which the disagreement is great—as the last few pages have testified—but there is an important sense in which the disagreement is narrow. Part of the reason for that is the often remarked theme that there's nothing inherently objectionable with many of their demands for what faith must consist in. For instance, there is a sense in which the call by Evans that God be “independent of the human mind,”<sup>73</sup> is perfectly at home in religious practice. For, as we've seen, part of the worship of God is to acknowledge, for instance, God's qualitative difference from us and all other existing things. And what fundamentally motivates Swinburne's arguments is his interest in clearing the way for religious belief to take root by opening the world of faith to people who, on principle, thought it irrational. Swinburne:

If someone does not believe or only half-believes, the faithful are required (as part of their religious practice) to help. Help may take various forms. ... [But] the only way which requires the nonbeliever simply to exercise his existing faculties in the pursuit of something which he is almost bound to regard as a good thing (to discover whether or not there is a God), is to present him with arguments whose premises are things evident to the non-believer and whose principles of inference are ones he accepts, and to take him through them.<sup>74</sup>

In Chapter Three the differences Swinburne has in mind and what this project can allow for will be shown to be quite substantial, but there is an important commonality here between Wittgenstein's method and Swinburne's interest. For all the differences between the Wittgensteinian and AφR approaches so much of what religious belief demands is held in

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<sup>72</sup> Wolterstorff, “Reformed Epistemology,” p. 62.

<sup>73</sup> Evans, “Kant and Kierkegaard on the Possibility of Metaphysics,” p. 12.

<sup>74</sup> Swinburne, “Philosophical Theism,” p. 5.

common agreement; or at least, very little of what religious belief demands is in principle in conflict between them.

To put that another way: what it is that divides these two approaches is not (necessarily) found in their religious practices. Many AφR are themselves religious—they see their philosophical endeavors as motivated by their commitment to faith—and it’s important (for me, at least) to state clearly that this paper does not mean to suggest that they fundamentally misunderstand what it means to have faith in God. This paper does not argue that they are confused about the importance of faith in their lives nor the role faith has in the lives of countless others.

Though there are compelling reasons to see AφR’s misunderstanding as fundamental, this is not to make a judgment about their understanding of faith. AφR is not concerned—as they repeatedly say—with the practices of faith but with theoretical accounts of God and God’s nature. Their failure, then, is not one of religious conviction but in their ability to give a coherent abstract generalization of religious life. Wittgenstein accounts for just this phenomena.

Though we do pay attention to the way we talk about these matters, we don’t understand it, but misinterpret it. When we do philosophy, we are like savages, primitive people, who hear the way in which civilized people talk, put a false interpretation on it, and then draw the oddest conclusions from this. (§194)

The difficulty that Wittgenstein points to is found when we take up a theoretical posture towards our practices. Though we do pay attention to the way we talk, when we try to explain the importance of our words, we easily lose our feet. That we may very well understand and appropriately use a given language-game (e.g., using the “foul” language-game in sports) does not guarantee that we will be able to generalize about the significance that language-game plays in the larger form of life in which it’s found. That particular language-game (namely, generalizing about one’s experience) is quite different than the *living* of one’s life. As the next

chapter will (quite indirectly) try to articulate, religious belief (or any other form of life) is something that is *shown* in our lives; thus, a failure to provide for its significance does not reasonably indicate a failure of understanding. Understanding, remember, is something we do as masters of language, and though one may be a master of language that does not necessarily indicate that one is capable of surveying it. The Introduction addresses this point by quoting §121 of *Philosophical Investigations*:

A main source of our failure to understand is that we don't have *an overview* of the use of our words. –Our grammar is deficient in surveyability. A surveyable representation produces precisely that kind of understanding which consists in “seeing connections.” Hence the importance of finding and inventing *intermediate links*.

This chapter has tried to provide some of the intermediate links by suggesting different elements of faith in §V and then applying those elements in various ways following that section. Chapter Three will attempt to further apply those links and suggest ways they might be reimagined to address the concerns of our present age.

But if AφR's use of the concept of “belief” is nonsense and if it's in use that anything might be made intelligible, then in what sense have they not fundamentally misunderstood what it means to have faith in God? The suggestion here is that their theoretical posturing is something like a kind of epiphenomenalism. Wittgenstein:

One man is a convinced realist, another a convince idealist and teaches his children accordingly. In such an important matter as the existence or non-existence of the external world they don't want to teach their children anything wrong ...

But the idealist will teach his children the word ‘chair’ after all, for of course he wants to teach them to do this and that, e.g. to fetch the chair. Then there will be the difference between what the idealist-educated children say and the realist ones. Won't the difference only be one of battle cry?<sup>75</sup>

It isn't that AφR don't understand the nature of religious practice, it's that they discount it. That's both a losing strategy—as it would be for an account of anything—but concerning

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<sup>75</sup> Wittgenstein, *Zettel* (Blackwell, 1967), §§413-14.



religious discourse it adds a very deep conflict with the nature of religious belief itself. Their attempt to turn an ordinary, common account of faith into a metaphysical exercise is the use that has no use—or sense—but this isn't to suggest that faith isn't a real presence in their life. What it will take to articulate that real presence is an ability to reflect and generalize not on the illusory metaphysical, or theoretical, aspects of faith, but a turn back to our everyday lives—our immanent domain—where an encounter with God is possible.

## **Chapter Two: Transcendence**

The purpose of a fish trap is to catch fish and when the fish are caught, the trap is forgotten. The purpose of a rabbit snare is to catch rabbits. When the rabbits are caught, the snare is forgotten. The purpose of the word is to convey ideas. When the ideas are grasped, the words are forgotten. Where can I find a man who has forgotten words? He is the one I would like to talk to.

Chuang Tzu

**I. This section introduces and outlines the various themes of this chapter which all revolve around the question of transcendence. If  $A \not\subset R$  represent one side of the spectrum of potential challengers to the analysis of religious belief this dissertation promotes, this section closely examines a challenge from the opposite end. Kai Nielsen argues that following Wittgenstein's own standards for intelligibility, religious language can't escape the charge of nonsense. Nielsen's challenge paves the way for this chapter's discussion on the very idea of a limit to intelligible discourse and whether questions of value (like ethics) and transcendence fall beyond such a limit.**

Is Christianity true? This is the question we are now led to ask, and as the Introduction claimed, it's a question that could potentially collapse this project onto itself. Chapter One began by asking what it means to understand something. Part of what it means to understand belief in God is a willingness to struggle with that belief—an ability to see that unlike other objects in the world (no matter how great or potentially great) belief in God is not like the acceptance or acknowledgment of a fact. Belief in God necessarily involves the worship of God and seeing that God *is* love. But all of this only gives an account of what religious forms of life are like, where they are found at home. We have not considered whether those forms of life can be regarded as true. Or whether a question about its truth is the same or a different kind of question than the kinds of questions we've already pursued. We might agree that *if* God exists then God is to be worshipped, or that *if* belief in God is true then such a commitment necessitates an ongoing struggle with it and, in the end, hopefully, seeing that love is at the heart of all it. But even if all that correctly describes what Christians believe, *why* think any of it true?

We approach that question via another one which continues the theme of the last chapter: for the Wittgensteinian method we turn to our practices to understand the import of our language; how, then, can a form of life so fundamentally rooted in the world of the transcendent have any grip in our lives with words? How could we even evaluate the truth of the claims of faith if the claims themselves are nonsensical? We've seen that language is accommodating; a basic part of its function is the ability to project new meanings into contexts we might not have considered appropriate. As Cavell writes, "We learn the use of 'feed the kitty', 'feed the lion', 'feed the swans', and one day one of us says 'feed the meter', or 'feed in the film', or 'feed the machine', or 'feed his pride', or 'feed wire', and we understand, we are not troubled."<sup>1</sup> Though we have given an account of language that allows for great plasticity—yet one still able to account of understanding—are there no limits to such a language?

In Chapter One we considered philosophers of religion who assumed that only if God-talk were metaphysical could it both appropriately characterize religious belief and be sensible. Now we consider the same question regarding metaphysics but the other way around. Kai Nielsen, in his paper "Wittgenstein and Wittgensteinians on Religion," agrees with AφR that religious belief is necessarily metaphysical (with an important qualification) but also, and contrarily, sees such belief as nonsensical. Nielsen argues, so to speak, that religion goes beyond the limits of what language can allow.

Like Wolterstorff—though the details are dramatically different—Nielsen too finds an element of commonality between his own position and the "Wittgensteinian" position on religion. Call it a commonality of purpose. Nielsen, a self-described neopragmatist, sees much to like in a view of religion uninterested in metaphysics:

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<sup>1</sup> Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, (Oxford, 1979), p. 181.

Wittgenstein, and for that matter Norman Malcolm and Peter Winch, both following Wittgenstein, are as much set against the idea that there could be a single true description of the world or some ultimate explanation which would show us what reality really is as are neo-pragmatists such as Richard Rorty and Hilary Putnam. Such notions, they all believe, are without sense. Natural theology and natural atheology, as much as metaphysical realism, are incoherent.<sup>2</sup>

Also like this paper, Nielsen argues that such a concession is not necessarily to slip into a form of relativism, though his articulation is quite different. As Feyerabend says farewell to “Scientific Reason,” so too a Wittgensteinian may say farewell to “Reason” without letting go of “reasoning and justification *within* language-games” and “the reflective effort to make sense of our lives and to be reasonable.”<sup>3</sup> Thus he sees Wittgenstein, and those following him in this regard, as forsaking religious doctrine in favor of religious practice. He quotes an exchange between Wittgenstein and a student of his, Maurice Drury, where Wittgenstein tries to dissuade Drury from becoming a priest:

Just think, Drury, what it would mean to have to preach a sermon every week. You couldn't do it. I would be afraid that you would try and give some sort of philosophical justification for Christian beliefs, as if some proof was needed. The symbolisms of Catholicism are wonderful beyond words. But any attempt to make it into a philosophical system is offensive.<sup>4</sup>

The Christian faith, then, as Nielsen sees Wittgenstein (and his followers) seeing it, is not a speculative system—not a “historical truth”—but “rather it gives a (historical) narrative and says: now believe! But not, believe this narrative with the belief appropriate to a historic narrative—rather believe, through thick and thin, and you can do that only as the result of a life.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Nielsen, “Wittgenstein and Wittgensteinians on Religion,” in *Wittgenstein and Philosophy of Religion* (Routledge, 2004), p. 146.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. Nielsen's italics.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Nielsen, *ibid.*, p. 148-9.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Nielsen, *ibid.*, p. 149. Originally from Wittgenstein's *Culture and Value*, p. 32.

Two things need to be addressed here. The first is that Nielsen claims that Wittgenstein thinks that doctrine can be sharply separated from religious practice, and second, doctrine necessarily requires (just is) a metaphysical stance towards the world.

In spite of Wittgenstein's statement "I am not a religious man," I think that it is, as Malcolm puts it, "surely right to say that Wittgenstein's mature life was strongly marked by religious thought and feeling." Kierkegaard had percipiently shown how difficult it is to be religious, how many people are deceived in thinking they are religious when they are not, and that some people who would honestly say they are not, and even some—say, militant atheists—who would vehemently assert that they are not, are nonetheless religious, and indeed deeply so. It is also the case that with his clarity of intellect, together with his deep religious sensitivity, Wittgenstein is likely to have had a keen sense of what a religious form of life is. I have claimed, as have many others, that there is no doctrineless religion and that religion inescapably involves making cosmological (metaphysical) claims. Wittgenstein firmly rejects this. Is he right to do so?<sup>6</sup>

That is, since Wittgenstein rejects metaphysical explanation in all areas of thought and since he too demonstrates a "keen" sensitivity to religious belief, Wittgenstein must also somehow accept that religious forms of life somehow can avoid assuming a metaphysical position, but as Nielsen wants to ask, *Can he possibly be right about this?*

Before we consider Nielsen's question, we need to, for the record, let Nielsen say a few words about why Christian doctrine necessarily commits one to a metaphysical position, regardless of how Wittgenstein might see it.

In Christianity ... God is said to be the ultimate spiritual being—the very ground of the world—transcendent to the world and, in being so, eternal and beyond space and time. And it is an essential part of that very religion to believe that human beings have immortal souls such that they—that is we—will not perish or at least will not perish forever when we die: when, that is, we lose our earthly life. And in addition there is what Kierkegaard called the scandal of the Trinity, but still, he believed, a scandal to be accepted trustingly on faith. These are central beliefs for Christianity, and without them Christianity would not be Christianity. It, of course, is not only a doctrinal system. It is also, as Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard stress, a demanding way of life that requires of believers—genuine believers—a reorientation of their lives. But it is also, and inescapably, a belief system with a set of doctrines.

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<sup>6</sup> Nielsen, p. 150.

Doctrines, that is to say, which necessarily commit one to metaphysical speculation. For Nielsen any such speculation (whether its concern is religion or mind or language) relegates one's view to the realm of nonsense. Talk of God's transcendence, talk of eternity, talk of immortal souls, talk of the trinity, etc., *necessarily* cannot be anything more than nonsense.

But whether Wittgenstein's own view of religion is metaphysical (and thus nonsensical) is an open question; for Wittgenstein, unlike most religious believers according to Nielsen, does not think the value of religion is to be found in its doctrines—as though it were a mere matter of intellectual curiosity—but rather it's a system meant to turn the believer's life around:

One of the things Christianity says, I think, is that all sound doctrines are of no avail. One must change one's life. (Or the direction of one's life.) ...

A sound doctrine does not have to catch hold of one; one can follow it like a doctor's prescription.—But here something must grasp one and turn one around.—(This is how I understand it.) Once turned around, one must stay turned around.<sup>7</sup>

Nielsen also acknowledges that though Wittgenstein sees life as a “gift” from God, Wittgenstein understands that one could equally come to see the world as “malicious” and that neither would presume to represent an “explanation” of the world. Wittgenstein:

We could easily imagine the Devil had created the world, or part of it. And it is not necessary to imagine the evil spirit intervening in particular situations; everything can happen ‘according to the laws of nature’; it is just the whole scheme of things will be aimed at evil from the very start.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Quoted in Nielsen, *ibid.*, p. 149. Originally from Wittgenstein's *Culture and Value*, p. 53. Though Nielsen does not comment on this point, it's important for our later discussion to notice that even in this “decisive” quotation from Wittgenstein against, as Nielsen puts it, the value of doctrine, the second paragraph seems to take a much different view of doctrine than the first. In the first Wittgenstein does appear to summarily dismiss the value of doctrine, but in the second Wittgenstein seems to be suggesting that doctrine is not *on its own* valuable—that it's having value depends on one's response to it. “As a doctor's prescription,” it has no sense.

<sup>8</sup> Quoted in Nielsen, *ibid.*, p. 156. Originally from Wittgenstein's *Culture and Value*, p. 71.

Since seeing the world as a gift is no metaphysical statement about some “fact” of the world, Wittgenstein acknowledges a wide range of possible pictures one may come to see in represented in the world.

So ends the brief exhibition of Wittgenstein’s endorsement of a kind of religious life that avoids metaphysical speculation. Nielsen as we know thinks that religious doctrines necessarily fall into metaphysical speculation, and now we will see that he is less than optimistic about Wittgenstein’s attempt to save religious life from the same fate. There is something in Wittgenstein’s response to, for instance, “suffering” that Nielsen gravitates to but even in that instance (or instances like that one) Nielsen believes that there are less problematic ways of understanding the matter. Nielsen sees his own position as more austere than Wittgenstein’s.

But faced with all the horrible contingencies of life, the suffering, cruelty, indifference, pain, jealousy, failures of integrity, the breaking of trust—the whole bloody lot—some would speak of neither God nor the Devil, or of the goodness, in spite of it all, of the world, or of the malignancy or maliciousness of the world. Indeed they would think (pace William James) that such talk makes no sense. Some would say, as I would, “That’s how things are” without reference to God or the Devil. I think (to abandon for a moment a Wittgensteinian commitment to description and to speak normatively) this austere approach is a more proper frame of mind. We see that the plague is always with us, sometimes rather dormant but at other times raging, and always as something that will return, and we resolve to fight the plague. .... “It’s God’s will,” “It’s the work of the Devil” and “That’s how things are” are all non-explanatory and in some language-games are where not only explanation stops, but where justification and the giving of reasons stops. I think myself “That’s how things are” is by far the more adequate way of viewing things. It is cleaner, with less mystification, and comes closer to—or so I think—telling it like it is.<sup>9</sup>

We’re faced now with two different lines of thought. The first is Nielsen’s reasons for thinking that Wittgenstein cannot escape metaphysical speculation in the use of religious language, and the second is Nielsen’s own proposal for a more appropriate response to the suffering in the world we all witness. Let’s consider the second point first. It’s tempting here to think that

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 156-7.



Nielsen himself sneaks in a bit of metaphysical speculation. Doesn't he presume a "standpoint from nowhere" in order to afford his evaluation that his "austere" description *better* describes the world than a Christian or Satanic view might?

Nielsen, however, carefully avoids such simplistic argumentative moves. For instance, he allows that words can be used differently in different contexts: "The giving of a commonsense description of tables, bits of mud, water flowing, the moon being pink on a given night, in contrast to giving a scientific physical description where we will say different things about solidity, colour and the like."<sup>10</sup> Though these are different "descriptive and explanatory practices" they are not to be privileged as better or worse descriptions of reality. In certain contexts one may be more useful than another but neither "is a more adequate or a better telling-it-like-it-is than another—period."<sup>11</sup> However, Nielsen does think that his own view is more appropriate than Wittgenstein's. Which brings us back to the first point: why think that Wittgenstein cannot escape metaphysical speculation in his use of religious language?

Nielsen thinks that Wittgenstein faces a dilemma. Either Wittgenstein's view of religious belief is a metaphysical assertion or it's a plainly false quasiempirical proposition.

"That's God's will" or "That's the Devil's work" we have *metaphysical* utterances penetrating into our common life. They are metaphysical conceptions. And they, as metaphysical conceptions, are, Wittgenstein and both Malcolm and Winch following him argue, and, as we neo-pragmatists argue as well, utterances which, in being metaphysical utterances, are incoherent, yielding pseudo-descriptions and pseudo-perspectives from which no intelligible descriptions, interpretations or explanations could flow.<sup>12</sup>

If 'God' and 'the Devil' are taken to denote Zeus-like entities, then these utterances are not metaphysical. They are implicit, very vague, empirical hypotheses. They are, that is, just crude, plainly false, empirical propositions plainly disconfirmed. *Such* religious

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 158.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 158.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 158.

beliefs are superstitions, and Wittgenstein was keenly aware of that and rejected *such* religious beliefs and such a way of looking at religion with disdain.<sup>13</sup>

Of course Wittgenstein would not be happy taking either horn, and Nielsen does a faithful job at trying to help Wittgenstein out of the dilemma. Nielsen sees that Wittgenstein will want to dissolve this problem as he dissolves many of the other philosophical problems he considered: by closely looking at the kind of word “God” comes to in the religious context. And we’ve seen that Nielsen is sensitive to this move (that is, in order to understand how a word functions we turn to its use), as he underlines again here:

Some words refer to or stand for something. They have a reference. But ‘Hans’, ‘blue’, ‘2’, ‘the Empire State Building’, ‘grace’, and ‘God’ do not all refer in the same way. We must, in particular, not assume that ‘God’ refers like ‘Hans’ or ‘the Empire State Building’.<sup>14</sup>

Wittgenstein (actually at this point, it’s better to say *Wittgensteinians*) wants to argue that “God” is not a substantive (not an object)—as Chapter One attempts to articulate—but Nielsen simply does not think that that suggestion is a coherent position. Nielsen:

If ... it is said that is not how to construe “God” either [that is, construing God as not a substantive], then it is difficult to know, unless we want to go back to the crude anthropomorphic construal or to a purely symbolic construal, how we are in some non-metaphysical way to construe “God.” Just what is this non-Zeus-like, non-purely symbolic, non-metaphysical construal of “God”? Do we really have any understanding of what we are talking about here?<sup>15</sup>

We do not know what counts for truth or falsity or what counts as reasonable or unreasonable here; indeed we do not even understand what we are saying. We are just in a fog. **Nonsense engulfs us.** Isn’t talk of mystery just a high-fallutin’ way of saying that? Once we see this clearly should we not desist—close up shop, so to say? Moreover, it is not just that we do not understand: we are forced, if we would play that language-game, to say things that we, if we reflect a bit, would not wish to say. Consider again Wittgenstein’s remark in *Culture and Value* that we “might speak of the world as malicious” or “easily imagine the Devil created the world, or part of it” or that “the whole scheme of things will be aimed at evil from the very start.” We not only *cannot* (*pace*

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 159.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 146

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 159.

Wittgenstein) easily imagine these things: we do not understand these utterances. We only, if we do not think, have the illusion of understanding them by extension from some familiar utterances we do understand. We understand what it is for a person to be malicious or an action or attitude to be malicious. We have truth-conditions or assertability conditions for such claims. But for the *world* to be malicious? **We can't intelligibly impute intentions to the world. That makes no sense at all.** .... There is no such functional language-game. Language is idle here. In support of this, I have supplied what Wittgenstein has called grammatical remarks. But would not Wittgenstein, of all people, perfectly well realize that? That is the way he repeatedly reasons. And the grammatical remarks I have assembled above seem to be plainly so. It looks like Wittgenstein is in a double bind.<sup>16</sup>

The double bind seems to be that Wittgenstein sees that Christian doctrine clearly counts as metaphysical speculation and thus must be jettisoned (the first bind), but also, if Wittgenstein is to be consistent, Wittgenstein must see that there's no recourse in language to make sense of religious belief full stop (the second). So Nielsen would likely agree with half of Chapter One: there's a fundamental aspect of AφR's project that is nonsensical (though we probably would disagree about the extent of the illusion they're under and the conclusions to draw from their construal). But Nielsen would have no truck with the suggestion that if we turn to religious *practices* we might make sense of them.

Nielsen in fact responds to just the kind of description Chapter One gives of religious belief. Take, for instance, some obvious claim that a traditional philosopher might dispute: I know the chair in front of me *really* exists. Wittgenstein would say, as we've seen, that the "really" in the slanted text of the previous sentence is idle. That such claims do not depend on metaphysical speculation but have their sense in our use of them. One way to understand the last chapter is to think of it as attempting a similar move. AφR wants to claim that they know God *really* exists. This paper wants to claim, instead, that belief in God isn't part of a metaphysical system, but rather something found in our ordinary life. Here's Nielsen's response:

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., pp. 160-1. The bolding is mine.

Suppose someone says that that is a philosopher's hat trick. People do God's will. People, following God's will, make pilgrimages to Lourdes, go to confession, give up philosophy, lead a life of celibacy, go to the Congo or Haiti to alleviate suffering, etc. But to this, it in turn can be responded, that this—this doing of God's will—is but to do things that some people take to be obligatory, the right thing to do, desirable to do, and the like, and that some of them associate these moral commitments with their *avowals* that that is doing God's will without understanding what God is or what His will is or how one could ascertain what is or what it is to do God's will. It is just a formula they recite with, if they are genuinely theistically religious, great conviction and sometimes with intensity of feeling. But that does not, and cannot, turn it into sense: into an intelligible utterance.<sup>17</sup>

This last bit—that reciting a formula with great conviction *cannot* turn religious belief into sense—is a slippery claim. In one sense (which Chapter Three will try to explain at length) this project is in *complete* agreement with it. *Merely saying religious words does not make one religious*. Of course that is not Nielsen's intent, though understanding what exactly he means is not readily apparent either.

Consider these two options. The first, and perhaps far less likely option, is that though one may speak of God, so far, according to Nielsen's lights, no one has done so successfully. Though for Nielsen, *any* doctrinal account of religious belief commits one to nonsense, perhaps there are assertability-conditions (in some possible world) for religious belief, but whatever they are they are as yet unseen. What speaks to this reading is that Nielsen is careful not to say that religious language qua religious language *must* be metaphysical. There certainly are religious claims (e.g., we can “easily imagine the Devil created the world”) which clearly are nonsensical, but whether all religious claims ought to be considered metaphysical Nielsen does not exactly say. After all, perhaps if some Wittgensteinian philosophers of religion were to give a more compelling description to the picture of “God-is-not-a-substantive”—one for which language does not idle—Nielsen as a matter of principle would be blocked from labeling it nonsense.

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., pp. 161-2. Again, I'm responsible for the bolding.

The overall tenor of his remarks though suggests the opposite: any language that tracks in religious concepts will fail to have sense. No matter what effort is made (no matter how nuanced a position we take), thinking about God necessarily commits us to thinking nonsense. Talk of mystery full stop is talk of nonsense. We cannot talk about religion without doctrine and doctrine *must* be metaphysical.

