

Wittgenstein's
Tractatus

History and Interpretation

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4

Kierkegaard and the *Tractatus*

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1 Introduction

Wittgenstein once said to Drury, ‘Kierkegaard was by far the most profound thinker of the last century. Kierkegaard was a saint’ (Drury 1981: 87). This chimes with G. H. von Wright’s remark that ‘Wittgenstein received deeper impressions from some writers in the borderland between philosophy, religion, and poetry than from the philosophers, in the restricted sense of the word. Among the former are St. Augustine, Kierkegaard, Dostoevsky, and Tolstoy’ (Malcolm 2001: 19). This seems to me an accurate assessment. Indeed, it has almost become a commonplace among Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard scholars to pay some form of lip-service to the thought that Wittgenstein held Kierkegaard in incredibly high regard. But although commentators like to mention this fact, most are at a loss about what else to do with it.¹ An excellent example of this kind of response is Bertrand Russell’s surprise, when he found that after the First World War Wittgenstein had, in Russell’s words, ‘become a complete mystic’. Russell wrote to Lady Ottoline Morrell on 20 December 1919, ‘I had found in his book a flavour of mysticism, but was astonished when I found that he has become a complete mystic. He reads people like Kierkegaard and Angelus Silesius, he seriously contemplates becoming a monk’ (Russell 2001: 198). Even more recent and more penetrating critics of Wittgenstein’s work, however, often either fail to see the extent to which Kierkegaard influenced Wittgenstein’s views on philosophy and religion or else misdescribe the points of contact between their respective authorships.

The problem is particularly acute as regards discerning any sort of parallel between the austere monolithic character of Wittgenstein’s early work and the astonishing prolixity of Kierkegaard’s pseudonymous production. For this reason, philosophers keen to make a connection between the *Tractatus* and Kierkegaard’s extensive oeuvre have traditionally focused on Wittgenstein’s conception of the ineffable and have sought to read this idea back into Kierkegaard’s central notion of ‘paradox’²—after

¹ Notable exceptions are Charles Creegan (1989), James Conant (1993), D. Z. Phillips (1993, 1999), Jamie Ferreira (1997), Stephen Mulhall (2001), and Mariele Nientied (2003).

² See e.g. Evans (1983).

all, as Wittgenstein himself once said to Waismann: ‘Man has the urge to run up against the limits of language . . . Kierkegaard too recognized this running up against something and even described it in much the same way (as running up against paradox)’ (Wittgenstein 1984: 68).³ James Conant has recently turned the tables on this kind of interpretative strategy by claiming that the ‘ineffability doctrine’ that commentators attribute to both authors alike, far from being endorsed by either of them, actually features only as a target in their work. In other words, Conant construes the central parallel between Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein as consisting not in ‘their sharing some mystical doctrine of ineffable truth but rather in their sharing a common twofold project of exposing the incoherence of any such doctrine and diagnosing the sources of its attraction’ (Conant 1993: 218).

Although I cannot argue it here,⁴ both accounts seem to me to be mistaken. Conant’s interpretation does have the virtue of not needing to ascribe incoherent doctrines to either Wittgenstein or Kierkegaard, but it does no justice to the intentions, ethical or otherwise, of either author and in fact comprises a severe distortion of their texts. There are, to be sure, interesting parallels between Kierkegaard and the early Wittgenstein, but the exposure (or, indeed, the endorsement) of a doctrine of ‘substantial nonsense’ (or of ineffable truth) is not one of them. For whilst, as it seems to me, Wittgenstein clearly *is* committed to the notion of ineffabilia in the *Tractatus*, Kierkegaard’s concerns are not with the limits of language and what might lie beyond them at all. Wittgenstein himself therefore appears guilty of imputing his own vision to Kierkegaard when he says that ‘Kierkegaard too recognized [this urge] and even described it in much the same way’. Kierkegaard neither recognized this urge nor described it in a similar way and hence the temptation to read him in Tractarian vein as either repudiating—in the manner of Conant—or as espousing—in the manner of Wittgenstein himself—an ineffability conception needs very much to be resisted.

The points of contact that can therefore be perceived between the early Wittgenstein and the Danish philosopher cannot be located in the actual endorsement (or rejection) of similar views about ‘ineffable truth’, but are rather to be found in a certain commonality of vision as regards ethics and religion. My main aim in this chapter is to offer a fuller account of this commonality. First, though, I would like to say something about the biographical evidence available for early Wittgenstein’s engagement with Kierkegaard.⁵

2 Historical background

There is every reason to suppose that Wittgenstein was introduced to the writings of Kierkegaard from a very early age. During his childhood and adolescence his elder

³ Except where an English translation is cited, translations are my own.

⁴ For the missing argument, see my 2004, as well as chapter 3 of my (2007). See also: Lippitt and Hutto (1998); McGinn (1999); Conant (2000 and 2002); Hacker (2000); Proops (2001); Sullivan (2002).