The charge of nonsense is a serious and important one and whether thinking of God necessarily involves us in it is just what the next several sections will consider. At the end of this chapter and throughout the next we will talk of mystery and the transcendent—and, implicitly, about the sense there might be in claiming that the *world* seems malicious—and if there can be (meaningful) talk about these concepts then it will only be because they are not nonsense. If that's true we'll need to be especially clear as to what nonsense is and what it means to avoid it.

To accomplish this we turn to Wittgenstein's conception of logic found in his first published work, the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. For the Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus* logic and nonsense are a central concern. As he sees it, attempts by Russell and Frege to draw the limits of thought by establishing *the* foundations of logic result in an entangling of them both in nonsense. What it means to think about logic, what it means to think clearly full stop, is a topic that exerted something of a hold on Wittgenstein from before the publication of the *Tractatus* all the way through the end of his life.

There is, though, another reason to turn to the *Tractatus*. For there Wittgenstein's concern is not only with logic but also with the place, if a place can be found at all, for ethics. We consider whether ethics can be found within the bounds of sense or whether it too necessarily results in metaphysical speculation. The next chapter will argue that there is a significant point of contact with the reflections made so far on religious belief (in Chapter One) and Wittgenstein's

remarks on ethics in the *Tractatus*. But our present goal is a bit more limited. This chapter will want to say that part of Nielsen's view runs against Wittgenstein's understanding of logic and ethics; but ultimately, like many other papers on Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, this chapter will not do much more than suggest what Wittgenstein's view is not. Though this chapter will critique Nielsen's understanding of religious belief there is an important challenge in his view of religion which will hold our attention through the end of this project: even if God-talk does not necessarily trespass the bounds of sense, how can we possibly keep our feet on rough ground when considering the intelligibility of such discourse? If religious belief is admitted to the table of reasonable discourse with what grounds could *any* belief system be disallowed?

This is a dissertation trained towards understanding religious belief but it's also a dissertation on Wittgenstein. Getting Wittgenstein right—understanding Wittgenstein's thought itself—is equally important. Equally important because this project assumes that clearly understanding Wittgenstein will prove helpful in making religious concepts intelligible. And if that's true we must now take a brief detour from the explicitly religious theme that characterized much of Chapter One. This detour is an especially long one and requires a bit of explanation.

The *Tractatus* is a complicated text. Recently it has received significant scholarly attention and has been the touchstone for philosophers (interested in Wittgenstein) to explore some of their most fundamental positions.<sup>18</sup> Since so much of the *Tractatus* is formed as a response to the work done by Frege and Russell, the next section (§II) briefly details some motivating concerns for Frege and considers why he was tempted to think that some forms of

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<sup>18</sup> The works this Chapter will explore include Diamond's "Throwing Away the Ladder: How to Read the *Tractatus*," (in *The Realistic Spirit*) "What Nonsense Might Be," (in *The Realistic Spirit*) and "Ethics, Imagination, and the Method of the *Tractatus*" (*The New Wittgenstein*); Conant's "The Method of the *Tractatus*," (in *From Frege to Wittgenstein*) and "What 'Ethics' in the *Tractatus* is Not," (in *Religion and Wittgenstein's Legacy*); and Kremer's "The Whole Meaning of a Book of Nonsense," (in *Oxford Handbook of the History of Analytic Philosophy*).

thought escaped the bounds of intelligibility. The three sections after that detail Wittgenstein's response: §III first outlines why Wittgenstein broke from Frege but then closely examines what Wittgenstein thought Frege got right and how that informs Wittgenstein's understanding of nonsense; §IV examines the reasons the *Tractatus* gives for objecting to Frege's conception of logic; and §V, after the stage setting of the previous three sections, attempts to clearly lay out the *Tractatus*' understanding of logic and the implications of it for setting a limit to thought. After this detailed account of logic, §VI briefly represents Kai Nielsen's objection to religious belief and then considers the difficulty that criticism faces given what kind of thing nonsense is in the *Tractatus*. §VI responds to Nielsen by comparing his remarks to a similar, historical interpretation of the *Tractatus*' account of ethics.

In the *Tractatus* logic and ethics are tightly related; the *Tractatus* claims that both are transcendent. §VI considers the sense that claim might have. Because of the selfundermining nature of the *Tractatus* §VII considers a challenge to the reading this chapter assigns to the *Tractatus* and how that criticism might undermine the aims of this project as a whole. §VIII briefly transitions the concerns of Chapters One and Two to the final chapter, Chapter Three.

It's true that the next few sections do not explicitly address religious belief but many of the central themes important to Chapter One are extended in them. Let's briefly make some of those connections for three of such themes.

1. In the last chapter we saw that part of what makes language what it is is that it allows for a kind of plasticity in use; what makes us masters of language is shown in our fluency and agility in the expression of thought. The last chapter pushed the accommodating nature of language; what concerns this chapter is whether we can speak intelligibly of its limits. Nielsen

has argued, we've already seen, that religious/mystical language is at least one example of such a limit. Religious language is nonsense.

But what qualifies something as nonsense; what is its character? What indicates, so to speak, that language has gone bad? These are questions that concerned both Frege and Wittgenstein. Frege seemed to think that the bounds of sense is something that could be gotten past. Part of Wittgenstein's criticism of Frege is that Frege at times seems to treat logic like an ineffable fact.<sup>19</sup> Frege on this point shares an important similarity in our concern in the last chapter with AφR. Wittgenstein, we might say, sees Frege as trying to use language to get outside language as AφR similarly attempted to ground religious belief.

2. What draws Wittgenstein to Frege is that he thought that many of Frege's fundamental insights were correct. What we termed, in the last chapter, as Wittgenstein's holism is in this chapter expressed in Frege's context principle. This chapter explores the genesis of Wittgenstein's concern about the importance of context and how closely connected that kind of holism is with the question of the limits of thought (and thus too with the concept of nonsense).

3. Also, like much of the last chapter, this chapter is concerned with the nature of philosophical disagreement. The next few sections detail both how Wittgenstein saw himself as inheriting much of Frege's work and how he saw himself correcting Frege where Wittgenstein thought he failed to follow through with his genuine insights. In this too an important theme from the first chapter is extended. The first chapter tried to argue that the gap between this project's understanding of religion and AφR's understanding is not necessarily wide. Part of what motivates that assertion is that Wittgenstein sees a certain kind of emptiness to philosophical speculation. What has weight for him is the use that we might make of a particular

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<sup>19</sup> So Conant suggests. See his "The Method of the *Tractatus*."



concept. The last chapter wanted to claim that *in practice* AφR is not necessarily in conflict with a Wittgensteinian view of religion. In this chapter we see that Wittgenstein thinks that the fundamental problems of philosophy come in the form of our attempts to get outside language, and that once we see where thought is at home those problems disappear.

First we turn to what motivated Frege to think that the bounds of sense could be trespassed.

**II. This section briefly details some motivating concerns for Frege’s project in arithmetic and logic. In his attempt to provide gapless proofs for arithmetic Frege discovers a limitation in natural language that he thinks can be overcome through logic. Thus Frege discovers a limit to the expression of language, though not necessarily a limit to thought. There are some aspects of thought, so Frege argues, that can be shown but not said.**

*What is the number one?*<sup>20</sup> This is the question with which Frege begins his *Foundations of Arithmetic*. For Frege not only is there no clear sense in either the fields of mathematics or philosophy for what a number is, there is no particularly clear thought about simple functional processes like addition. Why think this? If anything is well established in any science surely “inferences like that from  $n$  to  $n + 1$ ”<sup>21</sup> are. Frege anticipates that many will assume that these questions are already “adequately treated in the elementary textbooks.”<sup>22</sup> However, Frege finds each previous inquiry into the foundations of mathematics incomplete, and it’s in the incompleteness of our understanding in this area that so troubled Frege. For Frege only if

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<sup>20</sup> There is no significant thought or insight in this section that might meaningfully attributed to the realm of originality—a fact that will be painfully clear to any actual Frege scholar. This section is indebted wholly to the work of Weiner, Conant, Diamond, and others for the formation and expression of its content.

<sup>21</sup> Frege, *Foundations of Arithmetic*, p. iv.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. iii.

“gapless proofs” can be given—proofs that do not depend, for instance, on empirical enquiry or mere stipulative definition—can we be confident that the foundations of arithmetic can be shown to be true in the rigorous way he thinks necessary to justify the rules of mathematics as a legitimate science.

The fundamental theorems of arithmetic, wherever possible, must be proved with the greatest rigour; since only if the utmost care is taken to avoid any gaps in the chain of inference can it be said with certainty upon what primitive truths the proof is based; and only if these are known can the philosophical questions be answered.<sup>23</sup>

Frege pursued the possibility of providing the gapless proofs needed for true mathematical knowledge by linking it to logic. What motivates the connection between these two is the similarity in outcome between logical and mathematical contradictions. Frege:

Can the same be said of the fundamental propositions of the science of number? Here, we have only to try denying any of them, and complete confusion ensues. Even to think at all seems no longer possible. The basis of arithmetic lies deeper, it seems, than that of any of the empirical sciences, and even than that of geometry. The truths of arithmetic govern all that is numberable. This is the widest domain of all; for to it belongs not only the actual, not only the intuitable, but everything thinkable. Should not the laws of number, then, be connected very intimately with the laws of thought?<sup>24</sup>

Once a contradiction is allowed in a logical proof, the proof itself loses intelligibility; so too in arithmetic. Unlike a contradictory result in an empirical test—which tells us an assumption or hypothesis in our project is misplaced or misunderstood (both of which we can accommodate in thought)—in both logic and math plain contradictions seem to go past comprehension. They represent a kind of nonsense. Arithmetic, then, is to be subsumed under the laws of thought. The laws of thought apply to the widest domain of all: to all that is thinkable. And this is just the setting that logic itself is set to operate.

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., §5.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., §14.

After finishing *Foundations of Arithmetic* Frege's Begriffsschrift was challenged on a number of issues. Most notably on his third fundamental principle:

never to lose sight of the distinction between concept and object.<sup>25</sup>

There is, perhaps, no greater tension in Frege's works than his attempt to distinctly separate the terms "concept" and "object" but to have any sense of the conflict here, a bit of terminology needs to be introduced.

Frege argues that numbers are objects. He describes objects as the "saturated" part of a sentence; while concepts are the "unsaturated" part. Take this sentence:

Mars is a planet.

The unsaturated part is "is a planet"; it's unsaturated because by itself it's incomplete. Objects on the other hand are self-subsisting. Objects are what fall under concepts; so the unsaturated part of the above sentence has lots of potential objects that fall underneath it: Earth, Saturn, Pluto, etc. Instead of thinking that numbers describe objects (thus acting like concepts), Frege holds that numbers are assertions about concepts (which is another way of saying that numbers act like—in fact, just are—objects). Though it appears like "one" describes "moon" in the sentence, "The earth has one moon," Frege notes that such difficulties are superficial since the sentence can be rewritten to avoid confusion: "One is the number of Earth's moons."

If objects are numbers, Frege thinks he can provide gapless definitions for them. Here's a brief summary of his argument. Since it's a logical truth that every object is identical to itself, the concept *is selfidentical* holds of every object but one: namely the object that is *not* selfidentical, zero. "Frege defines zero as the extension of *is equinumerous with the concept is not self-*

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., § X.

*identical.*”<sup>26</sup> Since only one object is equinumerous with zero, that is Frege’s definition of one. With two objects logically defined—that is, since we have an object which is the extension of the concept *is identical to zero or is identical to one*—our lead question in this section, if Frege’s analysis is correct, has now been answered, gaplessly. And with that definition secured, Frege believes he has all he needs to give logical definitions to all other numbers and sets of numbers.<sup>27</sup>

Whatever interest there might be in understanding the logical basis of numbers—or arithmetic in general—we leave those considerations aside. For our purposes, Frege’s insistence that concepts and objects can be strictly separated is paramount. Consider a challenge on just that point made by Bruno Kerry. Kerry suggests that the object/concept distinction cannot be fully upheld because concepts do sometimes act as objects, as Kerry suggests they do in this sentence:

*The concept horse is a concept easily attained.*

Here we have a concept (*the concept horse*) that is clearly in the object position, thus seemingly violating Frege’s third fundamental principle. As Frege acknowledges, there is a sense in which this distinction is doomed to failure—or at least in need of significant qualification. Consider this later reflection by Frege (in a letter written to Bertrand Russell) on the problematic relationship between concept and object:

In the proposition ‘Something is an object’, the word ‘something’ ... stands for a proper name. Thus whatever we put in place of ‘something’, we always get a true proposition; for a [concept] name cannot take the place of ‘something’. ... The proposition ‘A is a [concept]’ is such an expression: it is always imprecise; for A stands for a proper name ... .<sup>28</sup>

James Conant makes explicit the nonsensical result of Frege’s terminology by drafting the following four propositions, each of which are drawn from the above quotation:

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<sup>26</sup> Weiner, *Frege Explained*, p. 65.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 65-6.

<sup>28</sup> Quoted in Conant, “The Method of the *Tractatus*,” p. 390. Originally found in Frege (1980). *Philosophical and Mathematical Correspondence*. B. McGuinness, ed. H. Kaal, trans. Oxford: Blackwell, p. 136.

1. *A* is an object.
2. Everything is an object.
3. *A* is a concept.
4. Nothing is a concept.<sup>29</sup>

Here's Conant's gloss:

In (1), the word 'A' stands for a proper name; and so, by Frege's lights, whatever we plug in for 'A' will occupy the argument place for an object, and thus (according to Frege's second principle) will be an object. Thus it would appear that no matter what we plug in for 'A', (1) will be true. But if (1) is true no matter what we plug in for 'A', it would seem to follow that (2) is true! Similarly, in (3), as in (1), the word 'A' stands for a proper name; and so, once again, whatever occupies this argument place will be an object. Thus it would appear in this case that no matter what we plug in for 'A', (3) will be false. But if (3) is false no matter what we plug in for 'A', it would seem to follow that (4) is true!<sup>30</sup>

If everything is an object (2), then there can't be concepts. Thus not only the expressions "the concept number" and "the concept horse" are acknowledged to be problematic but *any* use of the expression "concept" under Frege's own lights ought to be considered seriously defective, if not outright nonsensical.

Remember, though, that the goal of the Frege's *Begriffsschrift*, ultimately, is to show whether an inference has a suppressed premise or is necessarily true—that is, to show whether a definition is gapless or not. Once those terms are defined, Frege thinks that the basic truths of logic and arithmetic will be clearly demonstrated. Kerry charges Frege with failing to provide a coherent definition of a concept, but this is a demand that Frege (in response) rejects. Though concepts and objects appear in the *Begriffsschrift* they are never defined or explicitly expressed. For instance one of Frege's fundamental insights is that each concept either does or does not hold of each object, which can be expressed this way:

$$(F)(x)(F(x) \vee \sim F(x))^{31}$$

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<sup>29</sup> These propositions have been slightly adopted for my purposes.

<sup>30</sup> Conant, "The Method of the *Tractatus*," p. 391.

<sup>31</sup> My use of this example is due to Weiner, p. 110.

Though this is a statement, a logical truth, about concepts and objects, the terms “concept” and “object” are not actually used. In fact neither of those terms are ever expressed in Frege’s *Begriffsschrift*—there are no symbols for “concept” or “object.” In the *Begriffsschrift* definitions can only be given for those terms that can invoke proofs, but Frege understands “concept” and “object” as being logically simple and thus as not capable of definition. Writing about the analogous use of meaning Frege says this:

... to the proper name there corresponds the object; to the predicative part, something I call a concept. This is not supposed to be a definition; for the decomposition into a saturated and an unsaturated part must be considered to be a logically primitive phenomenon which must simply be accepted and cannot be reduced to something simpler.<sup>32</sup>

Recall that a definition must be gapless, as the definition of *zero* is (above), but clearly a “concept” cannot so aspire. When beginning scientific research into an unexplored field some scaffolding must be constructed—that is, to extend the metaphor, some supportive material must be used (e.g. “concept”) not a part of the system itself—but if terms like these are not capable of being expressed in the system, what actual purpose do they serve? Frege sees them as transitional in character. Just like scaffolding, once the system is built, its functional use has been exhausted.

Since definitions are not possible for primitive elements, something else must enter in. I call it elucidation .... Someone who pursued research only by himself would not need it. The purpose of elucidations is a pragmatic one; and once it is achieved, we must be satisfied with them. And here we must be able to count on a little goodwill and cooperative understanding, even guessing; for frequently we cannot do without a figurative mode of expression.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Quoted in Conant, “The Method of the *Tractatus*,” p. 435. Frege (1984). *Collected Papers on Mathematics, Logic, and Philosophy*. B. McGuinness, ed. Oxford: Blackwell, p. 281-282.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 300-301.

Elucidations, as Frege says elsewhere, are to serve as “hints” that lead the reader to the true and important use of Frege’s logical system.<sup>34</sup> This marks a significant difference between natural and logical language. Though, all we need to understand the basic truths of arithmetic can be expressed wholly in logical terms, Frege understands that he cannot—straight off as it were—introduce his logical theory in only those terms; first he must come to an understanding with the reader, even if that understanding is a bit misleading, in order to point her in the right direction. It’s Frege’s attempt to meet the reader half way, to create an atmosphere where they might come to share “the general feeling”<sup>35</sup> about the nature of his logical investigation. This he does through *natural* language and terms like “concept” and “object.”

The terms “concept” and “object” are meant to pick out features of Frege’s Begriffsschrift without the use of which we would fail to properly understand the logical system itself. Thus though there are important aspects of concepts that are straightforwardly true as expressed in logical language (e.g. each concept either does or does not hold of each object), equally so, when expressed in natural language, there is an important sense of “concept” which is fundamentally defective: e.g. as the expression “the concept number” is. Frege uses natural language to point our attention to the role of those terms in his logical system while acknowledging that there is a certain gap between the natural and logical languages which must be closed by the reader:

By a kind of necessity of language, my expressions, taken literally, sometimes miss my thought; I mention an object, when what I intend is a concept. I fully realize that in such cases I was relying upon a reader who would be ready to meet me half-way—who does not begrudge a pinch of salt.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> On the use of hints see, “On Concept and Object,” (in *The Frege Reader*) p. 193.

<sup>35</sup> Quoted in Conant, “The Method of the *Tractatus*,” p. 389. Frege (1984). *Collected Papers on Mathematics, Logic, and Philosophy*. B. McGuinness, ed. Oxford: Blackwell, p. 184-5.

<sup>36</sup> Frege, “On Concept and Object,” (in *The Frege Reader*) p. 192.

The role “concept” plays in a sentence must not be considered in isolation. Consider the proposition we put into logical notation above (that each concept either does or does not hold of each object). The symbol “ $F$ ” and “ $x$ ” play very different logical roles. Thus “ $F(x)$ ” is properly formed while “ $x(F)$ ” is not.<sup>37</sup> In natural language Frege expresses this by noting that a concept cannot be an object, that only concepts can predicate of objects, etc.—but all of that, while in a sense defective in natural language (e.g. when we try to directly address concepts: “The concept horse...”), is meant to bring us to a place where we can appreciate the role that “concept” plays in Frege’s logical language—where such defective uses are not necessary. Once the system is understood the defective terms, like scaffolding, can be done away with since their role is merely pragmatic and “has no place in the system of a science.”

Frege’s response to Kerry is to suggest that such terms can be discharged once their role is understood. Nevertheless there remains a serious question about their status: what ultimately do “hints” and “elucidations” come to? Frege is adamant that his logical system neither falls into metaphysical speculation nor suffers from, what he calls, psychologism (that is, a claim that amounts to nothing more than a mere psychological disposition), but it’s difficult to understand how his elucidations are neither metaphysical nor point to a metaphysical truth when he writes that “the nature of language forces us” into using those terms. This implies that there is a logical structure to language which Frege’s terms, when arranged improperly, fail to conform. On the surface they seem entirely proper (or, at least, not wholly deformed gibberish) but after a bit of analysis, we see that language *necessarily cannot* allow for them. There are certain combinations of words that the logical structure of language excludes from sense:

In the case of a concept we can also call the unsaturatedness its predicative nature. But in this connection it is necessary to point out an imprecision forced on us by language,

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<sup>37</sup> Weiner, p. 110.



which, if we are not conscious of it, will prevent us from recognizing the heart of the matter: i.e. we can scarcely avoid using such expressions as ‘the concept *prime*’. Here there is not a trace left of unsaturatedness, of the predicative nature. Rather, the expression is constructed in a way which precisely parallels ‘the poet Schiller’. So language brands a concept as an object, since the only way it can fit the designation for a concept into its grammatical structure is as a proper name. But in so doing, strictly speaking, it falsifies matters. In the same way, the word ‘concept’ itself is, taken strictly, already defective, since the phrase ‘is a concept’ requires a proper name as grammatical subject; and so, strictly speaking, it requires something contradictory, since no proper name can designate a concept; or perhaps better still, it requires something nonsensical.<sup>38</sup>

Frege seems to think of his elucidations as forming a combination of words that the nature of logic excludes from the realm of possibility:

... Proper names cannot really be used as predicates. Where they might seem to, we find on looking more closely that the sense is such that they only form part of the predicate: *concepts cannot stand in the same relations as objects*. It would not be false, but impossible to think of them as doing so.<sup>39</sup>

Texts like these suggest that Frege thought that nonsense is ineffable: through the use of language some terms point to an aspect of thought that evades the very possibility of sensible expression in language. Thus though there is a limit to language, that limit does not capture all that can be thought.<sup>40</sup>

Take, for instance, Frege’s use of “concept.” There is something our words try to say but are prevented from doing so because of the nature of language. This limit, however, is not extended to thought. When we try to say what a term like “concept” comes to in natural language

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<sup>38</sup> Originally quoted by Conant “The Method of the *Tractatus*,” (Conant also emended the translation) p. 389. Frege (1979). *Posthumous Writings*. H. Hermes, F. Kambartel, and F. Kaulbach, eds. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, pp. 177-78. As Conant (see “Method of the *Tractatus*,” p. 437) notes there is a deep ambivalence on Frege’s part about the status of these, so-called, nonsensical terms. As we will see soon, some (Geach, Weiner, and Dummett) see Frege as committed to thinking of them as introducing substantial (ineffable) nonsense, but others (Diamond) do not.

<sup>39</sup> Originally quoted by Conant “The Method of the *Tractatus*,” (Conant also emended the translation) p. 390. Frege (1979). *Posthumous Writings*. H. Hermes, F. Kambartel, and F. Kaulbach, eds. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, pp. 120.

<sup>40</sup> This idea is considered at length over the next few sections, especially as it is considered in the *Tractatus* and as it may or may not apply to religious thought.

our words fail to say anything sensible, but in the logical language of Begriffsschrift what the term comes to is clearly shown. This is a distinction made possible in part by Frege's admission that the term "concept" is not—and cannot—be expressed in his logical system (there is no symbol that expresses that term). Thus we can show but not say what a concept is. Our attempt to express (say) what a concept is does not amount to mere gibberish though; rather, our expressions of this term (and others like it) point to, and thus help illuminate, an important aspect of the nature of logic and thought. What a concept is can be thought but not, without running the limits of language, expressed.<sup>41</sup>

Borrowing language from Carnap—which we will explore as it relates to Nielsen at the end of the chapter—we can put the point this way. The term "concept" technically violates the logical syntax of language. The thought expressed in logic cannot be expressed in language because it necessarily contradicts its own rules for use. When we attempt to directly talk about "concept" in language (for instance when we use the word in a sentence) we necessarily involve ourselves in nonsense. But, to anticipate, unlike Carnap this bit of nonsense is not to be discarded or overcome but to be recognized as conveying a deep truth about the nature of thought. Here nonsense is illuminative. There is no combination of words possible that can properly convey the concept of a concept; and, as a result, this means that the use of "concept" in natural language *must* result in nonsense. Through the use of language we can "hint," and "gesture," and "point" to it but ultimately the gap between what can be thought and what cannot cannot, in this case, be

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<sup>41</sup> For those familiar with the historical development of the readings given to the *Tractatus* this formulation must seem bizarre. It is often thought (by both the logical positivists—e.g. Carnap—and other influential readers of the *Tractatus*—e.g. Hacker) that it is Wittgenstein who means to suggest that thought can reveal (show) deeper insights into the ontological makeup of reality than what language can demonstrate (say). As I have already acknowledged this reading of Frege is not without precedence, though it's primary importance for us is that Wittgenstein saw this (what he calls, later, a) temptation as being fully present in Frege. The *Tractatus* is meant to draw in someone who is, just like Frege, tempted to think of logic in this way.

closed by language. Thus the importance of elucidation and the illuminative nature of nonsense for Frege.