⁵ For a fuller account, see my (2007: ch. 1).

sister Margarete ('Gretl') served as his 'philosophical' mentor. In the words of Ray Monk, 'Gretl was acknowledged as the intellectual of the family, the one who kept abreast of contemporary developments in the arts and sciences, and the one most prepared to embrace new ideas and to challenge the views of her elders' (Monk 1991: 16). Given that Kierkegaard was Gretl's favourite author (Wuchterl and Hübner 1979: 30) and was generally very much en vogue in turn-of-the-century Vienna, it would be very surprising indeed if Gretl had not drawn her younger brother's attention to Kierkegaard's works.

Be that as it may, direct evidence is certainly available that Wittgenstein was exposed to some Kierkegaard subsequently. In 1914, while spending some time in Norway, Wittgenstein first came across Ludwig von Ficker, the editor of the literary journal *Der Brenner*, which published the work of Theodor Haecker, whose German translations of Kierkegaard first introduced the Danish philosopher to an Austrian audience. Among the Kierkegaard texts that featured in *Der Brenner* between 1913 and 1921 are the preface to *Prefaces*, the introduction to *Johannes Climacus*, the discourse 'At a Graveside' from *Three Discourses on Imagined Occasions*, the discourse 'The Thorn in the Flesh' from *Four Upbuilding Discourses, A Critique of the Present Age*, some journal entries from 1835 and 1836, as well as the discourse 'God's Strength in Human Weakness' ('*Die Kraft Gottes in der Schwachheit des Menschen*'). Wittgenstein clearly read this journal and even decided, through Ficker, to donate some of his family money to Austrian artists in need. Theodor Haecker was one of the beneficiaries (Monk 1991: 106–9).

Further evidence of Wittgenstein's engagement with Kierkegaard can be gleaned from the extensive correspondence of Wittgenstein's during the war period. Wittgenstein's sister, Hermine, for example, writes in her letter to Ludwig of 20 November 1917: 'Thank you very much for your lovely card from 13th November. You were perfectly correct in supposing that I did not receive the earlier one with your request for books, but I've just been out for them and a number of Kierkegaard volumes are already on the way. I hope they are the ones you want, because, given that I don't know anything about him and his writings, I simply chose a few at random. The *Diary of a Seducer*, which I bought in a different bookshop, will follow' (Wittgenstein 1996: 48). It is unfortunate that Hermine does not say which volumes she sent, but the fact that Wittgenstein had her send them to him at the Front suggests the importance they had for him.

Kierkegaard also comes up in the correspondence between Wittgenstein and his close wartime friend, Paul Engelmann,⁶ who quotes from the *Stages on Life's Way* in one of his letters to Wittgenstein. Engelmann says, "'If I had had faith, I would have

⁶ Wittgenstein first met Engelmann when he was in Olmütz. They became very close friends and Engelmann later collaborated with Wittgenstein on the house he built for his sister Gretl in the Kundmann-gasse in Vienna; see Monk (1991: 150–1, 235).

stayed with her”⁷ . . . It seems to me that you are lacking in faith’ (Engelmann 1970: 8.1.1918). To which Wittgenstein replies, ‘When you say that I do not have faith, you are quite right, except that I did not have it previously either. It is obvious that someone who wants to invent a machine in order to become a better person, that such a one has no faith. But what should I do? One thing is clear to me: I am much too bad to ponder about myself; I will either remain a swine or I will improve and that’s that! No transcendental twaddle when everything is as clear as a slap’ (Engelmann 1970: 16.1.1918).

From the notebooks and the coded diaries dating from this period it becomes clear that Wittgenstein was constantly preoccupied with spiritual matters. Although there are no direct references to Kierkegaard in these materials, it would, I think, not be an exaggeration to say that Wittgenstein was constantly suffering from a form of ‘Kierkegaardian despair’. The diaries reveal that Wittgenstein was continuously tormented by his moral worthlessness and his sense of being at odds with the world. Wittgenstein believed that this kind of unhappiness—what Kierkegaard would call despair—is the sign of a bad life, the mark of someone who is incapable of doing God’s will and who, as the previously cited letter suggests, lacks faith (Wittgenstein 1993a: 168–9).

In the *Notebooks* for 8.7.16 Wittgenstein equates doing God’s will with coming to terms with the facts, and at *Tractatus* 6.4321 he writes, ‘The facts all belong only to the task, not to the solution.’ On this conception of things, where life is seen as a task to be mastered (a conception that Kierkegaard shared), a lack of faith is therefore regarded as a *moral* failing. This is also the reason why Wittgenstein accepted the Dostoevskyan thought that if suicide is allowed, then everything is allowed. On 10.1.1917 Wittgenstein writes, ‘. . . suicide is, so to speak, the elementary sin’. This is so, because suicide is an evasion of the task that is life, a sign that one’s life is not in harmony with the facts, or, to put it religiously, is in rebellion against the will of God. An exposition of this view can be found in the writings of Anti-Climacus, the Christian author of *The Sickness unto Death*: ‘That is why the pagan . . . judged suicide with such singular irresponsibility, yes, praised suicide, which for spirit is the most crucial sin, escaping from existence in this way, mutinying against God . . . The point that suicide is basically a crime against God completely escapes the pagan.’⁸ So it seems that Wittgenstein would also have accepted the central Kierkegaardian notion that the opposite of sin is not virtue, but *faith*, and that only Christianity provides a real solution to the ‘problem of life’.⁹ In one of his coded diary entries from 1914 Wittgenstein says: ‘Bought Nietzsche volume 8 [containing *The Antichrist*] and read around in it. Was deeply

⁷ This is an allusion to Kierkegaard’s tortured relationship with his ex-fiancée, Regine Olsen.