**III. This section briefly outlines what Wittgenstein thought significantly differentiated his view of logic from Frege's. Though Wittgenstein was strongly critical of certain positions taken by Frege, he thought of the *Tractatus* as inheriting many of Frege's fundamental insights; thus this section ends by detailing just how Wittgenstein adopted many of Frege's views for his own purposes and how he used those principles to articulate his understanding of nonsense.**

My fundamental idea is that the "logical constants" are not representatives; that there can be no representatives of the *logic* of facts. (4.0312)

This represents Wittgenstein's break, in the *Tractatus*, with Russell and Frege. For Russell and Frege the project in logic had been to lay down what could and could not be said meaningfully in language: what terms of expression a proper logical syntax would allow for. But for the *Tractatus* to think that either language or logic precedes the other betrays a misunderstanding of both.

Frege says that any legitimately constructed proposition must have a sense. And I say that any possible proposition is legitimately constructed, and, if it has no sense, that can only be because we have failed to give a *meaning* to some of its constituents. (5.4733, Wittgenstein's emphasis)

Thus,

Logic must look after itself. (5.473)

A failure to appreciate this produces, in Wittgenstein's view, "the most fundamental confusions," of which "the whole of philosophy is full" (3.324). Each of these themes—that "logical constants" are not representatives (and the corollary assertion that a single sign can be used for many different symbols (3.32-3.323)), that language and logic mirror one another, and that logic

(and thus language too) must take care of itself—”might be summed up,” as Wittgenstein says in the preface, “in the following words: what can be said at all can be said clearly, and what we cannot talk about we must pass over in silence” (preface, 3). In coming to understand *Wittgenstein* (as opposed to his propositions (6.54)) we come to see that the aim of the *Tractatus*, stated directly after his silence avowal, is

to set a limit to thought, or rather—not to thought, but to the expression of thoughts: for in order to be able to set a limit to thought, we should have to find both sides of the limit thinkable (i.e. we should have to be able to think what cannot be thought). (Preface, p. 3)

This “break” from Frege represents both a continuation of Frege’s project and a critique of it. Wittgenstein too addresses the place of “natural” language in logic, the constituents of logical analysis (the general form of the proposition), and the role of nonsense in making that analysis explicit, but because Frege’s position is problematic in fundamental ways, Wittgenstein sees the *Tractatus* as also moving beyond Frege’s conception of logic. The next few paragraphs will first sketch out Wittgenstein’s critique and then turn to his inheritance of Frege.

Frege—so Wittgenstein sees him—attempts to set a limit to thought. For Frege, though our use of “concept” is necessary in natural language it unavoidably involves one in the expression of what cannot be said (thus the limit), but this means too that Frege can *think* both sides of the limit; and this, under Wittgenstein’s lights, is an absurd result. For Frege thinking both sides of the limit means, on the one side, detailing what can be said (in natural language), and on the other, what can only be thought (in pure logical analysis) and thus *not* said. What cannot be said (e.g. in the use of “concept” in natural language) must be hinted at—since it’s actually impossible to avoid using it in natural language—and this results in the important (and substantial) use of nonsense.

In the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein rejects just this use of nonsense. As we saw in 5.4733 Wittgenstein says that if a proposition does not have sense it “can only be because we have failed to give a *meaning* to some of its constituents.” Wittgenstein sets the way for that thought a few propositions earlier:

If a sign is *possible*, then it is also capable of symbolizing. Whatever is possible in logic is also permitted. (The reason why “Socrates is identical” means nothing is that there is no property called “identical”. The proposition is nonsensical because we have failed to make an arbitrary determination, and not because the symbol, in itself, would be illegitimate.) (5.473)<sup>42</sup>

Nonsense arises, contra Frege, not because logical syntax prevents the expression of certain propositions (e.g., “Socrates is identical”) from making sense in language but only because we’ve failed to give one or more signs a symbolization. We *could* make sense of “Socrates is identical” in any number of ways (e.g., we could see “identical” as symbolizing a nontypical adjective denoting, say, badassness), and once we do (come to understand how a certain sign is symbolized) the “rules of logical syntax” become superfluous (3.334; cf. 3.328 and 5.132). There are no (logical) rules that establish, beforehand (or even finally), how words must be used.<sup>43</sup>

Frege claims that “any legitimately constructed proposition must have a sense” (5.4733), and what Wittgenstein resists in that is the suggestion that rules for “legitimate proposition construction” can predetermine whether a proposition has succeeded in attaining sense. “Socrates

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<sup>42</sup> Following Conant I’m emending “signification” (from the original translation) to “symbolizing.”

<sup>43</sup> There is an interesting connection here with our discussion about the plasticity of language and the pursuant threat of its indeterminacy. That is, if there are no rules to determine how a word *must* be used, then how could we ever be confident that an interlocutor means to use his words in the way we expect them to mean? The point here for Wittgenstein is that there is only *logical necessity* (to be explained below). Thus the “rules for use” that are present are based on our forms of life (here Wittgenstein’s nonessentialism is important)—thus though we have a reasonable expectation that “Socrates is identical” means nothing, it does not mean that we do not have the resources to make sense of the phrase in one or many different ways. Our life with language allows for just this (unusual) use of language with frequent regularity.

is identical” is not nonsensical because the rules for “legitimate proposition construction” exclude the use of the signs “is identical” when used as the function for  $Fx$ , with “Socrates” as its argument, but simply because the function “is identical” has not been given a use.

This is what it means for Wittgenstein to *attempt* to set “a limit to thought.” For in determining what a legitimate sentence *must* look like Frege implicitly suggests that nonsensical formulations (e.g., “Socrates is identical”) can be thought and thus known as nonsensical (as what lies on the other side of the limit) but—because of their nonsensical status—barred from legitimate expression in language.<sup>44</sup> Below (in §IV) we’ll explore Wittgenstein’s reasons for rejecting such a move in detail, but for now it’s important to underline that Wittgenstein cashes out a central point of the *Tractatus* (“the aim of the book is to set a limit ... to the expression of thoughts”) by connecting it to the claim that nonsense comes to the mere failure to give a sign a meaning; thus avoiding the dubious proposition of setting a limit to thought.

We’ve just seen (at least an aspect of) what Wittgenstein thought Frege got wrong (that is, the substantial view of language), now we turn to see (at least an aspect of) what Wittgenstein thought Frege got right. Consider the three fundamental principles Frege lists at the beginning of *Foundations of Arithmetic*:

1. Always to separate sharply the psychological from the logical, the subjective from the objective;
2. Never to ask for the meaning of a word in isolation, but only in the context of a proposition;
3. Never to lose sight of the distinction between concept and object.<sup>45</sup>

These principles are shot through the entirety of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*. Wittgenstein more or less explicitly repeats the second (“Only propositions have sense; only in the context of a

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<sup>44</sup> It can be said; it cannot be said. In both cases there seems like there’s something—*it*—which is (or is not) referred to.

<sup>45</sup> Frege, *Foundations of Arithmetic*, p. x.

proposition does a name have a meaning,” 3.3), and though the first and third principles are inherited less directly (and altered somewhat) their influence on how Wittgenstein understands logical form is profound.

Just as important as the distinction for Frege between concepts and objects, is Wittgenstein’s distinction between “states of affairs” (or facts) and things (or objects)<sup>46</sup>—a distinction with which Wittgenstein begins the *Tractatus*. In those first few propositions of the book Wittgenstein writes:

If I know an object I also know all its possible occurrences in states of affairs.  
(Every one of these possibilities must be part of the nature of the object.)  
A new possibility cannot be discovered later. (2.0123)

To know the form of an object is to know how it fits into a proposition: “In a state of affairs objects fit into one another like the links of a chain” (2.03). Thus I know that “Mare Orientale” can fit into the empty place in the function “is larger than Mare Moscoviense”<sup>47</sup> like a link in a chain because to know what an object like “Mare Orientale” is is to know what kind of thoughts (facts) it can link into. For Frege concepts are *essentially* unsaturated but for Wittgenstein a “state of affairs” has sense—is either true or false.

For Wittgenstein objects too are independent:

Things are independent in so far as they can occur in all *possible* situations, but this form of independence is a form of connexion with states of affairs, a form of dependence. (It is impossible for words to appear in two different roles: by themselves, and in propositions.) (2.0122)<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Diamond, “Throwing Away the Ladder,” and Kremer, “The Whole Meaning of a Book of Nonsense,” p. 466.

<sup>47</sup> Mare Orientale and Mare Moscoviense and many of the other objects in this section refer to objects found on the surface of Earth’s moon. A lunar mare is a large, dark, basaltic (cooled lava) plain.

<sup>48</sup> Also see 2.062.

Mare Orientale can be compared to Mare Moscoviense, to the Leibniz crater, to the size of New York City, or the to the beauty of Navajo desert; it can be compared to anything that shares its form. That Mare Orientale is larger than Mare Moscoviense is independent of the fact that Mare Orientale is located on the western border of the nearside of the moon. This is a kind of independence, but it's an independence afforded by the kind of form it has as an object. Thus it's a kind of independence represented in a determined form. (Form as a limiting factor.)

Though there are important similarities and differences in Frege's use of "concept" and "object" and Wittgenstein's use of "states of affairs" and "things," what's important here (in both the above quoted sections) is that an object—or *any* other part of a sentence for that matter—can be understood only in the context of use in a proposition.

One name stands for one thing, another for another thing, and they are combined with one another. In this way the whole group—like a *tableau vivant*<sup>49</sup>—presents a state of affairs. (4.0311)

The proposition, like a picture, must be taken as a whole. What role a word has cannot be determined in isolation. Though Frege says, in "On Concept and Object," that "a proper name can never be a predicative expression," he quickly warns that "language often uses the same word now as a proper name, now as a concept word."<sup>50</sup> Frege's example: "Trieste is no Vienna." The same word that counts as a proper name in "Vienna is the home of Wittgenstein" counts as a predicative expression when Trieste is compared to Vienna in "Trieste is no Vienna."

Wittgenstein's example is "Green is green" (3.323): "These words do not merely have different meanings: they are *different* symbols."<sup>51</sup> When "green" is used in this sentence its

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<sup>49</sup> Like a *living picture*.

<sup>50</sup> Frege, "On Concept and Object," (in *The Frege Reader*) p. 189.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid. Wittgenstein's emphasis.



meaning may be unclear in *both* uses. As Wittgenstein suggests the first use of “green” could be for a proper name, while the second as an adjective. E.g.,

5. Mr. Green is green. (5'.) Gg

Conant adds two other possible uses of “Green is green”:

6. Mr. Green is Mr. Green. (6'.) g = g

7. The color green is the color green. (7'.)  $(\forall x)(Gx \leftrightarrow Gx)$ <sup>52</sup>

The use of “is” in (5) shows that “green” is predicated of Mr. Green; the use of “is” in (6) indicates an identity relation; the use of “is” in (7) represents the logical function of coextensionality (a relationship between concepts): for any object, if it is green then it must be green.

The necessity Wittgenstein and Frege find in the use of context for understanding the sense of a proposition also helps extend Wittgenstein’s understanding of nonsense. So far the emphasis has been that a word, alone, (e.g., “green” or “is”) cannot be made sense of outside the context of a proposition, but the converse point is equally important: a sentence with a nonsense word at the heart of it is just as nonsensical. Take two examples used by Diamond,

8. Caesar is a prime number.

9. Scott kept a runcible at Abbotsford.<sup>53</sup>

There is a temptation to think that one or both these sentences have a sense, despite the nonsense word it contains. At the root of that temptation though is the confused picture that there are elements to a sentence that can be determined before hand—and independently—which dictate whether a word is permissible or not. The element of (8) that we want to say is alright is “is a prime number” and the element alright in (9) is “Scott kept a \_\_\_\_\_ at Abbotsford.” Wittgenstein thinks that without the completing symbols in (8) and (9)—without assigning a meaning to the

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<sup>52</sup> Conant, “The Method of the *Tractatus*,” p. 403.

<sup>53</sup> Diamond, “What Nonsense Might Be.” These examples are examples that she also inherits.

sign “Caesar” or “runcible” (thus transforming them from mere signs to symbols)—the rest of the sentence too can only be seen as a collection of signs.

For instance, while we may coin “Caesar” a code word for the number “51,” we could just as plausibly change our expectation of the work done by “number.” Instead of thinking of it as an object we could think of it as an adjective (e.g. one equivalent to “idiot”).<sup>54</sup> There is nothing inherent in the form of the words “is a prime number” that dictates what is to be filled in the blank: “\_\_\_\_ is a prime number,” thereby disallowing “Caesar.” The same applies to (9). Though we could easily solve the problem of the nonsensical word “runcible” by assigning it an appropriate object-name (e.g., “cow”), Wittgenstein would not think, as Diamond asserts,

it is possible to assign a meaning to “runcible” which would clash with the meaning of the rest of the sentence. Here the idea is that “Scott kept a——at Abbotsford,” which is a feature of both “Scott kept a cow at Abbotsford” and “Scott kept a runcible at Abbotsford” means the same in both; and to make sense of the latter sentence what one has to do is give “runcible” a meaning which can combine to make sense with the meaning the rest of the sentence *already* has, and not one which will clash with that meaning.<sup>55</sup>

This outcome flows from 3.3: “only in the context of a proposition does a name have meaning.” To take that seriously means an unwillingness to think that “parts” of a sentence can have a predetermined use apart from the proposition as a whole. Trying to determine the meaning of a logical element (e.g., “is a prime number”) or a word apart from the context of a proposition (e.g., “Caesar”) is like giving the coordinates to a moving ship at sea without relaying its velocity, or as Wittgenstein says at 3.144:

Names are like points; propositions like arrows—they have sense.

If one wants to know where a ship is headed, it’s not enough to know the present latitudinal/longitudinal coordinates, the vector must also be given, and just as a vector is needed

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p. 102.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p. 100.

to track a ship so too is the entire proposition needed for *any* understanding of its “elemental” parts. The objection here is not that *any* natural inclination to fill in a certain symbol to a sentence with a blank in it (e.g., “Scott kept a \_\_\_\_\_ at Abbotsford”) is unwarranted or unjustified,<sup>56</sup> but rather that whatever our expectations are they are not logically compulsory. There is no *inherent structure* in a sentence with a blank that *forces* only a certain kind of word to fill its blank.

If we neglect the context of the proposition (a violation of fundamental principle #2) we will inevitably fall back to our own psychological/subjective expectations (a violation of fundamental principle #1) for what a given element, however fragmented, of a possible sentence comes to. Since the customary use of “is a prime number” is as an ascription of number, given our subjective expectation, we think “\_\_\_\_\_ is a prime number” will be filled by a number object. *There is no objection to that assumption!* The trouble comes when we transpose those expectations into an expectation of *logical necessity*. “Vienna” must be used as a proper name, “is a prime number” must only relate to number objects, “is” can only function in a statement of identity. Each of these assertions may be true in the (specific) context of a given proposition but to think that they *must be* true is to force us into a substantial conception of nonsense (a point addressed, below, momentarily). This is to violate Wittgenstein’s version of fundamental principle #3: a failure to take into account that objects fit together like links in a chain.

**IV. This section attempts to detail what Frege got wrong about logic by disentangling it from what Wittgenstein thought he got right. We focus on two important claims of Frege’s that Wittgenstein challenges in the *Tractatus*: that sentences act like proper names and that logical objects are themselves referring**

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<sup>56</sup> This would go against the central force of many of the claims made in Chapter 1 by, for instance, Cavell and Travis.

**expressions. Both these criticisms of Frege help clarify an important theme in the *Tractatus*: attempting to use language to step outside language leaves us with nothing but nonsense.**

For everything Wittgenstein inherited from Frege, he still saw Frege as in a tangle. A tangle that has perhaps preserved itself even in the last section. As we've seen, Wittgenstein argues that Frege's use of logic makes it seem as though there are actual rules or objects that metaphysically determine the nature of logic. Thus his criticism at 5.4733:

Frege says that any legitimately constructed proposition must have a sense. And I say that any possible proposition *is* legitimately constructed ...<sup>57</sup>

As Wittgenstein sees it, for Frege the rules of logic determine whether a proposition has sense, and if that's true it makes it seem as though, given the metaphysical rules of logic, only certain combinations of words are allowed, which means that other combinations are impossible. This gives rise to the view that a limit to language can be given; thus allowing one to think both sides of the limit. What can be said (the combination of words allowed) and what cannot be said (the combination of words not allowed). Even though there are certain words not allowed we can recognize those words as nonsense—as something substantial; we can recognize them *as a something* that cannot be said. Wittgenstein rejects this view by finishing the thought that began 5.4733:

And I say that any possible proposition is legitimately constructed, and, if it has no sense, that can only be because we have failed to give a *meaning* to some of its constituents.<sup>58</sup>

In the next paragraph of that proposition Wittgenstein's example is "Socrates is identical." "Is identical" is nonsense only because we have failed to give a meaning to it, which we could do.

The importance of context for a proposition adds another layer to this point.

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<sup>57</sup> My emphasis.

<sup>58</sup> Wittgenstein's emphasis.

Therein lies the tension. Wittgenstein criticizes Frege for suggesting that certain words can be treated as though they have a definite, absolute nature, but also we see that Wittgenstein inherits the context principle from Frege and that that principle is in part what motivates Wittgenstein's rejection of substantial nonsense. On the one hand, Wittgenstein seems to expect Frege to mishandle a nonsense string of words like "Socrates is identical"—Wittgenstein seems to assume that Frege will see it as *necessarily* illconstructed—but, on the other, Wittgenstein's primary reason for thinking that "is identical" no more has an inherent logical structure than a single word like "is" (3.323) has, is due to Frege's context principle. And if that's right why think Frege will mishandle "Socrates is identical"?

Wittgenstein's sees himself in the *Tractatus*, as Diamond and Conant (and others) have argued, as clarifying Frege's fundamental insights, while using those insights to solve some of the problems that Frege himself failed to untangle. Frege's fundamental principles *might* be used to properly handle the problem of nonsense words like "runcible," but misapplication is possible even with the right guiding principles in place.<sup>59</sup> And this is just what Wittgenstein thought did happen with Frege in two specific ways. First is Frege's view that a sentence acts like a proper name, and second is Frege's understanding of "logical objects"—both of which are more specific cases of the kind of nonsense Wittgenstein thinks Frege's view of logic creates.

For Frege what characterizes a sentence is that the object-expression determines its meaning. If the object-expression is empty (e.g. as "the Golden Mountain" is) then the proposition itself is deprived of *any* truth-value.<sup>60</sup> Thus for Frege, *sentences* themselves refer to an object, namely its truth-value (either to the True or to the False).

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<sup>59</sup> Conant, "The Method of the *Tractatus*," p. 398.

<sup>60</sup> Diamond, "Throwing Away the Ladder."

Wittgenstein resists this view because he thinks it's an attempt to create a science of logic, an attempt to take thought about logic out of its home—the context and use (application) of a proposition—by calcifying the conditions in which something counts as true, an attempt to self-justify (to ground the foundations of) logical inquiry.

Wittgenstein's alternative account to the suggestion that the proposition itself is a proper name is that the proposition is an articulated sign: "A proposition is not a medley of words" (3.141). He contrasts it against an aspect of Frege's conception of a proposition when he writes,

Although a propositional sign is a fact, this is obscured by the usual form of expression in writing or print.

For in a printed proposition, for example, no essential difference is apparent between a propositional sign and a word.

(That is what made it possible for Frege to call a proposition a complex name.)  
(3.1431)

The tendency for Frege to think of a proposition like a complex name is at odds with what Wittgenstein thought was Frege's genuine insight. If we look at a proposition in print we might come to think that the proposition itself is self-contained—that is, that a truth-value can be given to it once and for all. But Wittgenstein opposes this: "Situations can be described but not *given names*. (Names are like points; propositions like arrows—they have sense.) (3.144). Instead of thinking that a proposition refers to the True, for Wittgenstein propositions have a sense, and that sense is what's compared to reality: "A proposition that mentions a complex will not be nonsensical, if the complex does not exist, but simply false" (3.24). It's capable of being false because it's a proposition. (Propositions are propositions because they are *either true or false*.)

Wittgenstein connects this to his larger conception of nonsense: nonsense is not something substantial—as though one might refer to an *it* (a proposition) which could not exist—but rather if the complex does not exist the proposition (if it is an articulated sign at all) is merely

false. This is what Wittgenstein saw as Russell's merit. Russell's analysis of propositions shows that a proposition's sense is not determined by whether the object-expression actually refers to an object, but rather by the distinctive logical features expressed by the form of the proposition itself. The functionality of a sentence is not determined solely by the object-expression but by the sense expressed by the proposition as a whole.<sup>61</sup>

Wittgenstein's criticism of Frege's use of propositions as complex names comes to more or less the same criticism of his use of "logical constants," a point made at the very beginning of the last section (§III):

My fundamental idea is that the "logical constants" are not representatives; that there can be no representatives of the *logic* of facts. (4.0312)

This means, for instance, that the logical constant for "conjunction" is not itself a referring expression; thus neither propositions (as a whole) nor logical constants are representatives of objects. In the sections where Wittgenstein criticizes the idea of a proposition as a complex name, Wittgenstein has a lot to say about what kind of signs *do* represent objects:

The simple signs employed in propositions are called names. (3.202)

A name means an object. The object is its meaning. (3.203)

The configuration of objects in a situation corresponds to the configuration of simple signs in the propositional sign. (3.21)

In a proposition a name is the representative of an object. (3.22)

Thus the sign "Mare Orientale" in *Mare Orientale is barely visible on the western border of the nearside of the moon* corresponds—refers/points—to a physical object: one of the craters filled with cooled lava on the surface of Earth's moon. *That* is an example of a sign that represents. But logical objects (as Wittgenstein calls them in 4.441) like " $\sim$ ," " $\vee$ ," or " $\supset$ " or signs like "is" or

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<sup>61</sup> Diamond, "What Nonsense Might Be," p. 187.

propositions themselves are not like that.<sup>62</sup> Wittgenstein dedicates some space for detailing his reasons for this claim.

Consider the instance of a proposition relating two objects to one another. Wittgenstein resists the idea that the relation itself is an object of the proposition:

Instead of, “The complex sign ‘ $aRb$ ’ says that  $a$  stands to  $b$  in the relation  $R$ ,” we ought to put, “*That* ‘ $a$ ’ stands to ‘ $b$ ’ in a certain relation says *that*  $aRb$ . (3.1432)

The relation is not something that stands outside of the proposition but is internal to it. The relation is what gives the two objects a logical articulation, and this can “very clearly [be] seen if we imagine [the propositional sign] composed of spatial objects (such as tables, chairs, and books) instead of written signs. Then the spatial arrangement of these things will express the sense of the proposition” (3.1431). Again, in print, logical constants or propositions as a whole can begin to look analogously similar to referring object-expressions—as though the sentence itself names something (or as Frege puts it, refers to the True or False—but thinking of the propositional sign pictorially we can see that the essence of the proposition is just the logical space created when objects are linked together in a chain to form a state of affairs. If a string of words is logically articulated (is a proposition) then *it will* articulate the relationship between, for instance, two objects.

Wittgenstein makes related remarks concerning the use of logical constants. For instance, merely by repeating certain “logical objects” we can make them disappear: “e.g. negation in ‘ $\sim\sim p$ ’:  $\sim\sim = p$ ” (5.254). As Kremer points out, “if the ‘ $\sim$ ’ sign were a depicting element, the possible state of affairs represented by ‘ $\sim\sim oTk$ ’ would involve some further item, and would be a

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<sup>62</sup> I’m following Kremer’s very helpful analysis on this point. See Kremer, “The Whole Meaning of a Book of Nonsense,” pp. 460-479.



different state of affairs than that represented by ‘oTk.’”<sup>63</sup> But that it does not represent another, separate state of affairs is why Wittgenstein sees talk of the elements of the proposition like logical constants or of propositional form itself as falling under Occam’s Razor: “If a sign is *useless*, it is meaningless. That is the point of Occam’s maxim” (3.328). The double negation is an example of a superfluous sign and thus, as Wittgenstein sees it, it’s ultimately eliminable. The same is true of words like “is”: we can rewrite *Mare Orientale is larger than Mare Moscoviense* in logical form (e.g., *oLm*); thereby dispensing the need for using the sign “is” completely. Even without the “is” connective the proposition has sense.

For Wittgenstein, Occam’s maxim shows that “*unnecessary* units of a sign-language mean nothing” (5.47321, Wittgenstein’s emphasis), but in what sense are logical objects meaningless? Rewriting *oLm* as *Mare Orientale is larger than Mare Moscoviense* shows that adding “is” to the second picture is not to add anything substantive but rather like adding additional (logical) punctuation. But if *Mare Orientale is larger than Mare Moscoviense* contains a superfluous (and thus meaningless) sign does that mean that Wittgenstein takes the sentence to ultimately be without sense? That is, does it become mere nonsense? Kremer makes a helpful analysis here:

The way we show that “is” is superfluous, is to construct a notation in which *the sense* of [for instance] “Obama is American” is expressed without anything corresponding to “is” among the logical working parts of the proposition. There is, after all, no philosophical confusion in asserting that Obama is American. Confusion arises, rather, from treating the word “is” as a separable part of the entire proposition, rather than recognizing that it forms only a part of the predicate. Such confusion might lead one to wonder about the *meaning* of the copula “is” and thereby to generate philosophical problems about the relation of uniting subject and predicate.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., p. 471.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., p. 461. Kremer’s emphasis.