⁸ Kierkegaard (1980: 46); subsequent references to this work will be abbreviated ‘SUD’.

⁹ Of course this is also an idea to be found in Tolstoy and we know that Wittgenstein was constantly reading Tolstoy’s *The Gospel in Brief* at this time. However, it is no part of my argument, here or elsewhere, to claim that Wittgenstein was only influenced by Kierkegaard in religious matters.

impressed by his antagonism towards Christianity. For also in his writings there is a grain of truth. To be sure, Christianity is the only *certain* way to happiness. But what if someone rejected this happiness?! Might it not be better to be ground to the dust [*zu Grunde gehen*] in the hopeless struggle against the external world? But such a life is meaningless. But why not lead a meaningless life? Is it unworthy?' (Wittgenstein 1991: 49)

It seems, therefore, that at this point in his life, although he could not come to have faith himself, Wittgenstein accepted the idea that a life without faith is meaningless, that without it we are mere playthings of contingency, doomed to a life of despair and, as Kierkegaard would doubtlessly add, spiritlessness [*Geistlosigkeit*]. In *Fear and Trembling*, for example, Kierkegaard's pseudonym, Johannes de Silentio, expresses the same idea as the quotation above, though more poetically: 'If a human being did not have an eternal consciousness, if underlying everything there were only a wild, fermenting power that writhing in dark passions produced everything, be it significant or insignificant, if a vast, never appeased emptiness hid beneath everything,¹⁰ what would life be then but despair?'¹¹

That Wittgenstein was no stranger to the religious phenomenology of 'fear and trembling' and generally couched his religious thoughts and feelings in Kierkegaardian terms is corroborated by a recently found journal entry from 1922 where Wittgenstein recounts the following experience:

I suddenly felt my complete nothingness and saw that God could demand of me what He wills on the condition that my life would immediately become meaningless if I didn't comply . . . I felt totally annihilated and in the hands of God who could at every moment do with me as He wills. I felt that God could at any time force me immediately to confess my crimes [*Gemeinheiten*]. That he could at any moment force me to take the worst upon myself and that I am not prepared to take the worst upon myself. That I am not now prepared to renounce friendship and all earthly happiness . . . As I said, tonight I saw my complete nothingness. God has deigned to show it to me. During the whole time I kept thinking about Kierkegaard and that my condition is 'fear and trembling'. (Wittgenstein 2004, entry for 13.1.1922)

This is quite remarkable—not only does the entry contain an obvious reference to the Danish philosopher, it is almost as if Kierkegaard himself had written it. Wittgenstein here identifies doing God's will with what de Silentio, in FT, calls the 'last stage before faith': 'infinite resignation'—renouncing all finite (relative) ends. But although Wittgenstein believes that disobedience will make his life meaningless, he cannot force himself to comply with God's commands. Nevertheless, Climacus, the pseudonymous author of *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, would probably say that Wittgenstein is poised on the brink of faith, as the feeling of complete self-annihilation before God that Wittgenstein mentions is, according to Climacus, one of the most decisive features

¹⁰ This is also reminiscent of Pascal's oft-quoted aphorism: 'Le silence éternel de ces espaces infinis m'effraie'.

¹¹ Kierkegaard (1983: 15); subsequent references to this work will be abbreviated 'FT'.

of religiousness: ‘Religiously, the task is to comprehend that a person is nothing at all before God or to be nothing at all and thereby to be before God, and he continually insists upon having his incapability before him, and its disappearance is the disappearance of religiousness.’¹²

It seems, therefore, that Wittgenstein read much Kierkegaard both during and immediately after the First World War—during which time he wrote the *Tractatus*—and it should therefore come as no surprise to find a certain Kierkegaardian flavour permeating that work. It is to an explication of this that I shall now turn.

3 Kierkegaard and the mysticism of the *Tractatus*

Paul Engelmann describes Wittgenstein’s attitude to life in the following way: ‘an ethical totalitarianism in all questions, a single-minded and painful preservation of the purity of the uncompromising demands of ethics, in agonizing awareness of one’s own permanent failure to measure up to them’ (Engelmann 1970: 109). Not only would this description be equally true of Kierkegaard, it also provides us with a key for understanding what James Conant finds so mystifying about early Wittgenstein—how he could have found the notion of ‘ineffabilia’ intelligible. But if we bear in mind that Wittgenstein was, as it were, an ‘ethical totalitarian’, then his motivations will no longer seem quite so bizarre. For, as Kant had already seen, if the ‘absolute value’ of value is not to be compromised, value can have no place in a merely contingent empirical world, as it would otherwise only be one more part of that world and *eo ipso* on the same plane as ‘the facts’. Consequently, there can be no propositions of ethics, since these would necessarily be true, if, *per impossibile*, they could be expressed. But, as Wittgenstein says, ‘The only necessity that exists is *logical* necessity’ (6.37).