“Is” is meaningless in the sense that it’s no object. It is not a referring expression. On its lonesome it does no work. What work “is” can and cannot do is an internal relation of propositional use; and because it does not refer to an object it remains merely superfluous. It moves from a kind of superfluity to nonsense when we try to articulate it as something that “expresses” the inherent logical structure of the world.<sup>65</sup>

All of this we might summarize by saying that Wittgenstein rejects the idea that we can use language to get outside language. Consider his comments on propositional form.

Wittgenstein thinks that propositional form shares many similarities to pictorial form: for instance, the form of either cannot itself be represented. Wittgenstein:

A picture cannot, however, depict its pictorial form: it displays it. (2.172)

A picture represents its subject from a position outside it. (Its standpoint is its representational form.) That is why a picture represents its subject correctly or incorrectly. (2.173)

A picture cannot, however, place itself outside its representational form. (2.174)

If we were asked to explain what makes a picture a picture, we’d appeal to various propositions about the nature of pictures. But Wittgenstein sees propositions themselves as pictures (logical pictures); by describing pictures, we’ve done nothing more than to explain a picture with another picture. There is an aspect of getting outside the picture, as Wittgenstein recognizes above in 2.173, but that merely comes to asking whether the picture represents truly or falsely. Asking for the deep, ontological nature of pictorial form gets us no further than asking for additional pictures. This is why no picture is true *a priori* (2.225).

This is where Wittgenstein marks an aspect of similarity between pictorial and propositional form. Just as we cannot get outside pictorial form by appeal to pictures, neither can we get outside propositional form by further appeal to (perhaps, more general) propositions.

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<sup>65</sup> Kremer’s two additional statements about the nature of superfluity can be found on, *ibid.*, p. 471 and p. 476.

Propositions cannot represent logical form: it is mirrored in them.  
What finds its reflection in language, language cannot represent.  
What expresses *itself* in language, *we* cannot express by means of language.  
Propositions *show* the logical form of reality.  
They display it. (4.121, Wittgenstein's emphasis)

Just as a picture cannot get outside itself (cannot get outside its representational form), there's no getting outside language to represent language "itself" full stop. What language comes to can only be shown through its use. Any attempt to talk about language "as it is"—in its fixed or pure form—amounts to nothing more (if it amounts to anything) than supplying additional pictures just as bound in the hurlyburly of our complicated forms of life.

What could it possibly mean to step outside language? We've used Wittgenstein's critique of Frege to illustrate at least two examples: thinking that propositions refer to the True or False and thinking that logical constants refer to objects.<sup>66</sup> But the conceptual nature of Wittgenstein's resistance to Frege in this area is admittedly extremely difficult to layout. Here's an example that may only risk further confusing the issue. Consider the urban myth that if a law enforcement officer is asked whether she is a law enforcement officer, she *must* tell the truth. The myth usually involves a scenario where a drug dealer wants to sell narcotics but the dealer suspects that the transaction possibly involves an agent acting undercover for the police; the drug dealer also believes that the law somehow acts to protect drug dealers from selfincriminating exchanges like this by requiring the officer to disclose her identity if directly asked about her present occupation.

Part of our commerce with other human beings is that we can falsely report our intentions, our feelings, our identity, etc. Now we might try to shortcircuit that aspect of who we are—for instance by "swearing" on the lives of our children that what we say is true or by

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<sup>66</sup> Other examples might include Frege's characterization of concepts and objects discussed in §II.

placing our hand on the bible, etc.—and one of the difficult lessons of the *Tractatus* is that those social-linguistic activities may themselves communicate something deep and important about our experience and view of the world (4.002); nevertheless, this attempt at alienating us from ourselves—if what we are trying to do is to *absolutely* get outside the possibility of being deceived by another person—*will* fail because it amounts to denying a fundamental aspect of our nature. There is no using language to get outside language here. And that holds equally true for the different kinds of appeals we may make: whether it be to reason, religion, science, or social convention (law).<sup>67</sup>

This attempt to treat logic like an object (an external fact about language) is just the kind of thing that Wittgenstein accuses Frege of slipping into at various points of the *Tractatus*. For instance, on Frege's view that a proposition is like a complex name Wittgenstein writes,

Objects can only be *named*. Signs are their representatives. I can only speak *about* them: I cannot *put them into words*. Propositions can only say *how* things are, not *what* they are. (3.221, Wittgenstein's emphasis)

It would be a kind of cheat to think we could get actual objects into the signs that represent them. We think that this would earn us a necessary truth because the proposition would no longer represent truly *or* falsely since the object we took the proposition to reference is contained in the proposition itself, but this is just another attempt to create a picture that is itself outside representational form (2.174). Kremer describes the move this way:

Our temptation, in other words, is to give a justification, or grounding, for logic. This is the temptation one is danger of falling into when one embraces the idea of ineffable proposition-like insights into the nature of reality, insights which reveal the structure our language must conform itself to in order to be meaningful. This idea can be tempting insofar as it makes it possible for us to conceive of a grounding for logic which cannot itself be subject to a further demand for justification, an “internal” grounding, which we can appreciate through an insight that cannot be expressed—close enough to a

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<sup>67</sup> The Rule-Following remarks in Chapter One attempt to articulate why sense is still possible even if no absolute standpoint can be found.

proposition to serve as a justification, yet different enough to escape the demand for further justification.<sup>68</sup>

Attempting to conceive of logical objects like external facts about language is something that Wittgenstein thinks is mere nonsense, and Kremer brings out nicely the sense in which our demand for language to do something it cannot do involves an illusion. We have a picture in our mind of what it would mean to justify a given form of life and often that picture is one that presents itself as an unassailable fact, and though there is a context for the use of “unassailable facts”—for instance as we might describe the reality of gravity—even that use, as Wittgenstein comments at various points of the *Tractatus*, is circumscribed in important ways (e.g., in the 6.3’s). What we want (what Kremer suggests is an illusion) is a claim that is *not circumscribed in any way*. And to think that we can give a proposition so constructed is to fundamentally misunderstand what propositions are like. Or: attempting to do that is nonsense.

Now that might look like two different claims. On the one hand to think of it as impossible might simply suggest that it comes to nothing—a mere failure to give a sign a meaning—but on the other hand to think of it as impossible might suggest that there is something to be done but that we *necessarily cannot* (because of a limitation in our language) do it. How we understand this distinction—what we take Wittgenstein to be suggesting here—is what has led to a great divide in the literature about the *Tractatus* during the last twenty plus years. Hacker (among others) has argued that Wittgenstein intends to suggest that though we can’t represent logical form *in language* there is a prevailing form of logic metaphysically underwriting our use of it. There is a logically perfect language though it isn’t sayable. We can think it somehow, but when we try to express it—because of the limit of our language—it necessarily comes out garbled and ultimately unintelligible. However, even though such forms of discourse are

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<sup>68</sup> Kremer, “The Whole Meaning of a Book of Nonsense,” pp. 479-480.

unintelligible (nonsense), they're able to communicate—point/hint—the unsayable. This is more-or-less the reading this chapter has assigned to Frege's use of nonsense.

This section has tried to address the substantial view of nonsense by characterizing it as an attempt to use language to get outside of language and by arguing that the attempt itself is an illusion. Thus at each point when “a use of language that escapes language” has been considered such a move is always characterized as a failed *attempt*. These attempts have the appearance of sense (of being evaluatable)—as perhaps we might think “Scott kept a \_\_\_\_\_ at Abbotsford” has the appearance of sense—but after inspection we see that no articulation has been given of the signs present. Thus what we see is not a violation of the limits of sense (as though we might appeal to a predetermined syntax of language) but a violation of the expression of thoughts, as Wittgenstein puts it in the preface. To express a thought a proposition must have sense, but what these so-called propositions—propositions that escape the bounds of language—need to give us cannot be evaluated as propositions must, lest they fall prey to the very thing they were meant to propel us past. Nonsense is not a “thing” we can appeal to; it is not deep but represents merely the failure to assign meaning to a particular sign or particular range of signs. Nonsense—as Aquinas might say—is merely a privation of sense.

This section and the last two have focused on Wittgenstein's inheritance and criticism of Frege's conception of logic, especially as it relates to the concept of nonsense. The next section, the last on this series concerned with logic, attempts to articulate the *Tractatus*' understanding of logic, especially as it relates to language and thought. We've seen that for Wittgenstein there's no sense in asking for a grounding to logic, but if that's right then what makes logic (and language and thought) intelligible? Or to approach that question using terminology from the *Tractatus*: if logical analysis cannot be said, only shown, then why is the *Tractatus* seemingly

filled with so many claims about the nature of logic? How does the *Tractatus* see itself as contributing to a clear understanding of an “appropriate method” in logic? These inquiries will draw out the important implications for Wittgenstein’s understanding of the limits to the *expression* of thoughts.

**V. This section pulls the discussion back from detailing the various agreements and disagreements between Frege and Wittgenstein to consider how Wittgenstein’s understanding of logic fits with his conception of philosophy in general. For Wittgenstein logic and philosophy both aim at the clarification of thought. Thus we examine several passages from the *Tractatus* concerned with how language and thought sometimes goes off the rails and what role Wittgenstein thinks philosophy has in correcting those problems.**

As we’ve seen, Wittgenstein thought that many of the attempts by Frege and Russell to provide the foundations for logic result in nonsense. Wittgenstein thought their approach fundamentally misunderstood *what* philosophy could accomplish. If he’s right about that we need to give an account for how he thought the problems which Frege and Russell address could satisfactorily be met without trespassing the bounds of sense. If logic must take care of itself (5.473) then what role does Wittgenstein mean for the *Tractatus* to take? Wittgenstein presents the problem of language and thought here:

Man possesses the ability to construct languages capable of expressing every sense, without having any idea how each word has meaning or what its meaning is—just as people speak without knowing how the individual sounds are produced.

Everyday language is a part of the human organism and is no less complicated than it.

It is not humanly possible to gather immediately from it what the logic of language is.

Language disguises thought. So much so, that from the outward form of the clothing it is impossible to infer the form of the thought beneath it, because the outward

form of the clothing is not designed to reveal the form of the body, but for entirely different purposes.

The tacit conventions on which understanding of everyday language depends are enormously complicated. (4.002)

This passage is of great importance to this dissertation as a whole. Allow a few lines to stitch together part of the reason for that. For Wittgenstein, we can use language to express anything (“every sense”) that can be expressed. This represents the universal domain of language:

The totality of true propositions is the whole of natural science ... (4.11)

The totality of propositions is language. (4.001)

The totality of true thoughts is a picture of the world. (3.01)

The totality of existing states of affairs is the world. (2.04)

Thought does not outrun language, it is mirrored in it (4.121). If it can be thought it can be said and said clearly (4.116). If we could list all propositions, all states of affairs, the world would be completely described, and remember, for Wittgenstein, “The world is all that is the case.”<sup>69</sup>

There is nothing over and beyond the world waiting to be thought.<sup>70</sup>

And yet our discourse is mired in—if not defined by—confusion. How can this be? How can Wittgenstein reconcile the idea that anything that can be expressed can be expressed clearly with the concomitant sense that “language disguises thought”?

For Wittgenstein it’s one thing to be able to appropriately characterize thought, it’s another to be a competent user of logical form. Falling into the latter category is *shown* in the use of logic. “We can see this,” Wittgenstein says, “from the fact that we understand the sense of a propositional sign without its having been explained to us” (4.021). What counts for understanding is not whether one has the right idea about “how each word has meaning or what

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<sup>69</sup> Also remember, for Wittgenstein, “It is nonsensical to speak of the *total number of objects*.” (4.1272, Wittgenstein’s emphasis). Notice that the claim here is that it’s nonsense to speak of “the total number of objects” whereas as above Wittgenstein references the totality of “true propositions,” “true thoughts,” and “states of affairs.”

<sup>70</sup> See the next chapter on the limited nature of this claim. Murdoch resists Hegel’s *limit*, which is really the *whole* point of this chapter.



its meaning is” (4.002)—that is, understanding is not based on one’s *theory of meaning*—but rather, “to understand a proposition means to know what is the case if it is true” (4.024).

The problems of philosophy are like the problems of logic. Logical form appears mysterious when we are want to provide *the* final explanation of it. When we step back and detail its proprieties looking to find necessitated facts. We see that “language disguises thought” and attempt to pull back the curtain by employing a perfect logical language, but we do not realize that the attempt itself may merely replace one mask with another, thus further obscuring the nature of language.

4.002 is a cautionary tale. On the one hand logical language can be extremely useful for understanding the sense of a proposition since Wittgenstein sees that “it is not humanly possible to gather immediately from it what the logic of language is” (4.002).<sup>71</sup> After suggesting that “cross-category equivocations”<sup>72</sup> (like “Green is green”) constitute “the most fundamental confusions” of which philosophy is full, Wittgenstein writes that, “In order to avoid such errors we must make use of a sign-language that excludes them by not using the same sign for different symbols” (3.325).<sup>73</sup> Logical analysis then is an important tool for coming to a clear understanding of the meaning of a proposition (as Frege’s response to Kerry shows). Since “the tacit conventions on which the understanding of everyday language depends are enormously complicated” logical investigations into their use can be quite revealing. It’s a cautionary tale because Frege and Russell sometimes seem to think that language can be *reduced* to logical expression. That logical expression somehow reveals a necessarily clearer and better expression

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<sup>71</sup> It’s important to note that this line works for and against the importance of a logical language. It works for it because ordinary language is difficult to decipher; it works against it because it is no easy means to render the sense of that language into a “clear” (logical) one.

<sup>72</sup> Conant’s phrase. See his “The Method of the *Tractatus*.”

<sup>73</sup> What Wittgenstein’s sign-language comes to all depends on what we take his imperative to “make use” of it to mean.

of ordinary language and thus provides ordinary language's true essence: logical form in-and-of-itself. It's this view of logic—the view that sees logic as a fact—that enables them to think that rules can be given which underwrite legitimate logical expression.

Against this view stands Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*:  
Logic must take care of itself.

*A possible sign must also be able to signify. Everything which is possible in logic is also permitted. ("Socrates is identical" means nothing because there is no property which is called "identical." The proposition is nonsensical because we have not made some arbitrary determination, not because the symbol itself is impermissible.)*

*In a certain sense we cannot make mistakes in logic. (§5.473)*

Logic takes care of itself because there is no supplying representational form outside representational form. Logic is learned at the same time as language.<sup>74</sup> There is nothing over and above logic to ground logic in. Whatever representations we make of logic we do with logic. We can "explain" pictures but that amounts to nothing more than using a further picture to bring out an aspect of another picture. We can step outside a picture but that amounts to nothing more than asking whether the picture represents truly or falsely. Propositions are logical pictures, and when we fail to yield a genuine proposition (one that represents bipolarly) we have not thought illogically as much as we have simply failed to think anything (5.4731).

From the other direction, "we cannot make mistakes in logic" nor can we "give a sign the wrong sense" (5.4732) because as Ryle says, commenting on Wittgenstein's advance over Frege, "we do not begin with the possession of concepts and then go on to coagulate them into thoughts. We begin and end with thoughts ... ." <sup>75</sup> In the expression "Scott kept a \_\_\_\_\_ at Abbotsford" we do not have a thought (a self-contained unit) which stands in need of completion nor in "Socrates is identical" do we have a word (or series of words) necessarily illused. Certainly we have our

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<sup>74</sup> Kremer, "The Whole Meaning of a Book of Nonsense."

<sup>75</sup> Ryle, *Collected Papers*, vol. 1, p. 184. Conant's paper, "The Method of the *Tractatus*" originally drew me to this point by Ryle.

own parochial expectations about whether a particular word or sense will fit better or not, Wittgenstein's point however is that *logic* cannot be used to necessitate those expectations. Though we can't give a sign the wrong sense, we certainly can use a sign (or a string of signs) in which no meaning has been given. We cannot give a sign the wrong sense because *sense* does not reside in the sign but in the proposition. Propositions can be false but not illogical. As Ryle also points out, there are discernible features in a proposition (that is, each word in a proposition can be distinguished) but "an assertion is not a molecule of which the meanings of the words in which it is worded are the atoms. ... Concepts are not things that are there crystallized in splendid isolation; they are discriminable features, but not detachable atoms, of what is integrally said or integrally thought."<sup>76</sup> This is the fulfillment of Frege and Wittgenstein's context principle.

Frege and Russell see that "the tacit conventions on which the understanding of everyday language depends are enormously complicated" (4.002), but their response is to try to take care of logic—as though with the truths of logic in hand they might set ordinary language straight—and it is this posture, this attempt to get outside language with language that Wittgenstein resists.

Most of the propositions and questions to be found in philosophical works are not false but nonsensical. Consequently we cannot give any answer to questions of this kind, but can only establish that they are nonsensical. Most of the propositions and questions of philosophers arise from our failure to understand the logic of our language.

(They belong to the same class as the question whether the good is more or less identical than the beautiful.)

And it is not surprising that the deepest problems are in fact *not* problems at all. (4.003)

They try to get their words to do something that words are not meant to do—that words cannot do; in the case of Russell and Frege they try to specify not what it would mean for a particular sentence to be true or false but how a particular state of affairs might *only* be considered true.

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid., pp. 184-185.

This is just the temptation of illusion Conant thinks the whole of the *Tractatus* is directed towards:

For Wittgenstein, the source of the clash is to be located in *our relation* to the linguistic string—not in the linguistic string itself. The problem, according to the *Tractatus*, is that we often believe that we have given a meaning to all of a sentence’s constituent parts when we have failed to do so. We think nonsense results in such cases not because of a failure on our part, but because of a failure on the sentence’s part. We think the problem lies not in an absence of meaning (in our failing to mean anything by these words), but rather in a presence of meaning (in the incompatible senses the words already have—senses which the words import with them into the context of combination). We think the thought is flawed because the component senses of its parts logically repel one another. They fail to add up to a thought. So we feel our words are attempting to think a logically impossible thought—and that this involves a kind of impossibility of a higher order than ordinary impossibility. Wittgenstein’s teaching is that the problem lies not in the words, but in our confused relation to the words: in our experiencing ourselves as meaning something definite by them, yet also feeling that what we take ourselves to be meaning with the words makes no sense.<sup>77</sup>

Consider the request to *think* squarecircle. “Squarecircle” is not something deep—as though our powers of imagination fall just short of penetrating into an actual thing, “existing” in a “state” necessarily beyond our ability to express it “logically” in language—but represents a failure to say anything.

The “most fundamental confusions” of which “the whole of philosophy” is full are caused in part by thinking that we have given a sign a symbol (while under some particular illusion) when in fact the (nonsense) words we use are lifeless. For Wittgenstein the activity of philosophy is not meant to create a new theory of logic that demonstrably expels the possibility of nonsense, but rather

Philosophy aims at the logical clarification of thoughts.  
Philosophy is not a body of doctrine but an activity. (4.112)

We’ve seen it claimed that logic is not analogously like a matter of fact, but if it is not a fact then what is it? Here we see Wittgenstein’s answer. Logic is an activity for the clarification of

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<sup>77</sup> Conant, “The Method of the *Tractatus*,” p. 419.

thoughts. Logical analysis is what we do when we explore the “tacit conventions” of everyday language. This is the selfundermining element in Wittgenstein’s show/say distinction.

Selfundermining because the *Tractatus* looks as if it’s laying out *the* logical syntax of language yet we find Wittgenstein in that work, again and again, explicitly saying that logical form cannot be said but only shown.

A picture cannot, however, depict its pictorial form: it displays it. (2.172)  
Propositions cannot represent logical form: it is mirrored in them. ... Propositions *show* the logical form of reality. (4.121, Wittgenstein’s emphasis)  
What *can* be shown, *cannot* be said. (4.1212, Wittgenstein’s emphasis).

What does it mean to *show* logical form? In part we must look for a clear use of propositions: “with propositions ... we make ourselves understood” (4.026). We demonstrate our understanding of propositional form in the competent use of language. If we can compare a proposition to reality, if we can use it to make sense, then we understand logical form. Creating complex rules and systems of logic do not further “substantiate” its legitimacy.<sup>78</sup> If we could say what logical form comes to then we could determine beforehand the conditions of sense and *that* would allow for illogical thought, and we’d again be off to the races.

If logic must take care of itself, if logical syntax cannot be grounded, we can see that logical analysis itself is in this way superfluous. Wittgenstein:

In fact, all the propositions of our everyday language, just as they stand, are in perfect logical order. –That utterly simple thing, we have to formulate here, is not an image of the truth, but the truth itself in its entirety.  
(Our problems are not abstract, but perhaps the most concrete that there are.)  
(5.5563)

As we might construct a logical syntax devoid of the sign “is” so we might use and understand language without constructing a logical language to repicture its sense. Logic is a “meaningless” addition to ordinary language, which as it stands, is in perfect logical order. This conclusion

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<sup>78</sup> Kremer, “The Whole Meaning of a Book of Nonsense,” p. 469.

follows directly from Wittgenstein's view that logic must take care of itself. If there is no providing the "deep" ontological structure of language, if there is no using language to get outside language, no using a picture to *justify* another picture, if there is no representing logical form, then we can see that language will do just fine on its own.

But, as this section has tried underline, though logic's role may be superfluous that does not mean that it cannot illuminate. This is why what is superfluous for Wittgenstein cannot be wholly reduced to what is nonsense. We can repicture "Mare Orientale is larger than Mare Moscoviense" simply as "oLm" and though that alternative representation is superfluous (it adds nothing to the original) picturing it thus may draw our attention more clearly to the sense already latent in its everyday expression. It moves from merely being superfluous to nonsense when we try to *think* that the logical expression somehow demonstrates the proposition's underlying (superfactual) nature.

Wittgenstein's use of pictures brings out an important aspect of why we use pictures in the first place. We have a picture in front of us. Its sense may seem unassailable (or perhaps unapproachably obscure) and then another picture of that picture is given and the hold the original had on us breaks. We see the first picture in a light we thought not possible. Our sense of the picture is deepened. Or we're left unchanged, or exacerbated, or any number of other reactions. "The tacit conventions on which the understanding of everyday language depends are enormously complicated," true, but Wittgenstein does not say that they are not well understood. We see that they are understood by sensitively responding to the slightest catch in speech. We might assure a friend that we are "just fine" but in overemphasizing our fineness the friend might rightly sense that the opposite is true. For Wittgenstein it's *the bringing* out of these tacit conventions which is enormously complicated. Our making additional pictures attempts to draw

out their various aspects, making them less implicit. Perhaps! Sometimes our making additional pictures only furthers the confusion we originally felt.

Now there is nothing to suggest that Wittgenstein is ruggedly opposed to such attempts (as “What *can* be shown, *cannot* be said,” may seem to imply), but what he does oppose is the thought that whatever picture we might use to illuminate these everyday expressions might “explain” such behavior. –As though the behavior is just a confused fact that might be wholly explicated. –As though logic—understood as a predetermined syntax of meaning—can facilitate the *final* word on correct use. –As though logic might provide a picture that could stand on its own and bring out the convention’s *absolute* nature.

Since we have the ability to “construct languages capable of expressing every sense”—since we can both construct and *understand* such languages—there’s no sense in trying to detail an “underlying” logical structure to “explain” them. This is why that kind of logical investigation is superfluous. But this might seem to strain against the *Tractatus*’ final three propositions.

The correct method in philosophy would really be the following: to say nothing except what can be said, i.e. propositions of natural science—i.e. something that has nothing to do with philosophy—and then, whenever someone else wanted to say something metaphysical, to demonstrate to him that he had failed to give a meaning to certain signs in his propositions. Although it would not be satisfying to the other person—he would not have the feeling that we were teaching him philosophy—*this* method would be the only strictly correct one. (6.53, Wittgenstein’s emphasis)

My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually recognizes them as nonsensical, when he has used them—as steps—to climb up beyond them. (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it.)

He must transcend these propositions, and then he will see the world aright. (6.54)  
What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence. (7)

Wittgenstein understood that many would read the *Tractatus* expecting to find his doctrine concerning the nature of propositions, and the long history following the publication of that book certainly confirms his expectation. There is a painful irony in reading the *Tractatus* to posit

*ineffable* truths (thoughts that cannot be said given the limitations of language) while simultaneously explicating *in language* what those truths are;<sup>79</sup> but whatever strategy we might pursue to reconcile 6.54 (“anyone who understands me eventually recognizes them [my propositions] as nonsensical ...”) with the rest the book, we should be hesitant to expect a tidy resolution to the complex textual difficulties present in the *Tractatus*.