The upshot of this is that the early Wittgenstein’s view of ethics, like Climacus’ in CUP, is radically anti-consequentialist: the ethical must be willed purely for its own sake and whatever effects my actions might have in the external world are completely irrelevant, since everything that happens in that world is utterly contingent and therefore, no matter how good my intentions are, they can always bring about a bad result. Consequently, what actually comes to pass is out of an individual’s control and no blame or praise can legitimately attach to it. This is how Climacus puts it:

True ethical enthusiasm consists in willing to the utmost of one’s capability, but also, uplifted in divine jest, in never thinking whether or not one thereby achieves something. As soon as the will begins to cast a covetous eye on the outcome, the individual begins to become immoral . . . —the individual demands something other than the ethical itself. A truly great ethical individuality would consummate his life as follows: he would develop himself to the utmost of his capability; in the process he perhaps would produce a great effect in the external world, but this would not

¹² Kierkegaard (1992: 461); subsequent references to this work will be abbreviated ‘CUP’.

occupy him at all, because he would know that the external is not in his power and therefore means nothing either *pro* or *contra*. (CUP 135–6)

That the external means nothing either *pro* or *contra* is also a consequence of Wittgenstein's Tractarian view of ethics. Given that Wittgenstein believes, in the *Tractatus*, that value is located outside the world and is, in this respect, transcendental like logic (6.421), it follows that ethical actions cannot be events in the world, for if they were, this would *eo ipso* strip them of all *ethical* content. In the 'Lecture on Ethics'—given as late as 1929—Wittgenstein explains:

Suppose one of you were an omniscient person and therefore knew all the movements of all the bodies in the world dead or alive and that he also knew all the states of mind of all human beings that ever lived, and suppose this man wrote all he knew in a big book, then this book would contain the whole description of the world; and what I want to say is, that this book would contain nothing that we would call an *ethical* judgement or anything that would logically imply such a judgement . . . all the facts described would, as it were, stand on the same level and in the same way all propositions stand on the same level. There are no propositions which, in any absolute sense, are sublime, important or trivial . . . Ethics, if it is anything, is supernatural and our words will only express facts; as a teacup will only hold a teacup full of water [even] if I were to pour out a gallon over it. (Wittgenstein 1993b: 39–40; cf. 6.41)

In other words, given Wittgenstein's dogmatic distinctions between what can and cannot be said and between fact and value, it cannot but follow that the ethical must either be a chimera or an inexpressible, mystical something. For Wittgenstein is trying to square the circle here by attempting to wed a positivistic view of language—sentences can only picture facts—to a romanticized absolutist conception of ethics. But, as Wittgenstein himself says, given that 'no state of affairs has, in itself, what I would like to call the coercive power of an absolute judge' (1993b: 40), such an attempt is *ex hypothesi* doomed to failure. And this is why Wittgenstein ends up drawing the same conclusion as Climacus when he says that 'the question about the *consequences* of an action must be unimportant.—At least those consequences should not be events. For there must be something right about the question we posed. There must indeed be some kind of ethical reward and punishment, but they must reside in the action itself' (6.422). Notice how much this chimes with CUP:

Victory in the outer demonstrates nothing at all ethically, because ethically the question is only about the inner. Punishment in the outer is negligible, and far from insisting with aesthetic busyness on visible punishment, the ethical proudly says: I shall punish, all right, namely, in the inner, and it is plainly immoral to class punishment in the outer as something comparable to the inner. (CUP 297)

Hence, although the two philosophers have got there in slightly different ways—Climacus is here criticizing the Hegelian notion of the identity of the inner and the outer while Wittgenstein is following through on his logical commitments—they nevertheless end up arriving at the same destination. That is to say, in order to defend

the absolute demands of ethics against the encroachment of the claims of contingency, the ethical is relegated, in both authors, to the realm of inwardness. The 'coercive power of an absolute judge' that both Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein require of the ethical is therefore to be found, on their conception, not in some external sanction, but rather within the individual himself, in the sense that his good or evil willing becomes constitutive of the kind of world that individual inhabits. This is why Wittgenstein says, 'if the good or bad exercise of the will does alter the world, it can alter only the limits of the world, not the facts—not what can be expressed by means of language. In short the effect must be that it becomes an altogether different world. It must, so to speak, wax and wane as a whole. The world of the happy man is a different one from that of the unhappy man' (6.43).

Kierkegaard seems to have something similar in mind when he distinguishes, for example, between the different existence spheres. For these, too, are in a relevant sense entire 'worlds' that require the use of different concepts which only become available once an individual has undergone an inner transformation. As Climacus says, 'In the world of spirit, the different stages [spheres] are not like cities on a journey, about which it is quite all right for the traveller to say directly, for example: We left Peking and came to Canton and were in Canton on the fourteenth. A traveller like that changes place, not himself; and thus it is all right for him to mention and to *recount* change in a direct, unchanged form. But in the world of spirit to change place is to be changed oneself, and therefore all direct assurance of having arrived here and there is an attempt *à la* Münchhausen' (CUP 281). Although the target here is Hegel and his 'direct assurance', in the system, of having reflected himself out of immediacy, the underlying idea is clearly the same as Wittgenstein's: ethical (or religious) transformation takes place in the inner and can't be cashed out directly, as it were, in philosophical propositions.