The view that this chapter has pursued takes Wittgenstein to be presenting an austere understanding of logic and nonsense. Consider Wittgenstein’s remarks in the proposition just before he instructs us to throw away the ladder. Wittgenstein says that “the correct method in philosophy” is to “say nothing” except for the propositions of “natural science.” But he contrasts what can be said in natural science to the metaphysical thesis that philosophers argue for. Against a metaphysical conception of philosophy it would be no help to argue for some other philosophical doctrine that expresses the untenable nature of metaphysical thought. Such a response could only seek to establish *some other* limit, some other doctrine. Instead Wittgenstein recommends a method for showing the emptiness of that approach, replacing it by setting a limit to the expression of thoughts.

That method is embodied in the *Tractatus* itself. Insofar as the book draws us in to take *any* aspect of it to effectively get outside language and provide an independent, absolute criterion for logical analysis—or for anything else—either by explicitly endorsing such a position (that is, endorse by *saying*) or in some mysterious implicit sense (that is, endorse by *showing*), we’ve fallen into nonsense. Just the kind of nonsense Wittgenstein means to draw us into and then throw us out of (at least) by the end of the book. The temptation of which philosophy is full is present on every page of the *Tractatus*. Since Wittgenstein sees the allure of metaphysics to be

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<sup>79</sup> This is a point made by several of the resolute readers (that is, readers of the *Tractatus* who think that nonsense is a failure to find a symbol in a sign).



primarily psychological (that is, nonsense is not contained in the symbol but rather something we project onto it), he meets the illusion on its own terms. Just as we tried to enter into Kerry's world of circlesquares (concept objects), Wittgenstein enters into the world of logical speculation and shows that what we want and expect such speculation to produce turns out empty.

This section ends the prolonged look into Wittgenstein's conception of nonsense. Part of the reason we've spent such a protracted amount of time considering the *Tractatus*' view of logic (and nonsense) is that the *Tractatus* is also one of the few places that Wittgenstein talks about ethics and the transcendent. We're now at the point of this project (as a whole) where the diverging lines of inquiry are meant to begin to converge. Here's the first statement of convergence: for Wittgenstein, ethics and logic are one. As we've seen in these last few sections, the *Tractatus* certainly concerns itself with logic, and though we've yet to explicitly state what the *Tractatus* says about ethics, in saying what we have about logic, we're already said all that can be said about ethics—a thought in the *Tractatus* which is sometimes expressed like this: what we cannot talk about we must pass over in silence.<sup>80</sup>

**VI. This section transitions us back to the focus on religious belief in general and of Nielsen's criticism in particular, paying diligent attention to compare and contrast Nielsen's and Wittgenstein's view of logic/nonsense. In order to facilitate our concern with religious belief we also consider another topic on the judgment of value: ethics and the place of ethics in the *Tractatus*.**

From the beginning the intent of this chapter was to take Wittgenstein's considered position on nonsense and apply it to the challenge brought by Nielsen. This chapter also assumes that

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<sup>80</sup> Conant's "What the "High" in the *Tractatus* is Not," Diamond's paper, "Ethics, Imagination, and the Method of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*," and Kremer's "A Whole Book of Nonsense," have strongly shaped my understanding of the place of ethics in the *Tractatus*.

coming to understand Wittgenstein's view of logic and ethics in the *Tractatus* will help respond to Nielsen's criticisms of religious language. In order to pave the way for a conversation about "the higher" in the *Tractatus* (6.42, 6.432) let's briefly review Nielsen's opposition and put it into a broader context.

Chapters One and Two are twin chapters both meant to address the forceful objections raised against applying Wittgenstein's method to religious belief. Chapter One considers some of the objections that come from AφR and attempts to lay some ground work for an alternative (Wittgensteinian approach); Chapter Two begins with an objection from the other way around: suspicion from inside the "Wittgensteinian" camp itself. The objections considered in both chapters are two sides of the same coin: how can an "ordinary" philosophy—one without metaphysical recourse—reasonably talk about the transcendent in general or God in particular?

Nielsen deeply appreciates Wittgenstein's turn to use for understanding but thinks that precisely because God does not enter into the terrestrial plain, use of mystical and religious language is out of bounds.

We do not know what counts for truth or falsity or what counts as reasonable or unreasonable [when using religious language]; indeed we do not even understand what we are saying. We are just in a fog. **Nonsense engulfs us.** ... Consider again Wittgenstein's remark in *Culture and Value* that we 'might speak of the world as malicious' or 'easily imagine the Devil created the world, or part of it' or that 'the whole scheme of things will be aimed at evil from the very start'. We not only *cannot* (*pace* Wittgenstein) easily imagine these things: we do not understand these utterances. We only, if we do not think, have the illusion of understanding them by extension from some familiar utterances we do understand. We understand what it is for a person to be malicious or an action or attitude to be malicious. We have truth-conditions or assertability conditions for such claims. But for the *world* to be malicious? **We can't intelligibly impute intentions to the world. That makes no sense at all.** .... There is no such functional language-game. Language is idle here.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Nielsen, "Wittgenstein and Wittgensteinians on Religion," p. 160-1. The bolding is mine.

In light of the last few sections it seems reasonable to ask whether Nielsen means to suggest that religious language is nonsense because it failed to provide certain “religious” signs a symbolism or whether it’s nonsense because it violates, so to speak, the logical (grammatical) syntax of language? Reading him in the former light is supported by his assertion that in religious language there is no “functional language-game. Language is idle here....” but in support of the latter reading, Nielsen does not merely say no sense has been given to “speak of the world as malicious” but that we *cannot* speak (“intelligibly impute”) that way.

The more faithful reading seems to suggest the latter: Nielsen does not object merely to certain forms of religious belief but to religious belief itself. We might have him frame his objection like this. Just as it’s impossible to use concepts as objects—because of the grammar involved in the use of “concept” necessarily prevents it from acting as an object—so too is it impossible to use our language to *think* about “God.”

The analogy, though, has its difficulties. Many of the examples we considered for nonsense focused on whether a sign or a string of signs had been given a mode of symbolization, but for Nielsen it isn’t that there are particular religious language claims which avail themselves of signs without meaning but that the language *itself* is meaningless. The scope here is difficult to quantify.

Now it is true that there is a reading of the *Tractatus* (one that Wittgenstein intends) that reveals the propositions therein (save the “frame”<sup>82</sup>) as nonsense and that Wittgenstein in general means to depreciate to zero the metaphysical use of language. The scope for both these points is quite general but putting the issue like that is a bit misleading. For Wittgenstein nonsense is singular. When he says we can’t think squarecircle, he doesn’t mean to suggest that there is a

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<sup>82</sup> The frame of the *Tractatus* usually refers to the preface, the last few propositions at the end of the book, and a few propositions in the middle where the topic is explicitly method.

concept—squarecircle—that’s beyond our powers of imagination but only that there are certain marks on paper that we haven’t been given an understanding of. We might come to use the term “squarecircle” in any number of ways—perhaps to predicate of a situation that’s impossible to understand or to indicate the use of “doublespeak,” etc. This holds equally true for Wittgenstein’s understanding of the nonsense that is metaphysical speculation. It isn’t that there is a class of propositions out there tagged “metaphysical” that we *can’t* talk about; but rather its characterization as nonsense is simply meant to describe the splicing of two coherent pictures into an unintelligible one. One intends for the signs one uses to signify in a way that confers necessity to some fact, but this attempt fails to understand what propositions (and language and logic, etc.) are like and what they can and cannot accomplish.

There is no preset formula for deciding whether a proposition does or does not meet the requirements of sense or nonsense. There is no particular subject of “logic” that might be used to alleviate once and for all the possibility of falling into nonsense.<sup>83</sup> The challenge in writing about the *Tractatus* is in the very difficult task of trying to address Wittgenstein’s concerns about logic—Wittgenstein’s attempt to lead his readers to a better understanding of the language they already possess—without inserting (what might be taken as) *the* conditions for logical analysis.<sup>84</sup> We might say—as Wittgenstein says—that a proposition *must be true or false*, but if that’s taken as anything more than a mere triviality (however illuminating) then it’s just *gassing*. The general form of a proposition is not a proof, not substantially true, not an object that stands for a fact, an actual constituent of “reality.”

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<sup>83</sup> Diamond, “Ethics, Imagination, and the Method of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*,” p. 153.

<sup>84</sup> Not only is it a challenge to write about the *Tractatus* and avoid those pitfalls, it was a challenge *for Wittgenstein* to write the *Tractatus* and hold true to that purpose, as he later came to think that parts of it deeply betrayed his antimetaphysical commitment.

There's a helpful historical comparison to be made here, which we'll use as a bridge to broach the topic of ethics in the *Tractatus*. In the *Tractatus* what little Wittgenstein does talk about ethics, he consigns it to the same fate as logic.

Logic is not a body of doctrine, but a mirror-image of the world.

Logic is transcendental. (6.13)

... It is impossible for there to be propositions of ethics.

Propositions can express nothing that is higher. (6.42)

It is clear that ethics cannot be put into words.

Ethics is transcendental.

(Ethics and aesthetics are one and the same.) (6.431)

In the literature hovering over the *Tractatus* the two interpretations of what these propositions mean mirror (almost exactly) the traditional readings about how to read the *Tractatus*' view of logic: the ineffable readers suggest that "ethics" can only be shown and not said because though what we say about ethics points to a substantial truth about the world our expressions of that truth necessarily come out as nonsensical; the positivist reading suggests that "ethics" can only be shown and not said because the logical syntax of language prevents us from forming meaningful "ethical" content. It's a professionally dubious thing to compare someone's thought to logical positivism, but there might be a minor point of commonality in Nielsen's charge of religious nonsense. Here's what Carnap has to say about ethics—a position he sees as, in part, an inheritance of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*:

Either empirical criteria are indicated for the use of "good" and "beautiful" and the rest of the predicates that are employed in the normative sciences, or they are not. In the first case, a statement containing such a predicate turns into a factual judgment, but not a value judgment; in the second case, it becomes a pseudo-statement. It is altogether impossible to make a statement that expresses a value judgment.<sup>85</sup>

Nielsen will not have the motivating thought behind this claim: that words function for a single purpose. And unlike Carnap—on this point—Nielsen does not attempt to give a positive account

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<sup>85</sup> Carnap. Quoted in Conant, "What 'Ethics' in the *Tractatus* is Not," p. 56.

of religious language. Carnap wants to suggest that value judgments—though nonsensical—are a kind of quasi-poetic expression of emotional attitudes, but if anyone claims to understand Carnap on this point it's only because those signs are taken to symbolize, which of course exempts them for being slandered as nonsense. It may be that ethical judgments turn out to be something quite different than we expected and because of that we come to differentiate them sharply from empirical claims (e.g., we label them diminutively, “pseudo-statements”) but that position is still a far cry from calling them nonsensical.

In neither of these ways, then, does this section intend to compare Nielsen to Carnap. Rather how Carnap treats an “ethical” subject is how Nielsen seems to treat the “subject” of religion. For Wittgenstein “ethics” is not a subject in this sense, not a discrete thing capable of being identified as an *element* of a proposition. Just as logic cannot be confined to an aspect of thought, but rather is shot through *all* of it, so too is ethics shot through our forms of life. One can no more remove oneself from the domain of logic than the domain of ethics.

The temptation in discussing the *Tractatus*' view of ethics is to search through the book and think that where there are ethical terms there is ethical content. Wittgenstein resists that procedure for the same reasons he resists thinking of logical constants as facts that stand for objects within propositions. Logical constants like the negation sign can be wholly replaced without any loss of sense—think of them like punctuation marks but not like “logical objects” or words that stand for objects.<sup>86</sup> The suggestion that what makes a thought ethical is that it contains ethical signs (e.g., like “good” and “evil”) presupposes that if such signs were removed then the thought itself would lose its ethical character. But a proposition no more loses its logical character when its logical signs are removed than does a sentence lose its sense by

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

replacing (or simply removing) the copula from the sentence “Green is green.” Since *signs* do not contain meaning there is no such thing as “logical signs” or “ethical signs.”<sup>87</sup> But are there ethical symbols or ethical propositions? That is, though a single word by itself couldn’t be considered ethical, might an entire string of words?

It’s true that for a symbol to be discernible it must be found in the context (or as some translations of the *Tractatus* put it the “nexus”) of a proposition—without which the function of “is” could not be understood—but the nexus which makes logic and ethics discernible is considerably larger (and much different) than the sense of a single proposition; in fact, for Wittgenstein logic just is a mirror image of the world. Though any function—like the copula—also depends on the larger nexus of language for sense, the propositions of logic (and ethics) cannot be said, only shown. Recognizing a particular form of ethical content is much different than recognizing a particular sign functioning as a copula.

What Wittgenstein specifically has in mind in regard to ethics is thrown into some relief by many of the biographical collections of him made by his friends. As an exemplar of ethical thought Wittgenstein often spoke of the works of poetry and literature that he admired (e.g., Grimm’s fairy tales and the poetry of Ludwig Uhland) and the utter lack of ethical vocabulary in those works. Of Uhland’s *Graf Eberhands Weissdorn* Wittgenstein says, “If only you do not try to utter the unutterable then *nothing* gets lost. But the unutterable will be—unutterably—contained in what is uttered.”<sup>88</sup> Wittgenstein also had a long standing admiration of Tolstoy, especially for the short story “How Much Land Does a Man Need?” and the relatively short *Hadji Murad*. Here Diamond comments on the nature of the unutterable in these forms of literature:

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<sup>87</sup> This point is significant for the next chapter.

<sup>88</sup> Conant, “What ‘Ethics’ in the *Tractatus* is *Not*,” p. 69.

In both the Tolstoy story and the Uhland poem, the ethical is, as Wittgenstein saw it, in a sense contained in the work, but not by being spoken in it, not being told. The ethical character of the story and that of the poem depend on the absence in them of the explicitly ethical. This, though, is complicated; one cannot say simply that Tolstoy keeps his ethical views unsaid. The Tsar, in *Hadji Murad*, is presented with his vices etched very sharply indeed; and Tolstoy has his usual comments on the fashionable exposure of breasts. What Tolstoy does not tell us is how to think about Hadji Murad himself, his life and his death, or how to make what we think of Hadji Murad alive in our own lives.<sup>89</sup>

Wittgenstein saw Tolstoy's writing as both a paradigm of letting an ethical spirit show itself without trampling all over it but also, he saw in Tolstoy, the opposite of that paradigm. That is Wittgenstein thought Tolstoy often attempted to turn directly to the audience to *tell* them the "moral" lesson they should learn (e.g., as Tolstoy does in *Ressurrection*).<sup>90</sup>

What's the ethical spirit shown in the *Tractatus*—the "ethical content" that cannot be said? What there is to say now only reiterates the conclusion reached at the end of the last section, the conclusion about Wittgenstein's view of logic. We have a picture of what we think ethics must come to: something universal, a necessitated fact that holds regardless of the circumstance. Ethics must be otherworldly, transcendent, beyond. This picture is itself presented in the *Tractatus*. Wittgenstein resists it by resisting the whole "metaphysical" enterprise that it presupposes. The ethical spirit of the *Tractatus* shows itself in its willingness to be content with what we *can* say and in its refusal to attempt to traffic in what we cannot. We must speak from our own seats; seeing that a reified picture of the world is nothing but an illusion. And in that recognition we stay true to ourselves. To our place in the natural history of humankind. This position—speaking from within the limit of the expression of thoughts—is not something we can cheaply gain once-and-for-all by proclaiming it in the preface. Just as with logic, trying to wrestle "ethical" content out into explicit propositional form like a fact will only result in a

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<sup>89</sup> Diamond, "Having a Rough Story What Moral Philosophy Is," p. 130

<sup>90</sup> Conant, "What 'Ethics' in the *Tractatus* is *Not*."



superfluous enterprise. Rather instead, it's a conviction that must radiate from the text itself, from the life we live. If it's true *it must be shown*. The Tractarian conception of ethics is not to be found in a word or in a proposition but in the book itself.

**VII. This section considers the existential threat that Wittgenstein's conception of ethics represents to this project as a whole. The difficulty in speaking about the "higher" for Wittgenstein, as some argue, cannot be gotten around merely by disavowing ourselves from metaphysical speculation. The implications of that claim are closely examined here.**

Given such an indirect approach to logic and ethics, interpretative difficulties abound. If the last section is all that was need be said about Wittgenstein's conception of ethics in the *Tractatus* we could return to our discussion with Nielsen. But alas, an important point of resistance to the conclusion of the last section must be evaluated. *Must be* because pushing this discussion one level deeper will hopefully give us a greater insight into Wittgenstein's understanding of ethics, logic, and "the higher" in general—however obscure.

There are any number of reasons to resist the conclusion of this last section. Chief among them is that Wittgenstein himself would likely resist it. Isn't this description just a less direct way of attempting to utter the unutterable? We've tried at various points to carve out a space for talk about logic that while resisting nonsense admittedly remains superfluous. That is, we've tried to take propositions like "A logical picture is a fact"<sup>91</sup> or even "The world is all that is the case"<sup>92</sup> and express the various ways that we, as readers, might understand them. Wittgenstein means for us to initially take them as attempts to get outside language (this is the sense in which he sees them as nonsensical); but this chapter has attempted to articulate a way of understanding

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<sup>91</sup> *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, §3

<sup>92</sup> *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, §1.

them—once the latter has been cast down—as elucidating the grammar (to put it in terms Wittgenstein might use in his later work) of logic. This latter sense—even though it attempts to draw a limit to language from the inside—is acknowledged to be superfluous. Holding to either of the propositions quoted from the *Tractatus* (as in the paragraph directly above) isn't an attempt to ground our knowledge of the world or of logic but merely a nonessential description about how logic is shown in our lives. A description, however redundant and unnecessary, that might still illuminate.

Diamond, for one, resists this move. She gives a similar description as the end of the last section (§VI) did about the ethical in the *Tractatus* but comes to a much different conclusion.

Here she starts with an “ethical description” she means to throw away:

In what sense is the aim of the *Tractatus* ethical? The understanding that it is meant to lead to is supposed to be a capacity to “see the world in the right way”. That is, it is a matter of not making false demands on the world, nor having false expectations or hopes; our relation to the world should not be determined by the false imagination of philosophy. False imagination is not directly tied to what we say or do, but may be recognized in what we say or do, how we live, by an understanding that draws on another use of imagination. I hope it is clear not only that I am not using the word “false” as it is used when a meaningful sentence is said to be true or false; I hope it is clear also that the words I used just now purporting to give the aim of the book are nonsense.<sup>93</sup>

Not only does the *Tractatus* stand against those attempts to articulate an “attitude to the world as a whole”<sup>94</sup> or to expressions like “The goodness of life does not depend on things going this way or that,”<sup>95</sup> or any other “ethical” utterance “characterized by the linguistic intention to ‘reach beyond the world,’”<sup>96</sup> thereby conjuring the transcendent into our immanent domain, *but also* to those expressions, as this chapter attempted to give,<sup>97</sup> which take the ethical spirit of the

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<sup>93</sup> Diamond, “Ethics, Imagination, and the Method of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*,” p. 168-9.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 155.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 161.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 162

<sup>97</sup> For instance, consider these two paragraphs from this chapter:

*Tractatus* to orient “our relation to the world as a whole”<sup>98</sup> even if that orientation is one that tries to mark the limit from the inside.<sup>99</sup>

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That method is embodied in the *Tractatus* itself. Insofar as the book draws us in to take *any* aspect of it to effectively get outside language and provide an independent, absolute criterion for logical analysis—or for anything else—either by explicitly endorsing such a position (that is, endorse by *saying*) or in some mysterious implicit sense (that is, endorse by *showing*), we’ve fallen into nonsense. Just the kind of nonsense Wittgenstein means to draw us into and then throw us out of (at least) by the end of the book. The temptation of which philosophy is full is present on every page of the *Tractatus*. Since Wittgenstein sees the allure of metaphysics to be primarily psychological (that is, nonsense is not contained in the symbol but rather something we project onto it), he meets the illusion on its own terms. Just as we tried to enter into Kerry’s world of circlesquares (concept objects), Wittgenstein enters into the world of logical speculation and shows that what we want and expect such speculation to produce turns out empty.<sup>97</sup> (Penultimate paragraph in §V.)

And:

What’s the ethical spirit shown in the *Tractatus*—the “ethical content” that cannot be said? What there is to say now only reiterates the conclusion reached at the end of the last section, the conclusion about Wittgenstein’s view of logic. We have a picture of what we think ethics must come to: something universal, a necessitated fact that holds regardless of the circumstance. Ethics must be otherworldly, transcendent, beyond. This picture is itself presented in the *Tractatus*. Wittgenstein resists it by resisting the whole “metaphysical” enterprise that it presupposes. The ethical spirit of the *Tractatus* shows itself in its willingness to be content with what we *can* say and in its refusal to attempt to traffic in what we cannot. We must speak from our own seats. And in that recognition we stay true to ourselves. This position—speaking from within the limit of the expression of thoughts—is not something we can cheaply gain once-and-for-all by proclaiming it in the preface. Just as with logic, trying to wrestle “ethical” content out into explicit propositional form like a fact will only result in a superfluous enterprise. Rather instead, it’s a conviction that must radiate from the text itself, from the life we live. If it’s true *it must be shown*. The *Tractatus* conception of ethics is not to be found in a word or in a proposition but in the book itself. (Final paragraph from §VI.)

<sup>98</sup> Diamond, p. 169.

<sup>99</sup> Diamond articulates another nonmetaphysical description that she also hesitates to agree with: There is a tendency that readers of Wittgenstein may have to think in something like this way. In the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein got into a position in which ethical propositions were taken to be nonsense, on account of their failure to conform to the conditions that senseful discourse meets. In his later philosophical work, one of the main things that he subjects to criticism is the very idea that there are such general conditions. There is no general form of a proposition, no general form of making sense; and when we recognize that there is no such logical generality to be found in senseful discourse as such, we can

Diamond explains this point by drawing a contrast between Wittgenstein's rejection of thinking about logic as a matter of empirical psychology and Wittgenstein's rejection of thinking about ethics as empirical fact. To think about logic as a kind of empirical psychology would be to investigate

*the person* who judges that such-and-such or who says that so-and-so is that he or she puts together signs, has associations of various sorts, has feelings tied to different words or even some feeling of asserting something; possibly also that he or she intends to have some effect on other people; possibly also that he or she comes to have inclinations of this sort after certain kinds of experience in accordance with such-and-such natural laws; and possibly also that he or she will now be inclined, given certain further stimuli, to make mental transitions to other collections of signs, or to actions, in accordance with other natural laws including what you might call the natural laws of inferential behavior.<sup>100</sup>

Whether or not Wittgenstein might consent to there being “natural laws of inferential behavior,” as Diamond notes, is not the point; in the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein's concern is with the *logical* role (as opposed to the psychological role) of the different elements of a proposition. Here (below), in this lengthy quotation, Diamond connects Frege's fundamental principles (as we detailed in §III)—focusing specifically on the first: “always ... separate sharply the psychological from the logical, the subjective from the objective”<sup>101</sup>—to the particular ways in which nonsense (illusion about meaning) can enter our lives.

Two sentences may make use of the same word, but they may give that word quite different logical roles, as for example when I describe an object as green, and speak about a Mr. Green. If, when I refer to Mr. Green, what is going on in my mind, the images I

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see ethical thought and talk without preconception. We shall then be able to see that ethical thought and talk itself has great variety and complex resemblances and differences from thought and talk that enters our lives in other ways. And we shall then not be forced to push ethical talk into some mystical limbo out beyond senseful talk.

The reading I have just given of some main elements of the *Tractatus* may, however, suggest that there is something wrong with that conception. (Diamond, p. 169)

<sup>100</sup> Diamond, “Ethics, Imagination, and the Method of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*,” p. 156. My emphasis.

<sup>101</sup> Frege, *The Foundations of Arithmetic*, X.

have, the associations, happen to be exactly like what is going on in my mind when I speak about the green tomatoes I am cooking, those images and associations have nothing to do with the role of the word “Green” in the sentence about the man Green. In the case of that example, the sentence with the irrelevant associations may be meaningful. But now consider a sentence “The letter e is green”. And suppose that I have a lot of images of green things when I utter that sentence. That collection of images is no more relevant to the meaning of the sentence “The letter e is green” than it is to “Mr. Green teaches geometry”. The mental accompaniments of a sentence are irrelevant to its logical characteristics. And yet it is exactly those familiar mental accompaniments of the sentence that may give us the illusion that we mean something by a sentence which contains some familiar word, even though the word is not being used in its familiar logical role, and has not been given a new assignment of meaning. That, then, is one of the ideas in the *Tractatus* about the role of imagination in the producing of metaphysical nonsense. We are attracted by certain sentences, certain forms of words, and imagine that we mean something by them. We are satisfied that we mean something by them because they have the mental accompaniments of meaningful sentences.<sup>102</sup>

This extract helpfully brings together many of the themes that involve psychological versus logical conceptions of the proposition. (We’ve seen, for instance, Conant also claim that it’s our own parochial psychological associations that lead us into nonsense.) Diamond thinks the point holds equally true for Wittgenstein’s conception of the ethical.

From the point of view of empirical psychology, the ethical disappears. There is simply a person who comes out with words, has feelings, tries to get others to behave in certain ways and behaves in certain ways himself. *Nothing ethical there.*<sup>103</sup>

This is not to suggest that one who wants to address the “ethical” from a psychological perspective would agree that the ethical has disappeared, but that whatever one may want to call that kind of investigation it is not the kind of investigation that interests Wittgenstein *as ethical*. Just as investigating the psychological associations one might have with the letter “e” is not an investigation that interests Wittgenstein *as logical*.

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<sup>102</sup> Diamond, “Ethics, Imagination, and the Method of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*,” p. 159.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 161.

To better understand the kind of investigation Diamond sees Wittgenstein getting at, she suggests comparing his thought on this issue with Kant's—specifically on how they might agree and disagree about what the “transcendental” commits us to.

In reading Wittgenstein or Kant, we can take the word “transcendental” as a kind of warning. For Kant, the connection between ethics and the transcendental subject is such that ethics is destroyed, there is no ethics, if you try to move ethical thought into the realm of what we can know, the empirical world. For Wittgenstein, the connection between ethics and the transcendental is not, as it was for Kant, a matter of tying ethics to something other than what we can know, other than the empirical world. But, for him as for Kant, ethics is destroyed, there is no ethics, if we try as it were to push ethics into the empirical world. Not as with Kant, it is equally destroyed if we try to push it into synthetic a priori judgments. The resemblance I want especially to emphasize is in Kant's and Wittgenstein's rejection of an empirical psychology of the will with which we are concerned in our thought about good and evil. That which I take myself to see in myself or another if I think of that person as having an evil will—that thought of mine about a person—has no room in the sphere of thoughts about the world of empirical facts. Put there it is not about what I wanted it to be about.<sup>104</sup>

If we take Kant to represent the view of nonsense roughly characterized by the ineffable reading of the *Tractatus*—that there is something we can't talk about (e.g., the noumenal) because *it* is nonsensical—we can see why Diamond suggests that for Kant the ethical cannot be brought into the world; whereas for Wittgenstein, ethics does have a sense but the sense it has is not one that can be taken like an empirical fact. We bring ethics into the world—as an empirical fact—when we try to imagine the characters in *Grimm's Fairy Tales*, for instance in “Rumpelstiltskin,” as people not too dissimilar from us: “the king is greedy and unjust, the father a braggart and liar, the girl a promise-breaker and poor Rumpelstiltskin himself the victim of loneliness—i.e., all the characters are morally mediocre, with the king perhaps the worst—are common.”<sup>105</sup>

Instead of thinking about ethics as an empirical collection of facts—as a way to promote psychological theorizing—Diamond directs us to an approach that resists this reductive account.

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<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 168.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 170-1.

Think of Rumpelstiltskin, and the far from admirable character of the miller who brags about his daughter and endangers her life, and the king who sets the girl an impossible task, threatens to kill her if she does not carry it out, and is so avaricious that he is not satisfied by two rooms full of gold. The miller and the king are not nice decent folk. But their badness is not connected by the tale with our capacity to respond to evil as unapproachable and terrible, as Rumpelstiltskin's evil is. ... Some things in human life arouse in us a sense of the possible terribleness of what may be in our hearts: something sinister and dark, [in Frazer's words], something black and unapproachable, in Grimm's.<sup>106</sup>

Of course there's sense in bringing a character like Rumpelstiltskin into our world and making his pathology common; what Diamond means to highlight is that when we do that we're missing the aspect of the fairytale that Grimm aimed for and the aspect that so impressed Wittgenstein. Part of what, then, defines fairytales like these is just their lack of empirical psychology; this is what Wittgenstein has in mind when he says, in *Philosophical Investigations*, that "essence is expressed in grammar" (§371), or as Diamond puts it, "what you are talking about is given in how you talk about it."<sup>107</sup> What is it like to talk about this kind of ethical expression? Diamond:

The removal of thought and talk about the evil will from empirical talk is a technique of our language, just as stories about Rumpelstiltskin ... are techniques of our language. These two techniques have in common the maintaining of a contrast between thought and talk about some evils and thought and talk about the "unapproachably evil." .... If the dark and sinister in the human heart is the subject, we may mark our talk about it through the logical feature of cutting such talk off from ordinary talk about what goes on, not giving it entry there. That logical feature may be seen, I have argued, in the fairy tales, and, in different ways, in Kant's and Wittgenstein's refusal of an empirical psychology of the evil will.<sup>108</sup>

For Diamond, "The *Tractatus* use of the 'outside the world' marks—is simply one way of marking—that mode of thought about human life that Wittgenstein meant by ethics; it is as good as *Rumpelstiltskin* or *The Fisherman and His Wife* at marking it."<sup>109</sup> The *Tractatus* is. Not Diamond's "Ethics, Imagination, and the *Tractatus*," or Conant's "What the Higher is Not in the

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid., pp. 169-70.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., p. 170.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., p. 170.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., p. 171.

*Tractatus*”—but the *Tractatus*. There’s a sense reading these articles that they too mean to be tossed away after their insights have run their course. The temptation that Diamond asks us to resist is this: take any broadly construed “ethical” expression (for instance: “the goodness of life does not depend on the world as a whole,” or my own attempts to adjust “our relation to the world as a whole”), these attempts may have sense if they’re put into a proper context—a context that won’t find sense in a strictly empirical setting. But they have sense alright, and they roughly mean to impute to us an important aspect of understanding the world which is such and such. But, so Diamond suggests, the transcendent nature of the ethical for Wittgenstein will not allow for accommodation in these terms.

A couple of things to comment on. First, for Wittgenstein the transcendent is an intelligible concept. That is, *for Wittgenstein* it is intelligible. We often do it—the transcendent—a disservice, though, when we try to wrangle it into “necessary and sufficient conditions” for analysis; or even when we try to merely render it into explicit analysis full stop. We do it a disservice when we try to flatten it out as Nielsen does. Wittgenstein, we’re led to believe, thinks the transcendent can come through with some clarity in works of literature. Thus there is a kind of saying that gives life to the ethical and to the transcendent (in works of literature, often characterized by their indirectness vis-à-vis ethical concepts), but there is also a kind of saying that harmfully tramples over those concepts (in works of philosophy, often characterized by empirical psychologizing).

Second, there’s a need to acknowledge that Diamond’s line of argument about the status of the *Tractatus* as nonsense represents a serious qualification to the more-or-less superfluous reading that this chapter has pursued. For Diamond the propositions of the *Tractatus* are nonsense, so there’s no way to come to understand them as having sense. All that the *Tractatus*



can accomplish and all that Diamond and Conant's essays on logic and ethics in the *Tractatus* can accomplish is to push us up the ladder, to remove the psychological clusters that keep us from seeing the nature of these concepts as they are—as they are already shown in our lives. Once we've come to see the kind of grammar they are, nothing more is to be said. Nothing more can be said. Further attempts merely take away from the work's accomplishment. The *Tractatus* does not give us propositions of logic that are meant to be seen as grammatical remarks on aspects of logical character. Rather, the *Tractatus* is meant to leave us in *silence*.

Allow me to switch into the first personal. I'm not sure what to think about this outcome. I am sure, though, that I'm not interested in arguing point-by-point how nonsense might, for Diamond, become illuminating, or how one might appreciate the ethical sense of the *Tractatus* without falling into nonsense. That level of textual analysis I leave to the professionals. Presenting a clear, unequivocal reading of the *Tractatus*—apart from what this chapter has shown the *Tractatus* does not claim—is something I leave to the side.

From the beginning this project has attempted to acknowledge the struggle in writing about philosophy. That the move to philosophize can represent something that needs to be resisted as much as indulged. Here we find a very serious challenge to this project as a whole. Introducing the selfundermining element of the *Tractatus* threatens to derail this project entirely. Might it be better to not write about the transcendent or transcendent questions on value like religious belief? If this paper takes the *Tractatus* seriously oughtn't it remain silent on the nature of the worship of God? Might it not be better to let it be as it is? To let it *show* itself in its own natural habitat. It's impossible not to be drawn to the merit in answering those questions in the affirmative. That is, this project remains open to the suggestion that once it is understood—even if only by its author—it can be set aside.

**§VIII. This section outlines what themes from the first and second chapter will continue into the final chapter.**

Before we set this project aside, some reconciling work needs to be attempted. In the first chapter quite a few religious claims were made (e.g., that God is worshiped because God is qualitatively different from “objects,” that worship necessarily involves a kind of struggle with God, and also the centrality of the concept of love in that worship). What becomes of those claims? Chapter One discussed at some length the sense in which these aspects of religious practice do not serve as “candidate items” for the *truth* of religious belief—as though they might act as a proof or form of justification. Ultimately it was argued that “*nothing* can guarantee that one’s faith in God is as God demands it.” This point too we might describe as selfundermining. There is something in it that once expressed subverts itself. A fundamental aspect of religious belief resists being brought into the empirical world. And it’s just on this point that the first and second chapter meet.

What it means for the third chapter to articulate what kind of thing religious belief might be is, in part, to respond to the concerns raised by Nielsen. There’s a part of Nielsen’s criticism that this chapter has worked to challenge, and also a part—though not expressed as yet—that this project wants to accept. First the former point.

Nielsen seems to suggest that there is a subject out there, called religious language, and that that subject is nonsense—call it *mystical* nonsense. It isn’t that religious language is prime for becoming idle but that as a matter of fact any attempt to speak mystically will necessarily fail. Several sections of this chapter have tried to resist that assertion. As a byproduct of that discussion we’ve also seen what place Wittgenstein thinks the transcendent might take in language—or rather, in our world. Contra Nielsen’s suggestion that that place *must* be nonsensical—since for Wittgenstein there is no “thing” to be thought of as representing

nonsense—there is no sense in Wittgenstein that transcendence-talk necessitates nonsense (as perhaps both the logical positivists and the ineffable readers of the *Tractatus* might want). The transcendent is shown in our lives; in the *Tractatus* logic and ethics and art are all somehow connected to it.

The next chapter will attempt to elucidate the unsayable *what* of the transcendent by exploring religious belief's connection to both art and ethics. Chapter Three accomplishes this by linking the fundamental elements of religious belief and Johannes *de silentio*'s reflections on what separates the material world from the spiritual one with the ethos of the Tractarian vow of silence. On this point a particularly helpful picture Chapter Three will appeal to is the nature of love (specifically as it relates to religion, ethics, and art). Also, as an essential part of exploring *the what* of the transcendent, the next chapter draws out why approaching it this way will lead to a form of dissatisfaction. Not merely because we cannot use language to get outside language (thereby justifying it by some external standard) but because any account (like this one) can only succeed, at least in part, by realizing its own selfundermining character.

But what about the criticisms of Nielsen's we want to keep? This chapter has attempted to resist the idea that religious belief *must* result in nonsense, but this is hardly to suggest that it—religious belief—holds a position invulnerable to criticism. And it's this last point that presumably is most concerning to Nielsen: the idea that religion—as Wittgensteinians sometimes portray it—is insulated from serious critical reflection (especially, as Nielsen puts it, from criticism *outside* its own language-game). If religious belief amounts to nothing more than its practices then won't any religious practice make sense? Just because people involve themselves in a certain practice—like religious belief or astrology—cannot mean that that form of life has a *prima facie* reasonableness to it.

We began this chapter wanting to know not merely what religious practices amount to but whether—and on the basis of what—they might be considered true. The reflections of the last few sections have hopefully cast some aspersion on the suggestion that those two questions might be meaningfully distinguished (as though language and thought could be separated). Given the kind of thing Wittgenstein thinks that ethics is, what kind of criticism is made for it? Given the kind of thing Chapter One suggests religion is, what kind of criticism is made for it?

The next chapter considers several signs (e.g., facts, spiritual, religious belief, love, etc.) that this project has appealed to throughout and tries to explain clearly how they are meant to symbolize. How *this* project takes them to symbolize. Moreover, the following chapter tries to articulate—as clearly as this project can—a coherent account of what the nature of religious belief is like. This means, in part, to present a radically different perspective than the one considered in Chapter One (by AφR); yet one that attempts to respect the very difficult character of addressing this kind of talk.

### Chapter Three: Reconcile?

Socrates gets his antagonists to withdraw their definitions not because they do not know what their words mean, but because they do know what they (their words) mean, and therefore know that Socrates has led them into paradox. ... What they had not realized was what they were saying, or, what they were *really* saying, and so had not known *what they meant*. To this extent, they had not known themselves, and not known the world. I mean, of course, the ordinary world. That may not be all there is, but it is important enough: morality is in that world, and so are force and love; so is art and a part of knowledge (the part which is about that world); and so is religion (wherever God is).

Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?*

Callistos: But do the gods exist?

Socrates: Here we reach the end of what words can do. The gods concern the inmost heart of each man—and about this he can only speak to himself—and to them.

Acastos: Can't we always invent language, like poets do?

Socrates: There is a very great distance between the human and the divine. We must hope the gods will come to us. Perhaps there is something in us which belongs to them and which they will claim—in their own way. A man should follow virtue and look toward the good—and be content to *know* what he cannot *say*.

Murdoch, "Art and Eros"

Now having been questioned by the Pharisees as to when the kingdom of God was coming, He answered them and said, "The kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed; nor will they say, 'Look, here *it is!*' or, 'There *it is!*' For behold, the kingdom of God is in your midst."

The Gospel According to St. Luke

**I. This section extends Chapter One’s reflections on the difficulties of thinking of religious belief as a matter of fact by presenting an alternative account. This account is not explicitly religious but shares important traits with what we might call *relational* aspects of religious experience. We explore this theme by considering several detailed examples.**

There are no religious facts. There is no specific subject called “religion;” there’s no discrete thing capable of being identified as *the* religious *element* of a proposition. Just as ethics cannot be confined to an aspect of thought, but rather is shot through *all* of it, so too is religious belief shot through all forms of life. One can no more remove oneself from the domain of logic than the domain of religion. The suggestion that what makes a thought religious is that it contains religious signs (e.g., like “righteous” or “sinful”) presupposes that if such signs were removed then the thought itself would lose its religious character. What is religious is transcendental.<sup>1</sup>

There are some obvious difficulties with this that should be addressed headon. To start: why think religion is categorical like logic? Unlike the universal domain of logic or ethics, religion seems more restricted. What it means to be irreligious is something quite different than what it means to be illogical. Certainly there are people outside the domain of religion in a way they could not be in relation to logic/ethics. This is a point we will consider throughout this section.

Also, hasn’t this project (in Chapter One) taken religion to be a specific subject for which there are elements? Chapter One claimed that part of the atmosphere needed to understand religious forms of life could be found in three different aspects of religious

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<sup>1</sup> This paragraph closely mirrors Conant’s remarks on the *Tractatus*’ view of ethics. See his “What ‘Ethics’ in the *Tractatus* is *Not*,” p. 69.

belief: the adoration of God, the struggle of faith, and the centrality of love. If this is affirmed, is it not in conflict with the claim that there are no religious facts? It's with this tension that we begin.

An important claim of the first chapter was the insistence that the language often employed by AφR is not inherently objectionable. That is, this project does not mean to suggest that it's nonsensical to say that God is an "invisible person." To do so presupposes that there is something that cannot be asserted because *it* violates the logical syntax of religious language/belief. What the chapter did object to is the concept of God they articulate. The kind of use the sign "God" has for them. The *words* were not objectionable, only the picture they attempted to express. But the point can be pressed. Doesn't this paper assume that "the adoration of God" is a necessary fact of religious belief? This chapter will argue that that question misses the sense of how language and thought—specifically in regard to religion—function. Wittgenstein expresses dissatisfaction with philosophy's preoccupation with necessity by stressing that meaning is not found in a sign but in the context of a proposition. A sign could have *any* meaning. If a rich understanding is sought of what "the adoration of God" means we must attend to how that picture is understood and used.

In the first chapter what kind of work, for instance, "adoration of God" does is something we contrasted with "fact" language—that it was importantly *not* like fact language. In this chapter we extend that thought by enlisting some of the ideas explored in the second chapter. This third chapter will compare the system of thought that undermines itself in the *Tractatus* and the system of belief that undermines itself in religious language. The *Tractatus* means to undermine itself by both presenting an idea

and showing how that idea is an illusion. The illusion is *shown* in the presentation itself. The *Tractatus* shows what it cannot say.

We briefly looked at themes in both *Fear and Trembling* and in the Bible to explore what, in Chapter One was called the world of spirit. The string that draws both those themes together is this. A temptation we encounter at every turn in our use of language is to take a particular expression as inherently meaningful; when we try to communicate, as this chapter will, what we might call *eternal truth* we have to prepare ourselves to anticipate that the form we communicate that truth in is only a vehicle and not the truth itself. We encounter it at every turn because any attempt to address *truth eternal* will seem like an attempt to set a limit to thought, to get outside language. This is why philosophy requires not the learning of theses, but the pursuit of seeing and relating to the world in a particular way. To draw on language used in the first chapter we might put the matter like this: there are aspects of our lives that are not like facts, but any attempt to communicate those nonfact-aspects will look like we're attempting to put lipstick on a pig—will look like we're using fact-language while simultaneously denying it. This is why, to venture a bit of unwarranted speculation, so much of the literature exploring themes like this (on judgments of value) is opaque and perhaps intentionally obscure. And so, while pursuing this line of thought opens this project itself to severe criticism and serious vulnerability, it is to this topic our discussion leads.

Another way to characterize this theme (addressing truth eternal) is to think of belief in God like a metaphysical fact. This is just what Kierkegaard's Johannes *de silentio* means to reject in the quote we considered in the first chapter. Here it is again, though altered somewhat:



An old saying, derived from the world of experience, has it that “he who will not work shall not eat.” But, strange to say, this does not hold true in the world where it is thought applicable; for in the world of matter the law of imperfection prevails, and we see, again and again, that he also who will not work has bread to eat—indeed, that he who sleeps has a greater abundance of it than he who works. . . . It is different in the world of spirit. There, an eternal and divine order obtains, there the rain does not fall on the just and the unjust alike, nor does the sun shine on the good and the evil alike; but there the saying does hold true that he who will not work shall not eat, and only he who was troubled shall find rest, and only he who descends into the nether world shall rescue his beloved. . . .

In the first chapter we saw that for Johannes *de silentio* this means both that material wealth cannot be a form of “spiritual” currency (that is, Christ tells his disciples not to invite themselves to the head of the table but to make themselves “the lowest”), and that not only money and social status characterize the material world but so do facts.<sup>2</sup> Chapter One describes a “fact” as something that can be inherited. I can tell you how to fix a car or the chemical makeup of salt or the distance of the moon to the earth. *You* need not do the work to know these things. Thus you need not work to eat them. Chapter One spent some time on why, for Johannes *de silentio*, faith cannot be like a fact, but not much time on the converse relation: what it means to live in the “world of spirit.” As a means for

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<sup>2</sup> Putting it this way creates an ambiguity that must be clarified. The former sense of what material wealth means is a religious remark but the later is not. Anyone who attempts to seek righteousness by *appearing* righteous commits the religious sin of hypocrisy. In the later sense, however, those who fail to see that the material classification includes “facts,” either object to the grammatical sense being assigned to this concept or fail to appreciate the significance that this paper will attempt to give to it, but in either case we’ve not entered into the world of religious value. This point will be addressed in more detail below.

contrast—as a means to move a mostly negative presentation to a positive one—it will be helpful to explore this.

Here’s a chart that sets out several rough characterizations:

<u>World of Facts</u>	<u>World of Spirit</u>
Marks of distinction: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>* Can be inherited</li><li>* Rigid (scientific)</li><li>* Wealth (as money, resources, standing)</li></ul>	Marks of distinction: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>* Requires work</li><li>* Relational</li><li>* Wealth (as mutual acknowledgment, spiritual presence)</li></ul>
Normative criteria: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>* Knowledge</li><li>* Definitive</li></ul>	Normative criteria: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>* Vulnerability</li><li>* Understanding/wisdom</li><li>* Faith, hope, love</li></ul>

A couple things to say upfront. First, of course the fact/spirit distinction is, in an important way, artificial. This isn’t an attempt to preload any value into the distinction by the use of these signs. “World of Spirit” could rather be called “the relational,” “the religious,” or “world of value” and similar redescriptions could be given for the “World of Facts” (e.g., “the material”). That is, coming to recognize what the world of spirit is like is not intended in any way to be a *proof* for God’s existence. “World of Spirit” is not an inherently *religious* concept. In a moment this section will try, for instance, to distinguish between a factual marriage and a spiritual one. It may seem that this bifurcation suggests that anyone not involved in a religious tradition couldn’t have a meaningful (fulfilling) marriage since they might disavow any meaningful use of that concept. But this paper does not assume that. There are a cluster of other words, perhaps, that might be less distracting; for instance, very strictly this paper assumes that “relational” can just be substituted for “spiritual.” The second theme of this chapter (§V)

further explores the problematic thinking that these categories might pejoratively exclude certain groups of people.

Though these distinctions could lead us in any number of directions, for our purposes, we want to pull the immanent and the transcendent together, so the language we'll use will reflect that interest. We're attempting to see show how the spiritual is something before us and yet also beyond; to show that what many consider to be the otherness of religious discourse is something that belongs too in our ordinary lives; to show that though the religious belongs in our ordinary lives this does not mean it is a fact. And that all of this can be seen in the worship of God. In the love of God. Following the first chapter, the idea of this dissertation is that what we mean by these words—what *anyone* could mean by them—will come through most clearly in how they are used. Below we explore several explicit examples.

Second, though these two “worlds” are set in contrast they are not set *against* each other.<sup>3</sup> Engineers work to achieve a certainty that their building project will bear the kind of stress it will likely absorb in both normal and exceptional circumstances. This is a *good* achievement. Coming to a *final* answer for the cure to a given disease is an indisputably great result. The rigidity that the material world seeks is perfectly appropriate; nevertheless, it does stand in counterdistinction to the world of spirit. Think of the judgment that two things are as different as apples and oranges. The comparison means to suggest a kind of incommensurate relation to one another, but the temptation Wittgenstein tries to address in this picture is the attempt to make that distinction (“incommensurate”) sublime. Though we might be discussing apples and oranges (and

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<sup>3</sup> Think of Frege's distinction between concept and object. The goal of scientific investigations is to move towards rigidity. Which is not to suggest that the process often involves significant ambiguity (perhaps even approaching their description *relationally*).

the world that separates them) we are still talking about fruit! Points of contact can be made. Below we explore three brief examples, each of which we'll return to throughout this chapter. They mean to highlight the difference between the two worlds, though as we'll see, there are important links that hold them together. The first example concerns marriage and slavery.

In the world of fact whether one is married or not is often a rigid determination (by appeal to custom, law); one can obtain a marriage license by exchange of money, or by other forms of social exchange, etc. A marriage certificate is something that can be inherited in this sense. It is a fact. And because it's a fact the kind of "relational" arrangement that marriage represents can be *forced*. But what distinguishes the spiritual world from the material world is that in the world of spirit a marriage of slavery is not possible. Marriage as an inheritance equally so.

In the world of spirit a marriage is one that defines itself by *mutual acknowledgement*. One cannot unilaterally decide for another person that that person will become an intimate friend. When we control physical objects our decisions are (in *this* sense) unilateral. We manipulate wood in one way and another to form it into shape. But relational—spiritual—knowing must be *mutual*. Must exist in a world where openness, understanding, and vulnerability are all present. These are all virtues of *spiritual presence*. Each person must be willing to see the other not in an idealized state but as they truly are. The ability to disclose oneself in this way is an ever deepening process that requires one to be "awake and sober" as St. Paul will put it below.

The kind of force (and rigidity) that we use in the world of facts is just what's rendered useless in the world of spirit. We *can* treat other people as objects. But that's

just another term for slavery. Sex can be bought (and forced) but not intimacy. Only in the world of facts can one be married in name only. Attempting to force (or define) a relationship in this—material—way is just the refusal to enter into the world of spirit.

There are objections ready-to-hand. What could be meant by “disclosing oneself” and understanding another as “they truly are”? Have we not fallen back into the material idea that the self is something much like a fact to be discovered? This language—”disclosing oneself”—can be illuminating and it can also deceive. The distinction is not meant to suggest that a person is a static thing—a fact—or that marriage is simply “discovering” the “person/thing” that is one’s spouse since not only can we be a mystery to other people, we can be a mystery also to ourselves. It’s just because other people are not like facts that spiritual presence is required to know them.