In other words, Kierkegaard's and Wittgenstein's emphasis on the inner is the result of a common moral absolutism that is to guard the sanctity of the ethical, as well as of a shared sense of powerlessness in the face of the contingency of the world which can, at any moment, reduce my ethical striving to nothing. Wittgenstein speaks, in this context, of being completely dependent on an 'alien will' and in this way the ethical very quickly acquires a religious countenance:

To believe in God is to understand the question of the meaning of life. To believe in God is to see that the facts of the world are not the end of the matter. To believe in God is to see that life has meaning. The world is *given* me, i.e. my will approaches the world completely from the outside as something finished . . . That is why we have the feeling that we depend on an alien will. *However this may be*, we *are*, in any case, in a certain sense dependent and what we are dependent on, we can call God. God would, in this sense, simply be fate or, what is the same: the world independent of our will. I can make myself independent of fate . . . In order to live happily, I have to be in agreement [*Übereinstimmung*] with the world . . . I am then, as it were, in agreement with that alien will on which I seem dependent. This means: 'I am doing the will of God' . . . When my conscience throws me off balance, I am not in agreement with something.

But what is this? Is it *the world*? It must be correct to say: conscience is the voice of God. (Wittgenstein 1993a; 8.7.1916)

Sections 6.43–6.4321 of the *Tractatus* are clearly modelled on these remarks from the *Notebooks*, without, however, identifying being in agreement with the world with doing the will of God. In fact, the only reference to God (in a religious context) occurs at *Tractatus* 6.432 where Wittgenstein says: ‘*How* things are in the world is a matter of complete indifference for what is higher. God does not reveal himself *in* the world.’ But given that Wittgenstein goes on to say, at 6.4321, that the facts all belong to the task not to the solution, this makes it clear, I think, that he must have had in mind something similar to the *Notebooks* passage. Indeed, as 6.43 cited above tells us, Wittgenstein, in the *Tractatus*, seems explicitly to identify the good will with being in agreement with the world (the facts), with being happy, and with doing the will of God. In other words, what he seems to be saying is that when my conscience does not, as it were, throw me off balance, i.e. when my will is good, I am in agreement with the world; I am consequently doing the will of God, and the world—to use his Tractarian metaphor—waxes as a whole. Hence, the important thing for Wittgenstein is not *how* the world is or *what* I do, but rather the *spirit* in which I view it and in which I perform my duties.

Climacus has a similar conception in mind when he writes, echoing Kant:

But freedom, that is the wonderful lamp. When a person rubs it with ethical passion, God comes into existence for him. And look, the spirit of the lamp is a servant . . . , but the person who rubs the wonderful lamp of freedom becomes a servant—the spirit is the Lord . . . So the resolving person says: I will—but I also want to have world-historical importance—*aber* [but]. So there is an *aber*—and the spirit vanishes again, because the rubbing has not been done properly, and the beginning does not occur. But if it has occurred or has been done properly, every subsequent *aber* must again be renounced, even if existence in the most flattering and inveigling way did everything to force it upon one. (CUP 138–9)

Climacus here voices many of the same ideas as Wittgenstein above: the notion that to serve the ethical is to do the will of God as well as the thought that this only becomes a possibility once I renounce my stake in worldly affairs—once, as Wittgenstein would put it, I make myself independent of the facts. For, as Wittgenstein says in another *Notebook* entry, ‘Even if everything we desired happened, this would only be the luck of the draw, as there is no logical connection between will and world . . .’ (Wittgenstein 1993a: 5.7.1916). And a little later he adds, in Stoic vein, ‘only that life is a happy one which is able to renounce the comforts of the world. For such a life these comforts are just so many mercies of fate’ (Wittgenstein 1993a: 13.8.1916).

For both Wittgenstein and Climacus, then, the ethical life is a life of renunciation and in this sense it is very close to the religious. One would consequently be very much misled if one were to think that because the two authors emphasize, like Kant, the ‘inner’, or, as Climacus would say, ‘subjectivity’, as of paramount importance in ethics, the force of the ethical ‘ought’ is in any way diminished thereby. Quite to the contrary:

if one's conscience is, indeed, conceived to be the voice of God, then its wrath is more terrible than any external punishment could be, since, as Climacus notes so perceptively, 'If in my relationship with God I regard what I am doing as good and do not keep watch over myself with the infinite's mistrust of me, then it is just as if God, too, were content with me, because God is not something external that quarrels with me when I do wrong but the infinite itself that does not need scolding words, but whose vengeance is terrible—the vengeance that God does not exist for me at all, even though I pray' (CUP 162–3). Hence, on the conception that Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard share, there is an internal connection between the good will (moral virtue) and faith and a lack of the latter is therefore tantamount to a moral failing. This is why Wittgenstein says in the letter to Engelmann mentioned earlier that 'it is obvious that someone who wants to invent a machine in order to become a better person, that such a one has no faith' (Engelmann 1970: 16.1.1918). For someone who shirks the painful process of inner transformation, and would rather create a *deus ex machina* in order to do the work for him, is clearly still enslaved, in Climacus' words, to the 'abers' of this world and consequently the spirit of the Lord vanishes again. The result is the hopelessness and despair that Wittgenstein felt—as his diary entries confirm—during much of the time of writing the *Tractatus* and which Anti-Climacus depicted so ably in *The Sickness unto Death*.