Think of this in terms of gender and sexuality. In the material world our biological makeup is something that we can come to a determinate knowledge of. Like all facts what it is is set. We inherit the physical constituents that make us who we are, and like all facts it is something that we can, by force, change and manipulate. But in the world of spirit our sense of who we are can change even if the biology doesn’t. We have experiences (though they are not “everyday” ones) where—in a moment—who we are is “revealed” to us.

For instance, consider an adolescent coming to understand her sexual orientation. It’s not unusual to hear of this process creating conflict *both* within the person coming to understand herself *and* in her family/community. Part of the conflict may be due to confusing the distinction this chapter endeavors to make. For instance, sometimes parents want to think of their child’s sexuality as a fact. As something “disclosed” to them and

thus something once and for all rigid and concretely determined. The strife is sometimes caused by the parents' inability (or unwillingness) to enter into a vulnerable (spiritual) relationship; a strife sometimes caused by the parents inability to see that the image they have of their child is something that will change over time. If they are to enter into a relationship like that they must come to see that their understanding to each other is not static and definitive but expanding and changing. It is not something that they can force or wholly determine but something they must *respond* to.

Again this is not merely an interpersonal point. Relational conflict does not come only from the obstacles and barriers that arise in understanding *other* people. Think, for instance, of those who consider themselves transgender. What one identifies as one's gender can change even if, in that moment, the biology itself has not. Similarly, though of course the differences are important, one's understanding of one's life purpose—or what one finds meaningful (an essential picture one has of oneself)—can in a moment change.

Take for instance the character Walter White from the TV series *Breaking Bad*. In the first episode of the series Walter is diagnosed with terminal cancer, with perhaps only a few months to live. Walt's understanding of himself changes in that moment. From Walt's perspective, he begins to transform himself from a man defined by the will of others into a man selfdefined. The new man he sees himself becoming is one who by sheer force of will determines the legacy he is to leave his family. Yes, he wants to leave them money and a reasonable security from destitution, and although he says he is only concerned with leaving them a material inheritance he is in truth also concerned to leave a spiritual one. He is concerned (perhaps supremely so) by how his children and his wife

will come to remember him. But because he so misunderstands the spiritual (or because he so ignores it) the inheritance he ends up leaving destroys everything he values.

Walt wants his children, specifically his son (Walter Jr.), to have a certain image of himself (Walter Sr.). He is willing to do anything to create and preserve that image. He wants Walter Jr. to see him as selfsufficient, independent, not reliant on the assistance of others. Instead of accepting money from wealthy friends (who generously offer it), Walt makes and sells methamphetamines. He goes on a rampage collecting “material wealth” to ensure this image. He sucks up money and power the best that he can. A year or so after finding out that he has cancer, Walt Jr. finds his dad in his apartment badly beaten. Walt is deeply embarrassed by what he perceives as a loss of face. In this rare moment of vulnerability, Walter Jr. sees how spiritually broken his father is. Instead of losing admiration for his father, as Walter expects he will, Walter Jr. tells his dad that he’d rather see him like this—beaten and vulnerable—then as he has known him the last few months: spurning the spiritual needs of his family; bullying his wife to accept his decisions; refusing to acknowledge his dependence on others. *This* is what destroys him and his family.

Well, not *only* that. The international drug ring with which he conspires has a strong hand in it also. And this point brings us to an important counterbalance in understanding the material world’s relation to the spiritual. So far it might be easy to assume that the two really are opposed to one another. That one might pursue *either* material wealth *or* spiritual wealth. But each of these examples, in different ways, shows the tension in that thought. Part of Walt’s downfall is just his refusal to acknowledge the *fact* of his mortality. Instead of looking at the reality of his circumstances and admitting

that he needs help (medically, financially, relationally, etc.) and allowing others into his life—to see his vulnerability, to acknowledge his grief, and let others share in it—he tries to build a wall to insulate himself from these things. Because of his refusal to deal with the facts, because of his refusal to confront his own vulnerability and let his family share in it, he destroys them and himself. Here we see how facts and spirit flow into one another.

Similarly it's deeply misguided to think that one simply *chooses* one's sexuality or gender. Our understanding of ourselves is as much a response to biological facts as anything as else. The difficulty in a parent's ability to understand their LGBT child can be found in their refusal to acknowledge these facts (that being gay *isn't* a choice). Merely recognizing that a child is gay is not enough to make a spiritual connection. Accepting a child's sexuality or gender is not indicated merely by the absence of contraire feelings. *Accepting* (loving) a child—the other—requires spiritual presence. And this spiritual presence is something that one cannot merely inherit but rather something one *must* work for.

Again this is not to suggest that following a rather formulaic outline for how to strengthen, for instance, one's marriage is *prima facie* dismissible. Spouses that, for instance, share equal responsibility for raising their children, spouses who regularly take date nights and split the load of common household chores, spouses that avoid remodeling their home during financial difficulty, may very well have a statistically better chance for a flourishing marriage. A healthy marriage will understand that sometimes a mechanical relationship is just as important as an intimate one. A spiritual marriage does not mean that one becomes eager to overshare and exaggerate emotional



connections. This is just to say that there is no *form* of spiritual authenticity: no incontestable picture, no set *fact* to strive for. Attempting to ham-handedly adopt such a picture is just to shift the marriage away from a spiritual relationship into a factual one, and since there is no form of spiritual authenticity, what picture one takes to be *the* picture of what a spiritual marriage *must* look like can become oppressive and poisonous. Similarly refusing to learn from “factual methods” for achieving a flourishing marriage may lead to a spiritual death.

One last comment on *Breaking Bad*. Part of what makes the show so compelling is that Walt himself is often conflicted in the role he works to assume; sometimes his character enters the lives of those around him in a way that shows deep concern and tenderness, but ultimately, as the show’s title indicates, the trajectory we see him on is of a spiraling descent. Walt sometimes recognizes the need to be vulnerable with his wife, Skyler—and there are moments in the series that show genuine moments between them—but as the show progresses Walt’s recognition of his distance from Skyler is merely his recognition of him losing control of her. Consider this exchange in the episode “Fly” between Walt and his partner in crime, Jesse:

Walter: I’ve been to my oncologist, Jesse. Just last week. I’m still in remission.

I’m healthy.

Jesse: That’s good. Great.

Walter: No end in sight.

Jesse: That’s great.

Walter: No. I missed it. There was some perfect moment that passed me right by,

but I had to have enough [money] to leave them. That was the whole

point. None of this makes any sense if I didn't have enough. And it had to be before she found out. Skyler. It had to be before that.

Jesse: Perfect moment? For what? To drop dead? Are you saying you want to die?

Walter: I'm saying that I lived too long. You want them to actually miss you. You want their memories of you to be ... but she just won't ... she just won't understand. I mean, no matter how well I explain it, these days she just has this ... this ... I mean, I truly believe there exists some combination of words. There must exist certain words in a certain specific order that can explain all of this, but with her I just can't ever seem to find them.<sup>4</sup>

In this moment Walt sees the distance between himself and his wife, but instead of moving towards real change in the fundamental problems in their relationship (e.g., Walt's criminal involvement, for instance), Walt turns to the manipulation of words to produce a false image of hope. Walt thinks of their relationship as a fact. Skylar is a rather complex chemical equation, an equation Walt has yet to break, but one nonetheless breakable. If only he could find the right *combination* of words, he could fix the thing that is his relationship to Skylar. Walt attempts to buy love on the cheap and fails to see that no matter how many millions he accumulates that kind of material wealth necessarily fails to break into the plain of spiritual value.<sup>5</sup>

**II. This section turns to consider the implications of the spiritual world for religious belief, specifically focusing on the transcendent nature of Christ's commandment to "Love thy neighbor."**

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<sup>4</sup> *Breaking Bad*, "Fly," Season 4, Episode 9.

<sup>5</sup> Walt, like Frege, thinks he might find some sentence to give Skylar that *itself* contains truth. Walt like Kerry thinks by saying that words function one way and not another, thereby *forces* those concepts to be different than they are.

So far in this chapter we've considered what the world of spirit is like; now we want to ask, what does it mean to take a spiritual view of faith?<sup>6</sup> In Chapter One we saw the temptation to think that when Jesus says, "For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted," that simply becoming the lowest will put one in right relationship with God. This suggestion—that righteousness can be had merely by stringing the right collection of words together or adopting a certain posture like a mask—is criticized throughout the New Testament. For instance, consider this passage from St. Paul in 1 Thessalonians 5:

Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers and sisters; you do not need to have anything written to you. For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. When they say, "There is peace and security," then sudden destruction will come upon them, as labour pains come upon a pregnant woman, and there will be no escape! But you, beloved; are not in darkness, for that day to surprise you like a thief; for you are all children of light and children of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness. So then, let us not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober; for those who sleep sleep at night, and those who are drunk get drunk at night. But since we belong to the day, let us be sober . . . .

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<sup>6</sup> It's tempting to think that this means to suggest that the religious presupposes the spiritual—that the religious builds on the spiritual like a house builds on a foundation. But this suggestion still assumes that language and thought can be separated. There are aspects of these language-games that share affinities (sometimes deep ones), but that does not mean that one is more fundamental than the other. That one might be reduced to the other.

Whatever eschatological picture the author of this passage intends, there is an important understanding of religious belief present.<sup>7</sup> We might wonder why preaching “peace and security” is taken by St. Paul with such offense given the preponderance of religious writings that assume that a fundamental good (aim) of religious belief is found in coming to peace with oneself and with God; but St. Paul does not suggest that *finding* peace with God will bring sudden destruction, but rather that, we might say, *preaching* “peace and security” will.

Consider the distinction this way: there is a way of understanding religion (call it *false* religion) that attempts to treat what is spiritual as a fact.<sup>8</sup> The children of darkness—of false religion—claim that peace and security can be had by merely acting in a certain way or by saying the right words. They claim that it can be inherited or sold at a price. This is not only a distortion of religious belief but also of life in general. Presentday caricatures of those preaching peace and security are found in television ads that suggestively imply buying their products will *fully* insulate one from the contingencies of life—as though one might actually remove the possibility of loss (of health, possessions, or life itself). Religious presentday caricatures can be found in those proclaiming a faith invalidated by drinking, being gay, having long hair, or racially intermarrying. They use

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<sup>7</sup> I’m following a suggestion made about this passage by Denis McManus in an unpublished lecture. (McManus, himself, was following a suggestion about this passage made by Heidegger).

<sup>8</sup> Notice that this point is not connected with Chapter One’s focus on AφR. One reason for that is that the problem that Chapter One explored with AφR was not a religious problem but a philosophical one. The first chapter tried to stress that there might be great continuity between what AφR sees as important religious demands and what this project sees as important religious demands. The problem with AφR was that they failed to see the philosophical significance of those demands. They see philosophy as providing an *explanation* for the kind of epistemic link that connects us with God. But as the second chapter tries to argue philosophy cannot set a limit to thought—provide the grounding for thought (about world or God). At any rate, this is a philosophical misunderstanding and has no necessary connection to how religious belief might actually be present in their lives. Which is just to say that this paper does not assume that AφR *preaches* “peace and security,” though they may philosophize it.

the bible as a prooftext; as the solution to a rather complex mathematical formula set to solve the difficult problems of life. Religion as a “solution” to life. Want to know God? Say these words. Take this pill. The children of darkness treat religion as a cheap insurance policy. Something that can be bought and transferred like paper across a desk. For St. Paul this is a *false* security, a *false* peace, a *false* version of faith.

The false religion St. Paul found in the children of darkness is the same kind of false religion that Jesus sees in many of the religious leaders he encountered. We briefly considered the importance of Christ’s interactions with them in Chapter One; we return to that discussion now to both press that point and also respond to a potential criticism of it.

Jesus does not ask his followers to accept certain religious doctrines—what some might call religious facts—but rather he asks them to live a certain way. Jesus asks his disciples to *follow him*. Our interlocutor’s concerns from Chapter One might again seem to present a real challenge to this suggestion.

*Interlocutor:* Of course Jesus asks his followers to live a certain way, but why think that excludes also asking them to believe certain doctrines!?! Though he didn’t ask them to believe in the Trinity surely that was an implicit aspect of the faith he meant to proclaim. Religious doctrines aside, it’s beyond debate that he asked them to believe certain religious *facts*! Sometimes these facts seem mystical, as when Jesus says, “Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.”<sup>9</sup> Mystical perhaps but this remark is not something that a disciple gets to choose whether to believe or not.

Whatever maneuvering you might try to get out of seeing that as a religious fact,

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<sup>9</sup> John 12:25

you *can't* get out of this central, non-mystical concern of Jesus': the care for the poor.

When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?" And the king will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."<sup>10</sup>

Whatever you might want to make of "the throne of his glory" you must concede that it's just a *fact* that if you do not take care of those in need you are not following the *commands* of Christ. Taking care of the poor *is* material; whether or

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<sup>10</sup> Matthew 25:31-39.

not it's been done *is* an empirical question; it's something that belongs in your world of facts.

At the beginning of this section we characterized St. Paul's concern in Thessalonians as rejecting the idea that there are facts to religious worship, perhaps we might have our interlocutor concede to that but still insist that there are facts in religious *ministry*.

It might seem odd, at first, bringing these two aspects of religious belief (worship and ministry) together. But notice that when Jesus criticizes those oppressing the poor often his aim focuses on those in religious authority—those representing the *religious* institution. That is, when Jesus condemns the priestly caste (condemns the picture they have of themselves) he does so by highlighting their neglect of those on the margins. This “issue”—our relationship to the poor—isn't a parochial interest of his; it flows from an essential aspect of the worship of God.

To draw these concerns together (worship and ministry) we focus on two moments of confrontation. The first is Christ's scathing criticism of the scribes and Pharisees in Matthew 23. There he calls them hypocrites and accuses them of lawlessness: “they tie up heavy burdens ... and lay them on the shoulders of others,” “they love to have the place of honor at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues,” they are like “whitewashed tombs, which on the outside look beautiful, but inside they are full of the bones of the dead.” When the Pharisees challenge Jesus on his knowledge of the law—specifically on the conditions for divorce—he tells them that it is only because of their hardness of heart that these laws were given.<sup>11</sup> Against this hardness Jesus proclaims that it is to the little children that the kingdom of heaven belongs.

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<sup>11</sup> This confrontation comes a few chapters earlier in Matthew 19. Though it obviously isn't a part of Matthew 23, it does share important themes.

The second moment comes when Jesus returns to the synagogue of his childhood. He proclaims that the “Spirit of the Lord . . . has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free” (Luke 4). Initially he’s met with a response both pacifying and condescending.<sup>12</sup> They fail to see his words as revolutionary—they call him “gracious”—and remind him he’ll never be more than “Joseph’s son.” Jesus presses the issue. He asks them to recall two stories from their scripture when God acted through his prophets to rescue and heal *outsiders*. Jesus suggests to them that if they fail to take the *claim* of their faith seriously, God is just as capable of passing over them as he did when the prophets of old restored children not of God’s chosen tribes. The problem Jesus addresses in Nazareth is the same problem he speaks to in Matthew 23: ultimately they have “neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith.”

There are two thoughts here that converge on the same principle. Jesus resists a version of faith where one is made righteous merely by following the rules or reciting given forms of spiritual language, while also pressing them to see that a false kind of worship is directly tied to a failure to care for the poor.

We’ve already noted that for Jesus the scribes and Pharisees think that by merely wearing long robes and saying long prayers—that because they’ve adopted the true *form* of faith—they have thereby secured their holiness and that this point finds easy application to modern day caricatures; but it’s important also to see that the radical picture Christ conceives applies equally to the church as it exists today. To understand the gospel we must see that no temple of worship is an end to itself, that if the worship of

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<sup>12</sup> My reading of this passage was influenced by some of the commentaries on this text in *Feasting on the Word* (Year C, Vol. 1, pp. 308-313).



God turns on nothing more than an exaltation of the church's narrow interests than that worship is sham worship. To enter God's Kingdom, Jesus tells his followers that they must enter not as legalistic rule-followers, not as the privileged, not as "spiritual experts" or "Very Reverends," but as children.

Jesus equally commits himself to the idea that if one fails to seek justice for the poor one has failed to seek the kingdom of heaven. Doesn't this, though, conflict with the principle he uses to chastise those in "spiritual" authority? Isn't he merely replacing one set of rules with another? Better rules, perhaps, but still a spirituality comprised of rule-following?<sup>13</sup> It's understanding the nature of Christian responsibility to the poor that reveals so much about the essence of worship itself.

Jim Wallis writes that when Jesus says that the poor will always be with us, it's not because they're a hopeless cause but rather that Jesus expects wherever the poor are found his followers must also be.<sup>14</sup> Part of the conviction of the reality of God—what it means to worship God—is found in the church's ability to "strive for justice and peace among all people," to "respect the dignity of every human being."<sup>15</sup> Taking care of the poor does not mean simply giving the poor material assistance—as if the poor represent a mere problem to be solved—but requires that as we supply that assistance we come to *see* them as people with dignity. We cannot both love God and be callous to those in need. *To love God*—to embody that in our lives—means seeing dignity in *every* human being. It means to strive to live in a world like that. If God's love flows through the church then a care for the poor will also. As Gutiérrez puts it, "Jesus shows us that God's love is

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<sup>13</sup> This question was pressed on me by a very perceptive student of mine in an *Introduction to Philosophy* course.

<sup>14</sup> Jim Wallis, *God's Politics*, pp. 209-220.

<sup>15</sup> *Book of Common Prayer*, p. 305.

clearest [in the least among us].”<sup>16</sup> What God’s love is like is most transparent there.

What it means to make this connection, what it means to be spiritually present with them, is not something that can be earned once-and-for-all.

The spiritual virtue of this kind of presence is what must lead a faithful church in their worship of God. Just as the church is tempted to merely provide for the poor, instead of caring for them as fellow creatures loved by God, so are they tempted to treat their forms of worship as a problem to be addressed and then put away. It’s in our nature as people to want the final answer, to “decide” how to live and then be done with it. Hence the tendency to calcify what the worship of God looks like, to mistake a given picture of worship as inherently valuable.

Emphasizing Jesus’ antipathy towards legalism is not meant to imply that there is anything objectionable about living a strict life of organized prayer. Indeed just the opposite. It would violate the spirit of Jesus’ criticism to think that we could, straightoff as it were, mark those participating in monastic communities as “Pharisees” *or* as “deeply spiritual.” There is no *form* we can adopt to guarantee spiritual authenticity. To think that there is—to think that there might be—is to misunderstand what worship is like.

Nourishing spiritual presence is what will allow the Spirit full voice in religious belief. This is what grounds the need for a life of prayer and the importance and authoritative voice of communal worship. In the liturgy—the fixed forms of worship that combine prayer and the reading of scripture—the church reminds itself that if the outsider has no place in their house of worship, neither does God; the liturgy reminds the church that Jesus resonates least with those who assume that their interests *must be* God’s own.

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<sup>16</sup> Gustavo Gutiérrez, “Saying and Showing to the Poor: ‘God Loves You,’” p. 29.

The liturgy—a historical, cultural fact—pushes the church to see that it is a *means* to glorify God. In this way it too works to undermine itself.

**III. In order to make the point of the last two sections a bit more clear, we step back and approach the transcendent through the lens of Iris Murdoch, specifically considering her reflections on the nature of love and its connection with ethics and art.**

Iris Murdoch’s “The Sublime and the Good”<sup>17</sup> importantly touches on many of themes so far considered but from a much different perspective. In considering Murdoch we better connect the value of spiritual presence to what this chapter claims is *the what* of the transcendent: love. Murdoch’s essay will serve as an object of comparison both for our use of the “spiritual world”—that is, her attempt to explain what love comes to will provide us further tools (words) for understanding the peculiar terminology this chapter attempts to clarify—but also serve as a tool for comparing religion to both art and ethics.

“The Sublime and the Good” attempts to pull art and ethics together by suggesting that the two share the same core: “their essence is the same ... the essence of both of them is love.”<sup>18</sup> Though they share the same essence there are important differences, as Murdoch well understands, and it’s in considering their similarities and differences that allow us a clearer understanding of both. Her article gives life to these claims by first considering different philosophical conceptions of art. Since Murdoch’s account itself is meant to sharpen this project’s account of the transcendent, we’ll rehearse her view in some detail.

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<sup>17</sup> “The Sublime and the Good.” Found in the *Existentialists and Mystics* (1999).

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 215.

Murdoch starts with Kant.<sup>19</sup> For Kant aesthetic judgment falls into two categories: the beautiful and the sublime. The beautiful, unlike the sublime, is independent of sentiment but also (ideally) free of cognitive and moral judgment. The beautiful falls into two categories: free and dependent beauty. Examples of free beauty include flowers, birdsongs, and wallpaper. Free beauty represents “the true judgment of taste”.<sup>20</sup>

Here, according to Kant, the imagination and the understanding are in harmony in the apprehension of a sensuous object which is not brought under any particular concept and is verified in accordance with a rule we cannot formulate. Beauty is “coupled with representation through which the object is given, not through which it is thought.” Beauty is a matter of form. What is truly beautiful is independent of any interest, it is not tainted either by the good, or by any pleasure extraneous to the act of representing to ourselves the object itself.<sup>21</sup>

Dependent beauty on the other hand is less free because it attempts to represent a moral quality of character that produces, however limitedly, “intellectual delight” and thus takes away from the kind of freedom that exists in the truly beautiful. Horses, representations of human form, and buildings are all examples of dependent beauty. Objects of free beauty have no interest in “charm or with emotion” but rather exhibit “purposiveness without a purpose.” Thus, for instance, “a bird’s song, which we can reduce to no musical role, seems to have more freedom in it, and thus to be richer for taste, than the human voice singing in accordance with all the rules that the art of music prescribes.”<sup>22</sup> Art is beautiful when it appears to be purposeless and nature is beautiful when it appears to

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<sup>19</sup> What follows merely attempts to do justice to Murdoch’s own account of Kant.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 206.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 207.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 207.

have intelligible construction; in either case it is in the *free play of form* that achieves true beauty. Because of its freedom, Kant thinks both that what is beautiful is universal and also, paradoxically, that it remains in the realm of the subjective. Universal because it is “common sense” that produces sentiment for taste, but because of the noncognitive nature of the judgment whatever the standard (or, justification) the sentiment might hold to is beyond proof. Murdoch: “the aesthetic judgement is immediate and the pleasure taken in it is inseparable from, is in fact, the synthesis: the putting together of a conceptless representation.”<sup>23</sup> Clearly, marking something as beautiful is a judgment but because of the primal nature of the objects of beauty and our relation to them, Kant sees those objects as seeping into us and thus also, in this way, bypassing cognitive evaluation.

The other category of aesthetic judgment for Kant is the sublime. The sublime “is an object (of nature) the representation of which determines the mind to regard the elevation of nature beyond our reach as equivalent to a presentation of ideas.”<sup>24</sup> Whereas beauty exists as a harmony of imagination and understanding, the sublime represents a conflict between imagination and reason. For Kant reason—in general—is tasked with pursuing systematic wholeness and works to overcome (a kind of cognitive, rational) incompleteness by achieving total comprehension. Thus when we encounter a stormy sea, a great waterfall, the starry sky, an endless range of mountains, etc., we’re presented with something that reason sees as an object capable of being wholly systematized into understanding, but seeing that these objects of experience refuse those attempts, we

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 207.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 208.

experience a sense of the sublime. The “imagination strives to its utmost to satisfy this requirement of reason,”<sup>25</sup> but, ultimately, fails.

On the one hand we experience distress at this failure of the imagination to compass what is before us, and on the other hand we feel exhilaration in our consciousness of the absolute nature of reason’s requirement and the way in which it goes beyond what mere sensible imagination can achieve. This mixed experience is, Kant remarks, very like *Achtung*, the experience of respect for the moral law.<sup>26</sup>

Kant thinks that both the beautiful and the sublime are related to the good. Since recognition of the good is essentially connected to reason, beauty—being both nonrational and nonemotive—connects to the good only analogically. Since judgment in taste is “independent, disinterested, and free,” it acts as a sensuous counterpart to moral judgment. It’s as if art represents the “good” in a form we can see and touch. The sublime, however, is much more intimately connected to the good since reason—“the moral will itself”—is active in the experience: “the sublime sets the mind in motion and resembles the exercise of the will in moral judgement.”<sup>27</sup> The sublime is the moral freedom of our “exultant manner.”<sup>28</sup>

Murdoch takes the exclusion of classic examples of good art as reason enough to think that a theory of art is flawed. Since the sublime has nothing to do with art (but rather is a deep emotional response to nature), the other side of aesthetic judgment—beauty—must carry Kant’s ability to account for art. But since what is truly beautiful for

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 208.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 208.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 209.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 209.