In other words, Kierkegaard's and Wittgenstein's quasi-religious conception of ethics implies what Anti-Climacus calls the 'upbuilding thought' of being a self 'directly before God': a self, that is, that has God and not the merely human as a criterion. As Anti-Climacus puts it, the 'self takes on a new quality and qualification by being a self directly before God. And what infinite reality the self gains by being conscious of existing before God, by becoming a human self whose criterion is God! . . . Just as only entities of the same kind can be added, so everything is qualitatively that by which it is measured, and that which is its qualitative criterion [*Maalestok*] is ethically its goal [*Maal*]; the criterion and goal are what define something, what it is, with the exception of the condition in the world of freedom, where by not qualitatively being that which is his goal and his criterion a person must himself have merited this disqualification. Thus the goal and the criterion still remain discriminatingly the same, making it clear just what a person is not—namely, that which is his goal and criterion' (SUD 79–80). Naturally, on such a conception, human guilt cannot but be infinitely magnified into sin, which perhaps explains the intense feelings of moral worthlessness that plagued Wittgenstein throughout his life. For with God or God's will as the measure of moral conduct, every failing becomes a sin against God. As Anti-Climacus confirms, 'because sin is against God it is infinitely magnified. The error [of older Christian dogmatics] consisted in considering God as some externality and in seeming to assume that only occasionally did one sin against God. But God is not some externality in the sense that a policeman is. The point that must be observed is that the self has a conception of God and yet does not will as he wills, and thus is disobedient. Nor does one only occasionally sin before God, for every sin is before God, or, more

correctly, what really makes human guilt into sin is that the guilty one has the consciousness of existing before God' (SUD 80). Here Anti-Climacus repeats, and religiously accentuates, the point made by Climacus above that, because God is not something external, or, as Wittgenstein says in the *Tractatus*, does not reveal himself in the world, it is impossible ever to escape his scorching gaze, for this is located within. So, to continue with Climacus' metaphor, the wonderful lamp of freedom must be handled with care, as the spirit of the Lord, once conjured up, is here to stay. That is to say, once a self recognizes that it is before God, Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard seem to agree, it can never divest itself of this knowledge on pain of losing itself or, what amounts to the same, plunging into despair.

Anti-Climacus' definition of faith as a state in which 'the self in being itself and in willing to be itself rests transparently in God' (SUD 82) can therefore be seen to parallel Wittgenstein's identification, in the *Notebooks* and in the *Tractatus*, of being in agreement with the world (the facts), with doing the will of God and with being happy. For the 'faithful' self that wills to be itself is, in Wittgenstein's parlance, in agreement with itself and the world—i.e. it 'happily' accepts the limitations and constraints imposed upon it from outside without viewing this as cause for despair. So the self, in faith, despite constantly struggling to better itself, bears a positive relation towards itself and the world. In this respect, the self's particular constitution and the way the world happens to be (the facts) becomes irrelevant in the sense that both these things, as Wittgenstein says, only belong to the task, not the solution. The self must therefore continue to work on itself—must, as Climacus puts it, continue to strive—but without regarding the way it is made or the tasks that the world sets it as reasons, as it were, to pick a quarrel with God. The attainment of such a perspective is consequently marked by not feeling at odds with the world (or alienated from oneself) and by ceasing to perceive life as a problem. This is why Wittgenstein says, 'the solution of the problem of life is seen in the vanishing of the problem' (6.521).

In order for such a perspective of faith to be a genuine possibility, Anti-Climacus would argue, real trust in God is necessary and this involves the conviction, on the side of the believer, that for God everything is possible: 'The *believer* sees and understands his downfall, humanly speaking . . . , but he believes. For this reason he does not collapse. He leaves it entirely to God how he is to be helped, but he believes that for God everything is possible . . . The believer has the ever infallible antidote for despair—possibility—because for God everything is possible at every moment. This is the good health of faith that resolves contradictions' (SUD 39–40). Hence, with this armour, so to speak, the self, in faith, avoids both possibility's despair, what Anti-Climacus characterizes as the failure to obey, 'to submit to the necessity in one's life', and necessity's despair, a kind of fatalism that can see nothing but unalterable facts (determinism). Wittgenstein's account in the *Tractatus*—although containing all other aspects of Anti-Climacus' formulation—is devoid of this dimension of possibility, for what it proposes is merely what Johannes de Silentio calls infinite resignation (the renunciation of all relative ends). And although de Silentio would agree that the dying to immediacy

that early Wittgenstein proposes—renouncing the comforts of the world—is a necessary condition for faith, it is only the last step before faith and not equivalent to faith itself, as the knight of faith, in the end, regains the world after having renounced it. Wittgenstein’s identification of the will of God with the world seems to preclude this, however, as, on his conception, happiness can only be achieved by making oneself completely independent of the facts. But if God and the world (the facts) are equated, as in Wittgenstein’s *Notebooks*, then this would seem to imply also having to make oneself independent of God. So, it seems that Engelmann’s diagnosis of a lack of faith has turned out to be correct: Wittgenstein, given his ethical-religious conception, has contracted Anti-Climacus’ disease—the sickness unto death—but without, in the end, being able to reach for the ‘radical cure’ that Christianity would provide.

So far we have seen, then, that Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein share a Kant-inspired absolutist conception of ethics, which, however, ultimately goes beyond Kant’s, for it is inextricably bound to the notion of God’s inexorable presence and constant admonishment. Furthermore, Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard both reject the German philosopher’s rationalistic view that even God is subject to the decrees of human reason.¹³ In a conversation with the Vienna Circle from 1930 Wittgenstein makes this clear:

Schlick says that there are two conceptions of the essence of the good in theological ethics: according to the more superficial view, the good is good because God wills it; according to the more profound view, God wills the good because it is good. I believe that the first conception is the more profound: good is what God commands. For it cuts off the way to any kind of explanation of why the good is good, whereas the second conception is precisely the superficial, rationalistic one which pretends that reasons can be given for this. The first conception clearly states that the essence of the good has nothing to do with the facts and can consequently not be explained by a proposition. If there is a sentence that expresses precisely what I mean, it is this: good is what God commands. (Wittgenstein 1984: 115)

That God is the *terminus ad quem* or final arbiter on what is good or absolute, and that no further grounds can be given for this, is also Johannes de Silentio’s view in FT, where the issue is presented in a particularly radical way using the biblical story of Abraham and Isaac as a paradigmatic example. In the section entitled ‘Is There an Absolute Duty to God?’ de Silentio says:

The ethical is the universal, and as such it is also the divine. Thus it is proper to say that every duty is essentially duty to God, but if no more can be said than this, then it is also said that I actually have no duty to God. The duty becomes duty by being traced back to God, but in the duty itself I do not enter into relation to God . . . God comes to be an invisible vanishing point, an impotent thought, his power is only in the ethical, which fills all of existence.¹⁴ Insofar, then, as someone

¹³ See e.g. Kant (1974: 201–6, 245–53).

¹⁴ Notice how this echoes the Kantian (1974: 202) view: ‘There are no special duties to God in a common [*allgemeinen*] religion; for God cannot receive anything from us; we cannot act upon or for him . . .’.

might wish to love God in any other sense than this, he is a visionary, is in love with a phantom, which, if it only had enough power to speak, would say to him: I do not ask for your love—just stay where you belong. (FT 68)

If Kant and Hegel are right, in other words, then, as de Silentio goes on to point out, Abraham cannot be the father of faith he is commonly hailed to be, but ought rather to be regarded as an especially abhorrent type of potential murderer. For Abraham conceived his duty to God as absolute, i.e. as something over and above all his other duties, even the duty to his son. And on such a conception, *pace* Kant and Hegel, it must at least in principle be possible that a collision can occur between one's duty to God and all one's other ethical commitments. If this is deemed impossible *ab initio*, then, as de Silentio says, it implies that there actually is no duty to God, but then of course there is also no such thing as faith, as the 'coercive power of the absolute judge' then becomes nothing more than the impotent power of an underlabourer of the ethical (and hence, on the Kantian view, of reason).

Consequently, what both Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein are rejecting here—and this is a feature that remains constant throughout the latter's authorship—is the craving for explanation and the idea that everything can be justified by appeal to the high court of reason. And this temptation, both philosophers believe, is all-pervasive: it is a deep-seated *malaise* that is not only to be found in ethics and religion, where, both would argue, it is especially pernicious, but in philosophy and science as well. It is surely not coincidental that in the sections directly preceding Wittgenstein's remarks on ethics and the mystical in the *Tractatus*, he says:

There is no compulsion making one thing happen because another has happened. The only necessity that exists is *logical* necessity. The whole modern conception of the world is founded on the illusion that the so-called laws of nature are the explanations of natural phenomena. Thus people today stop at the laws of nature, treating them as something inviolable, just as God and Fate were treated in past ages. And in fact both are right and both wrong: though the view of the ancients is clearer in so far as they have a clear and acknowledged terminus, while the modern system tries to make it look as if *everything* were explained. (6.37–6.372)

Compare this with what Climacus says in CUP:

An objective religious person in the objective human mass does not fear God; he does not hear him in the thunder, because that is a law of nature, and perhaps he is right. He does not see him in events, because they are the immanent necessity of cause and effect, and perhaps he is right. But what about the inwardness of being alone before God? Well, that is too little for him; he is not familiar with it, he who is on the way to accomplish the objective. (CUP 544)

In other words, what both Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein are saying in these passages is that it is possible to see the world in two different ways: in terms of the 'so-called laws of nature' or as manifestations of the will of God or of Fate. Neither conception, both authors believe, can be finally justified or absolutely grounded; and this, at least, the religious perspective makes clear by acknowledging, as Wittgenstein says, 'a clear

terminus'. In this respect the religious conception is ethically superior to the scientific one, for it curbs philosophical (or scientific) *hubris* by recognizing a clear limit. What is more, both authors seem to urge, although there need not necessarily be a conflict between the two points of view, the scientific conception can stand in the way of seeing things from a religious perspective. For in order for a religious vantage point to be possible, one needs, as Wittgenstein says, to awaken to wonder, and in its desire to explain everything, 'science is a way of sending him [man] to sleep again' (1980: 5). And this is also the reason why, according to Climacus, the 'objective man' knows nothing about the inwardness of being alone before God, as the *spirit* in which science is carried on these days is not, in the end, compatible with such a conception.