Kant is found in the free play of form, Kant's theory of art excludes any medium that requires *thought* for appreciation (thus, all novels are excluded). His understanding of art, Murdoch suggests, too closely resembles his theory of perception: something understood to "happen at once, as it were automatically, bringing us its pleasure in the very act of synthesis."<sup>29</sup> Though Kant, dubiously, allows for some music (as long as it is not set to words) and poetry (which resembles rhetoric but is in fact only the "free play of imagination") to count as art his exclusion of Shakespeare, Tolstoy, and Dickens makes his theory of art seem underwhelmingly provincial. In fact, Murdoch thinks, Kant's theory fails to account for the highest form of art: tragedy. What tragedy comes to and why Kant's understanding of the judgment of taste cannot make sense of it, Murdoch explains by trying to fit an understanding of tragedy into Kant's use of the sublime; she then compares that use against Hegel's own view of tragedy.

As with Kant's account of ethics, Kant's understanding of the sublime is meant to exclude social considerations of any form. "Kant's ideal *objects d'art* were flowers and meaningless lines interweaving: simple, clean things not tainted by any historical or human particularity."<sup>30</sup> Similarly in ethics,

Kant resented the hold which history has upon ethics. He attempts to make the act of moral judgement an instantiating of a timeless form of rational activity; and it is this, this empty demand for a total order, which we are required to respect in each other. Kant does not tell us to respect whole particular tangled-up historical individuals, but to respect the universal reason in their breasts.<sup>31</sup>

Thus Murdoch suggests, for Kant,

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 210.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 214.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 215.

The sublime is a segment of a circle, grasped by imagination, with the rest of the circle demanded and as it were dreamt of by reason, but not given. The sublime is only occasioned by natural objects (non-historical, non-social, non-human), and the imaginative understanding the lack of which occasions the pain-and-pleasure of sublimity is a kind of vast systematic perception of nature which space and time and the nature of our sensibility forbids.<sup>32</sup>

We see only part of the circle knowing that it represents—in fact, is extended to—a whole which we cannot perceive. There is a view of human helplessness here—something perhaps connected to tragedy—but ultimately it’s a concern with an empty, nontemporal, transcendent reality. Kant’s aesthetic categories here are handsome but illequipped to handle an account of tragedy. And his ethical system, for the same reasons, fairs no better: “Kant’s aesthetic tastes mirror his moral preferences. He would like, as it were, by morality to crystallize out of the historical process a simple society living strictly by extremely general rules (‘Always tell the truth,’ etc.), with no place for the morally complicated or eccentric.”<sup>33</sup> The kind of tension and ambiguity that great art considers and produces—the very thing found in tragedy—is something that Kant’s thought fundamentally means to exclude.

There are both similarities and differences to be found in comparing Kant to Hegel on this score. Hegel holds to a similar demand of reason (reason, ultimately, aims for *total* comprehension), but he tries to humanize the demand, bringing it—reason—concretely into the social and historical domain of reality. For Hegel tragedy is

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 213.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 215.



the envisaging of a conflict between two incompatible goods. Not a conflict between good and evil but between two goods, which are seen to be such because they incarnate different real social forces with real claims in society. Antigone and Creon are both right, as we see if we understand the total situation which encloses them both.<sup>34</sup>

Modern dramas fail at tragedy for Hegel because instead of presenting real goods in conflict, the conflict is generated by the “whims” and “passions” of individuals. Hegel though, like Kant, demands that reason aspire both to systematic wholeness and avoid, at all costs, incompleteness. For Kant, while the sublime performs an important moral function in us—precisely because of its transcendent nature—for Hegel its moral value is found in the *resolution* of opposing goods. What makes Hegel’s view unnerving for Murdoch is that reason’s demand for complete understanding is satisfied. In the reconciliation of those opposing goods the whole circle can be seen. Thus the sublime is brought entirely into social-historical view. The transcendent has no purchase here. Hegel’s view of tragedy stalls because the supposed tension between goods can only be *apparent* since the “opposed” actors are “comfortably seated at the point of view of the totality.”<sup>35</sup> Thus, for Murdoch at least, what tragedy is to investigate—real conflict—drops out underneath Hegel’s totalizing system.

Murdoch herself attempts to provide something of a Hegelian synthesis between what she sees as Kant’s “intoxicating” connection of the sublime with the *Achtung* of his moral theory and Hegel’s effort to bring moral goods (and the human social-historical context in general) under analysis and consider (and thus also appreciate) when they

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 213.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 214.

come into conflict. The synthesis, as we hinted earlier, displays itself in Murdoch's placing art and ethics into the same sphere:

Art and morals are, with certain provisos which I shall mention in a moment, one. Their essence is the same. The essence of both of them is love. Love is the perception of individuals. Love is the extremely difficult realization that something other than oneself is real. Love, and so art and morals, is the discovery of reality. What stuns us into a realization of our supersensible destiny is not, as Kant imagined, the formlessness of nature, but rather its unutterable particularity; and most particular and individual of all natural things is the mind of man. That is incidentally why tragedy is the highest art, because it is most intensely concerned with the most individual thing. Here is the true sense of that exhilaration of freedom which attends art and which has its more rarely achieved counterpart in morals. It is the apprehension of something else, something particular, as existing outside us. The enemies of art and of morals, the enemies that is of love, are the same: social convention<sup>36</sup> and neurosis. One may fail to see the individual because of Hegel's totality, because we are ourselves sunk in a social whole which we allow uncritically to determine our reactions, or because we see each other exclusively as so determined. Or we may fail to see the individual because we are completely enclosed in a fantasy world of our own into which we try to draw things from outside, not grasping their reality and independence, making them into dream objects of our own. Fantasy, the enemy of art, is the enemy of true imagination: love, an exercise of the imagination.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> That is, thinking of the love in relationships as falling under the material world.

<sup>37</sup> "The Sublime and the Good," p. 215-6.

A few words about Murdoch's view of art in general. For Murdoch art is "truth as well as form."<sup>38</sup> "The artist must tell the truth about something which he has introduced."<sup>39</sup>

Literature is bad when it is false: "words such as 'sentimental,' 'pretentious,' 'self-indulgent,' 'trivial,' and so on, impute some kind of falsehood, some failure of justice, some distortion or inadequacy of understanding of expression."<sup>40</sup> Bad art is a kind of fantasy; whereas good art makes use of imagination: "Imagination, as opposed to fantasy, is the ability to see the other thing, what one might call, to use those old-fashioned words, nature, reality, the world."<sup>41</sup> Or, in a word, imagination seeks and discloses *truth*; whereas fantasy distorts the world by celebrating neurosis: the temptation to enclose ourselves into a world separated from the independence of reality—where we make "dream objects of our own."<sup>42</sup>

Art of course is not concerned only with truth but is also essentially tied to form.<sup>43</sup> "The paradox of art is the work itself may, as it were, have to invent the methods by which we verify it, by which we test it for truth, to erect its own interior standards of truthfulness."<sup>44</sup> We might say echoing Kant that art is the sensuous form of *truth*, and it's this aspect of art that makes it so accessible to us. Much more accessible than, for instance, philosophy. We find ourselves entering the world of art with ease. Murdoch:

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<sup>38</sup> Murdoch, "Literature and Philosophy: A Conversation with Bryan Magee," (in *Existentialists and Mystics*) p. 25.

<sup>39</sup> Murdoch, "Art is the Imitation of Nature," (in *Existentialists and Mystics*) p. 256.

<sup>40</sup> Murdoch, "Literature and Philosophy," p. 11.

<sup>41</sup> Murdoch, "Art is the Imitation of Nature," p. 255.

<sup>42</sup> Murdoch, p. 216.

<sup>43</sup> This point represents Murdoch's proviso that art and ethics are one. Art is concerned with—is essentially connected to—form in a way that ethics is not. Or to put it another way, again showing Kant's influence on her own view, art is ethics represented in "sensuous" form.

<sup>44</sup> Murdoch, "Art is the Imitation of Nature," p. 256.

Literary modes are very natural to us, very close to ordinary life and to the way we live as reflective beings. ...When we return home and “tell our day,” we are artfully shaping material into story form. ... A deep motive for making literature or art of any sort is the desire to defeat the formlessness of the world and cheer oneself up by constructing forms out of what might otherwise seem a mass of senseless rubble.<sup>45</sup>

The giving of form to our experience—to the good and true<sup>46</sup> of our world—is at the root of the basic instinct to enter into art. Art is the incarnation of truth. It is paradoxical because in its form there is a kind of freedom and autonomy: “the ambiguity of the great writer creates spaces which we can explore and enjoy because they are opening on to the real world and not formal language games or narrow crevices of personal fantasy; and we do not get tired of great writers, because what is true is interesting.”<sup>47</sup> The author’s moral judgment provides air for the reader to breath:

One can see here very clearly the contrast between blind fantasy and visionary imagination. The bad writer gives way to personal obsession and exalts some characters and demeans others without any concern for truth or justice, that is without any suitable aesthetic “explanation.”<sup>48</sup> It is clear here how the idea of reality enters into literary judgement. The good writer is the just, intelligent judge. He justifies his placing of his characters by some sort of *work* which he does in

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<sup>45</sup> Murdoch, “Literature and Philosophy,” pp. 6-7.

<sup>46</sup> Good art does not moralize. Some great works of art faithfully explores truly terrible aspects of human life. Thus art does not necessarily “uplift.”

<sup>47</sup> Murdoch, “Literature and Philosophy,” p. 25-26.

<sup>48</sup> An editorial aside: This is not to say that good art cannot be whimsical, capricious, or even mean. Since we find each of those concepts in the world—they are true in this sense—they are just as available to art for exploration as anything else might be. But this is just to provide the kind of “aesthetic explanation” Murdoch means to suggest it needs.

the book. A literary fault such as sentimentality results from idealization without work. A great writer can combine form and character in a felicitous way (think how Shakespeare does it) so as to produce a large space in which the characters can exist freely and yet at the same time serve the purposes of the tale. A great work of art gives one a sense of space, as if one had been invited into some large hall of reflection.<sup>49</sup>

Art is “representation and autonomous”<sup>50</sup> because for an object to be art it must have form but in the form it has we find windows of freedom. This underscores the critical importance of Kant and Hegel for Murdoch. Kant saw the aesthetic significance of freedom in art but failed in a way that Hegel did not to account for the ambiguity of the human condition. There is freedom in the sense that “the artist is *creating* a quasi-sensuous thing”<sup>51</sup>—that is, the artist “is more like God than the moral agent”<sup>52</sup>—and in the sense that “in the creation of a work of art the artist is going through the exercise of attending to something quite particular other than himself.”<sup>53</sup> Here we have Kant’s understanding that art is the use and encounter of freedom combined with Hegel’s sensitivity to the human subject and the ambiguity that creates. In the (sometimes) careful act of creation the artist shows, what we might call, the infinite depth of her subject.

Murdoch sees in the possibility of art the power to *liberate*.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Murdoch, “Literature and Philosophy,” p. 28.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 219. My emphasis.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 219. This underlines again another particular difference between the sublime and *Achtung*. Art is both “consolation and delight” (Murdoch, p. 219).

<sup>53</sup> Murdoch, p. 219.

<sup>54</sup> Part of what so interests Murdoch in Plato is that Plato works to show how art has the power to *imprison*.

This is why for Murdoch tragedy represents the highest form for which art can aspire. In tragic art we find a work that is self-contained but focused on “the individual being and destiny of human persons, which defies form.”<sup>55</sup> This is why “great tragedy leaves us in eternal doubt.”<sup>56</sup>

Kant was marvelously near the mark. But he thought of freedom as the aspiration to a universal order consisting of a prefabricated harmony. It was not a tragic freedom. The tragic freedom implied by love is this: that we all have an indefinitely extended capacity to imagine the being of others. Tragic, because there is no prefabricated harmony, and others are, to an extent we never cease discovering, different from ourselves. Nor is there any social totality within which we can come to comprehend differences as placed and reconciled. We have only a segment of the circle. Freedom is exercised in the confrontation by each other, in the context of an irreducibly dissimilar individuals. Love is the imaginative recognition of, that is respect for, this otherness.<sup>57</sup>

Love is that thing which attempts to perceive and understand the intricacies we find in the world and in one another. This is the concern of many of the “great writers”:

They can see how different people are and why they are different. Tolerance is connected with being able to imagine centres of reality which are remote from oneself. There is a breath of tolerance and generosity and intelligent kindness which blows out of Homer and Shakespeare and the great novelists. The great

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<sup>55</sup> Murdoch, “The Sublime and the Good,” p. 219.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 219.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 216.

artist sees the vast interesting collection of what is other than himself and does not picture the world in his own image.<sup>58</sup>

Murdoch calls this talent of great writers a “calm merciful vision.”<sup>59</sup> It’s a talent that allows them to use a medium necessarily bound in time and place (that is, art exists *in* history) and thus also bound to form and yet able to transcend those constraints by meditating on and then presenting a picture of the world that appears boundless. This is art’s task. An unblinking picture of the world that neither skirts the deep pain and conflict present in our lives (thus avoiding sentimentality) nor dismisses acts of mercy and grace and joy (avoiding an oversimplification into nihilism). This is a care for the world equally capable of articulating the otherness found in “lifeless” vistas (as we see in landscape paintings), or in artifacts (as we see in pottery and sculpture), or in animals (as we see in portraits and photography and film), or in people (as we see in *all* forms of art). –All of this is said no better than in Wittgenstein’s opening of the *Tractatus*: The *world* is all that is the case. In a world where a “calm merciful vision” reigns the transcendent can break through. In the boundary of art our confining picture of the world can be shattered. Here we use a picture to step outside a picture.

Love, however, is found not only in art but also in the practical world—the world ethics must be a part of—and the practical world is “haunted by that incompleteness and lack of form, which is abhorred by art, and where action cannot always be accompanied by radiant understanding, or by significant and consoling emotions.”<sup>60</sup> Here we see the sense in saying that we *construct* narrative story arcs into the “history” of our lives. “I was totally awash until I met my wife,” “I realized then that everything in my life was

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<sup>58</sup> Literature and Philosophy,” pp. 29-30.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., p. 29.

<sup>60</sup> “The Sublime and the Good,” p. 220.

leading up to this moment,” “My life has been a series of mistakes all clustered around the same failure of understanding,” etc. There is a naturalness in each of these expressions; but the tragedy of life—which is just another way to say the exhilaration of life—sometimes leads us to see that these expressions *are* constructions. That life sometimes deeply resists careful or even loose formalizations of it. Sometimes life feels like—sometimes life *is*—an unbearable series of endless, random events. But it’s just here—when reality rebuffs our attempt at systemization—that the sublime power of tragedy can be felt.

Tragedy in art is the attempt to overcome the defeat which human beings suffer in the practical world. It is, as Kant nearly said, as he ought to have said, the human spirit mourning and yet exulting in its strength. In the practical world there may be only mourning and the final acceptance of the incomplete. Form is the great consolation of love, but is also its great temptation.<sup>61</sup>

The challenge that art assumes is being true to the world. It’s a medium that is essentially bound, but also one that—when it is great—transcends its own form. What is truth? Truth is not denying the tension between a world we want to construct and a world that rebuffs our constructions. What is love? Love is merciful attention to the particularity of our world. Merciful because it does not demand that the world reflect our own projections. Love, compassion is the “the non-violent apprehension of difference.”<sup>62</sup> Not only does love allow difference it celebrates it.

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., p. 218.



**IV. This section applies Murdoch’s understanding of love to the themes of the first two sections, thereby drawing to a close this project’s articulation of the essence of faith.**

The concept of God is to put form to the thought—to the *conviction*—that love might be infinite yet personal. That the word of God might be spoken into our world. “God” is the symbol that can have no symbol; an attempt to articulate a form for the formless. God is the infinite other, infinitely distant; yet sometimes also forcefully present. The *being* defined as pure love is the *divine being*. Christians worship God because they see in God the infinite capacity for love; God is worthy of worship because in God there is no end to God’s loving character. Faith takes flight when we see the world as a gift; then we see that there’s no person to give thanks to and yet there is a need to offer thanks.

Thanksgiving as a sacrifice.

Consider this point by translating it in material form, into the matter of factness of a business contract. Two parties enter into an agreement and after goods or services are rendered, payment is exchanged. The children of darkness “worship” God because they believe that as a matter of exchange, since they’ve “sacrificed” to God God will reward them. The challenge of faith is to *see* all of life and yet still see God in it. There is nothing objectionable about crises in faith. An essential aspect of faith is the *struggle* it demands. Think of the loss of a young child. The words we search to find the right—*any*—expression for the grief experienced by the bereaved family seems out of our reach. Yet faith demands that we see all as a gift from God, that no matter the outcome we still respond to God in prayer and thanksgiving. But to ask a family to see the loss of a child as an occasion to thank God seems horribly perverse. And no doubt as a matter of

horrible perversion a pastor or an assistant professor of philosophy *has* asked a family to respond this way.

Faith is not a drug to anesthetize one from the pain of loss. In Christ we have a picture of a suffering God, and even in Christ—*the* picture of God incarnate—his suffering on the cross pushed him to the point of despair. Faith plants a seed of hope. A hope that believes that even in death there may be resurrection. The spiritual view of the world does not see itself as saddled by sorrow and blessed by joy. *All things come from thee O Lord*. Part of a life of faith is sacrificing deep grief at the alter of God; praying that God will be with us as we sojourn on. To pull back and see the great swirl of life—its horrors, its joys, its banality, its excitement—to see all of this as a gift. Even death. Nietzsche pictures such a posture like this:

Have you ever said Yes to a single joy? O my friends, then you have said Yes too to all woe. All things are entangled, ensnared, enamored; if ever you wanted one thing twice, if ever you said, “You please me, happiness! Abide, moment!” then you wanted *all* back. All anew, all eternally, all entangled, ensnared, enamored....<sup>63</sup>

The religious form of that thought is this:

Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever thou hadst formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting, thou art God.

Our children will one day die, our friends, our spouses; indeed just as a seed takes hold in the soil, grows into a plant, blooms into a flower, and then withers to dust, so too will humanity itself be received back into the earth. This is not to suggest that faith tempers emotion. That believers ought to be suspicious of rage or disquietude. *All these things* are

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<sup>63</sup> Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, IV, 19.

part of who we are and have their proper place. And yet God invites us to live in peace. A peace that passes all understanding. Faith struggles to see *the* world as gift.

The tension we see in speaking of God is only amplified in the person of Jesus. This is why Kierkegaard refers to Jesus as the *absolute* paradox. God is eternal truth and love; the incarnation takes that formlessness and places it into a form, into a human body. Jesus is the sensuous form of God. The incarnation is a formless form. This is why the words of Christ are so important and also why they so easily mislead. Christ says that “he who becomes the lowest shall become the greatest.” A remark that intentionally challenges our understanding of what a life of faith demands. The temptation that the remark is meant to challenge is the idea that we can solve the problem (struggle) of faith by merely becoming the lowest. Instead Christ calls us to the never ending growth of love and understanding.

Kierkegaard also often refers to the spiritual world as infinite and eternal and Murdoch’s description of love provides a helpful picture to realizing those concepts. There is a tragic freedom in love; in coming to *see* other people we find the “indefinitely extended capacity to imagine the beings of others”<sup>64</sup>; thus there is no final resolution in love, which is why love so resembles great tragedy. And yet love does not provoke a sense of disaffection or anxiety. We see that love calls us to an eternal commitment and through it we attain a “calm merciful vision,”<sup>65</sup> since love is the “non-violent apprehension of difference.”<sup>66</sup> In The Gospel According to St. John (Chapter 6) Jesus says that God the Father has put God’s seal upon Jesus. Christ means for himself to be the temporal picture of God on Earth. Part of the picture we see in the Gospels is of a

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<sup>64</sup> Murdoch, “The Sublime and the Good,” p. 219.

<sup>65</sup> Murdoch, “Literature and Philosophy,” p. 29.

<sup>66</sup> Murdoch, p. 218.

God who sees all we are and yet calls us into relationship with deep affection. That the love of God is never ending. Jesus often radically challenges the image that many listening to him had of God. Against the image of God as a cruel adversary, Jesus says that the Good Shepherd will lay down his life for his sheep. If it is right to say that the worship of God demands that we see that God is no object, it is just as right to say that neither does God see us as objects. This is perhaps just the point of this reflection by Simone Weil:

God emptied himself of his divinity and filled us with a false divinity. Let us empty ourselves of it. This act is the purpose of the act by which we were created.

At this very moment God, by his creative will, is maintaining me in existence, in order that I may renounce it.

God waits patiently until at last I am willing to consent to love him.

God waits like a beggar who stands motionless and silent before someone who will perhaps give him a piece of bread. Time is that waiting.

Time is God's waiting as a beggar for our love.

The stars, the mountains, the sea, and all the things that speak to us of time, convey God's supplication to us.

By waiting humbly we are made similar to God.

God is only the good. That is why he is waiting there in silence. Anyone who comes forward and speaks is using a little force. The good which is nothing but good can only stand waiting.

Beggars who are modest are images of Him.

Humility is a certain relation of the soul to time. It is an acceptance of waiting. That is why, socially, it is the mark of inferiors that they are made to wait. "I nearly had to wait" is the tyrant's word. But in ceremony, whose poetry makes all men equal, everybody has to wait.

Art is waiting. Inspiration is waiting.

He shall bear fruit in patience.

Humility partakes in God's patience. The perfected soul waits for the good in silence, immobility and humility like God's own. Christ nailed on the cross is the perfect image of the Father.

No saint has been able to obtain from God that the past should not have been, or that he himself should grow ten years older in one day or one day older in ten years, or that ... No miracle can do anything against time. The faith that moves mountains is impotent against time.

God has left us abandoned in time.

.... God has separated force and the good in this world, and kept the good for himself.

His commandments have the form of asking.<sup>67</sup>

*God waits like a beggar ... Anyone who comes forward and speaks is using a little force. The Good which is nothing but good can only stand waiting.* This is why the Introduction to this project claimed that the religious picture *Christ is God* is both a religious confession and one impossible to state. What is Jesus? We cannot peel back his flesh to see his divinity. The incarnation is spiritual not a fact. Christ does not force his disciples to see him as God. To think that he could is just to misunderstand the spiritual world

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<sup>67</sup> Weil, "The Things of the World," p. 424-426.

where Christ's incarnation is a reality. He waits for them. He draws them near. He shows them what the kingdom is like by dining with tax collectors and associating with "sexual deviants." He shows them what the kingdom of heaven is like by proclaiming God's love for all people, especially those shunned by society. In Christ we see that God's love is not one of tyranny—like Zeus in the clouds, waiting to strike us down when we misstep—but like a father's for a child. Jesus is the Shepherd who will risk all to find us when we are lost. He shows God's love by submitting to suffering on the cross. Then, after, the resurrection the disciples come to *see* him as God.

This is the sense in the religious claim that *Christ is liberator*. This is the spiritual sense of the ongoing story of redemption and salvation in God. When this aspect of Christ is *seen* the worship of Christ *as* God is made possible. Jesus did not speak of his divinity he showed it. The love that Christ calls his disciples to is an unending—eternal—journey of redemption and reconciliation: with themselves, with each other, with God. Love is at the heart of divine knowledge in all its forms: in the Trinity, Incarnation, Resurrection, and Ascension.

What does it take to see Jesus? To follow him? Surrender. Sacrifice. A willingness to use the picture of God-bound-in-form to see through that very picture. Faith is the commitment to meditate on the confession that Christ is God in order to transcend the confession itself. Richard Foster's deeply spiritual—though often problematic—text *Celebration of Discipline* appeals to Kierkegaard on just this point:

"Seek ye first God's kingdom and his righteousness." What does this mean, what have I to do, or what sort of effort is it that can be said to seek or pursue the kingdom of God? Shall I try to get a job suitable to my talents and powers in

order thereby to exert an influence? No, though shalt *first* seek God's kingdom. Shall I then give all my fortune to the poor? No, though shalt *first* seek God's kingdom. Shall I then go out to proclaim this teaching to the world? No, though shalt *first* seek God's kingdom. But in a certain sense it is nothing, become nothing before God, learn to keep silent; in this silence is the beginning, which is, *first* to seek God's kingdom. ...<sup>68</sup>

After climbing up and tossing the ladder aside, we see that the rough ground before us is no different than the ground we had left. Yet it is different. *We* have changed. Faith does not call us to a higher plain. One where life is *set* as a matter of fact. One where we *submit* to matters of fact. That plain is an illusion. Seeing the plain before us as both immanent and transcendent is not something done once and for all, or even at the same time. But that itself is merely to describe what the life of faith is like. Perhaps there is no greater criterion for living on that plain than the ability to faithfully, prayerfully keep that vision in silence by letting it radiate through our being.

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<sup>68</sup> Foster, *The Celebration of Discipline*, p. 76.

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