So, it is precisely in order not to be the kind of philosopher who, as Climacus says in his other book, makes 'supernatural things ordinary and banal' (Kierkegaard 1985: 53) that early Wittgenstein banishes all that is great and important—ethics, aesthetics, and religion—into the realm of the ineffable and eschews all theorizing about it. For in the sphere of value, Wittgenstein thinks, theories will necessarily bypass the problems which trouble us: 'Whatever one were to tell me, I would reject it, and precisely not because the explanation is wrong, but because it is an *explanation* . . . One cannot teach the ethical. If I could only explain the nature of the ethical to someone else by means of a theory, then the ethical would have no value . . . For me a theory has no value. A theory does nothing for me' (Wittgenstein 1984: 116–17). Or, as Climacus would say, the solution to the problem of life is not to be found in a *doctrine*—in a sum of propositions that gives me a recipe for how to live—but, rather, 'in the vanishing of the problem' (6.521), which, Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein agree, can only be brought about by the right way of life.

4 Conclusion

We can now understand the spirit in which the final two 'propositions' of the *Tractatus* are intended: '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. What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence' (6.54–7). I would like to suggest that these sentences constitute an *ethical* revocation of the work which shows, as Wittgenstein writes in the letter to von Ficker, that the *Tractatus* consists of two parts: of the one which is here, and of everything that Wittgenstein has *not* written. 'And precisely this second part,' Wittgenstein insists, 'is the important one. For the Ethical is delimited from within, as it were, by my book; and I'm convinced that, *strictly* speaking, it can ONLY be delimited in this way. In brief, I think: All of that which *many* are *babbling* today, I have defined in my book by remaining silent about it' (quoted in Monk 1991: 178).

In other words, the *Tractatus* highlights the importance of the ethical precisely by having next to nothing to say about it. In this sense, silence is not just the upshot of Wittgenstein's restrictive conception of the sayable, it is also a *moral* injunction: where only babble or transcendental twaddle is possible, it is a sin not to hold one's tongue.¹⁵ And here there is an interesting parallel to be discerned not only with the name of the author of *Fear and Trembling* (Johannes de *Silentio*), but also with the revocation that John, the Ladder (Kierkegaard's Johannes Climacus), offers us in an 'Understanding with the Reader' at the end of CUP:

Just as in Catholic books, especially from former times, one finds a note at the back of the book that notifies the reader that everything is to be understood in accordance with the teaching of the holy universal mother Church, so also what I write contains the notice that everything is to be understood in such a way that it is revoked, that the book has not only an end but has a revocation to boot. (CUP 619)

That is to say, Climacus is intimating that a personal appropriation of the book's message is more important than its content: once the perspective that the book is trying to convey has been grasped—once the book has, that is, been 'understood'—author and text 'annul' themselves and are, in this sense, 'revoked'. Consequently, the reader is to see that 'the understanding is a revocation—the understanding with him as the sole reader is indeed the revocation of the book. He [the reader] can understand that to write a book and to revoke it is not the same as refraining from writing it, that to write a book that does not demand to be important for anyone is still not the same as letting it be unwritten' (CUP 621). This also seems to be the reason why Wittgenstein says in the Preface to the *Tractatus*: 'Perhaps this book will be understood only by someone who has himself already had the thoughts that are expressed in it—or at least similar thoughts.—So it is not a textbook.—Its purpose would be achieved if it gave pleasure to one person who read it and understood it.' (Notice how Climacus speaks of 'the sole reader' and Wittgenstein of 'one person'.)

What this means is that it is the purpose of neither the *Tractatus* nor of CUP to communicate new knowledge, but rather to achieve the change in perspective that, in the end, makes all philosophical talk—for example (though not exclusively) about the ethical or the religious—superfluous. In this respect, as Wittgenstein says in the letter to von Ficker, 'the point of the book is ethical.' Or, indeed, as Kierkegaard puts it in 'A First and Last Explanation':

What I in one way or another know about the pseudonymous authors of course does not entitle me to any opinion, but not to any doubt, either, of their assent, since their importance . . . unconditionally does not consist in making any new proposal, some unheard-of discovery, or in founding a new party and wanting to go further, but precisely in the opposite, in wanting to have

¹⁵ Which implies, of course, that, strictly speaking, Wittgenstein should not have written the *Tractatus* at all or, at any rate, should not have written more than proposition 7: 'what we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence.'

no importance, in wanting, at a remove that is the distance of double-reflection, once again to read through solo, if possible in a more inward way, the original text of individual human existence-relationships, the old familiar text handed down from the fathers. (CUP 629–30)

And this, I would like to think, is also the *Tractatus*' aim, however implausible this might, at first blush, appear.

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