

For Sissy and Uli

A Confusion of the Spheres

*Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein on
Philosophy and Religion*

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OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

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Great Clarendon Street, Oxford OX2 6DP

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford.
It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship,
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Published in the United States
by Oxford University Press Inc., New York

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First published 2007

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Data available

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Data available

Typeset by Laserwords Private Limited, Chennai, India

Printed in Great Britain
on acid-free paper by
Biddles Ltd., King's Lynn, Norfolk

ISBN 978-0-19-922982-6

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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An honest religious thinker is like a tightrope walker. He almost looks as though he were walking on nothing but air. His support is the slenderest imaginable. And yet it really is possible to walk on it.

Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*

Acknowledgements

The writing of this book was made possible by a three-year 'Hertha Firnberg' research fellowship awarded by the Austrian Science Fund. I would like to express my gratitude to this institution as well as to the Philosophy Department of the University of Vienna for providing me with an office and a congenial place in which to work during the tenure of the award. I would also like to thank Konrad Paul Liessmann for supporting my application as well as the two anonymous referees who favourably reviewed it.

This book has been greatly improved by critical comments from Brian McGuinness, Denis McManus, Stephen Mulhall, three anonymous readers for Oxford University Press, and, in particular, Aaron Ridley, whose generous provision of good advice has gone well beyond the call of duty. I also wish to thank Stephen Mulhall for supporting my application for a Visiting Fellowship at New College, Oxford, where, during the Michaelmas term of 2004, much fruitful work was conducted.

I have at one point used material previously published. Sections IV to VI of chapter 3 are based on my paper 'No New Kierkegaard', *International Philosophical Quarterly* 44/4 (2004): 519–34. My thanks to the editor for permission to draw on this material here.

Last, but not least, I would like to thank Peter Momtchiloff, Helen Gray and the staff from Oxford University Press for their help and support.

Introduction

Hegel is a Johannes *Climacus* who does not storm the heavens, like the giants, by putting mountain upon mountain, but climbs aboard them by way of his syllogisms.

Søren Kierkegaard, *Papers and Journals: A Selection*¹

I would be afraid that you would try and give some sort of philosophical justification for Christian beliefs, as if some sort of proof was needed . . . The symbolisms of Catholicism are wonderful beyond words. But any attempt to make it into a philosophical system is offensive.

Ludwig Wittgenstein²

On 1 June 1310, in Paris, the French mystic Marguerite Porète was burnt at the stake for heresy. Her 'sins' consisted in affirming the primacy of faith and love over reason and propagating mystical union with God through dying to the self or 'annihilation' of the soul. In her book, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, she had written:

You who would read this book that I have writ
If you will please your heed to it to lend,
Consider well what you may say of it,
For it is very hard to understand
But let Humility lead you by the hand,
She, keeper of the key to Learning's treasure-chest,
She, the first virtue, mother to all the rest.

¹ trans. Alistair Hanay (London: Penguin, 1996), 100.

² Quoted by M. O'C. Drury, 'Notes on Conversations with Wittgenstein', in Rush Rhees (ed.), *Recollections of Wittgenstein* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 102.

Men of theology and Scholars such as they
 Will never understand this writing properly,
 True comprehension of it only may
 Those have who progress in humility;
 You must let Love and Faith together be
 Your guides to climb where Reason cannot come,
 They who this house as mistressess do own . . .

So you too must abase your learning now,
 Built only upon Reason, and your true
 And perfect trust completely you must show
 In the rich gifts which Love will make to you,
 And Faith will cause to shine in brightest hue.
 So understanding of this book they'll give
 Which makes the Soul the life of Love to live.³

A list of fifteen 'propositions' was extracted from this book, allegedly contravening Church doctrine; and it was these that formed the basis of her condemnation.⁴

I

It is remarkable how much Porète's words—written so very long ago (in 1296 to be precise)—and the spirit that animates them chime with a number of things Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein say about religious belief. For Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein also believe that spiritual cultivation is more important for a religious understanding than intellectual adherence to a set of dogmas; they, too, believe that 'truth in the sense in which Christ is the truth is not a sum of statements, not a definition . . . , but a life.'⁵ In Wittgenstein's words, faith is faith in what is needed by my *heart*, my *soul*, not my speculative intelligence. For it is my soul with its passions, as it were with its flesh and blood, that has to be saved, not my abstract mind. Perhaps we can say: Only *love* can believe the Resurrection. Or: it is *love* that believes the Resurrection.⁶

³ *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, translated from the French with an Introductory Interpretive Essay by Edmund Colledge, J. C. Marler and Judith Grant (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999), 9.

⁴ Introductory Interpretive Essay to *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, xiv–xvi.

⁵ Søren Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, ed. and trans. Howard and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 205, henceforth PC.

⁶ *Culture and Value*, ed. G. H. von Wright, trans. Peter Winch (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980), 33e, henceforth CV.

In the light of this, it is perhaps not entirely surprising that, her fateful end apart, parallels can be discerned between Porète's treatment at the hands of the Inquisition and the ways in which Kierkegaard's and Wittgenstein's religious thought has been regarded in much of the philosophical literature. For, just as the Inquisition seemed to find nothing wrong with the idea of distilling a body of doctrine from a work—written in the form of a dialogue between Love, Reason and the Trinity and in the language of courtly love—whose object is to show that this is precisely the wrong way in which to approach spiritual questions, so Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein have, more often than not, been treated as 'premise-authors'⁷ whose intellectually disreputable claims warrant philosophical excommunication. J. L. Mackie, for example, is of this opinion. He attributes a form of 'irrationalism' to Kierkegaard which, in his words, is tantamount to playing 'a sort of intellectual Russian roulette'.⁸ Alvin Plantinga shares Mackie's interpretation:

According to the most common brand of extreme fideism, however, reason and faith *conflict* or *clash* on matters of religious importance; and when they do, faith is to be preferred and reason suppressed. Thus, according to Kierkegaard, faith reaches 'the absurdity that the eternal is the historical'. He means to say, I think, that this proposition is among the deliverances of faith but absurd from the point of view of reason; and it should be accepted despite this absurdity.⁹

Nor have Wittgenstein's views on religious belief fared much better. They, too, like Kierkegaard's thought, have been condemned as 'fideistic' and as committing Wittgenstein to the thesis that religious beliefs are immune from rational criticism and support.¹⁰ According to John

⁷ This is Petrus Minor's (the pseudonymous author of Kierkegaard's *Book on Adler*) term for authors primarily interested in the communication of 'results'. See chapter 2 for further elaboration of this.

⁸ J. L. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 216.

⁹ 'Religious Belief as Properly Basic', in Brian Davies (ed.), *Philosophy of Religion. A Guide and Anthology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 91. This kind of view is, unfortunately, endemic. It cannot only be found in Kierkegaard's critics, but also in the works of sympathetic advocates who argue that faith is, literally, 'beyond' or 'against' reason. An especially prominent example of the latter is C. Steven Evans' work. See, for example, *Kierkegaard's Fragments and Postscript* (New York: Humanity Books (imprint of Prometheus Books), 1999) and *Faith Beyond Reason* (Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1998). For similar types of argument see Julia Watkin, *Historical Dictionary of Kierkegaard's Philosophy* (Maryland: The Scarecrow Press, 2001) and Patrick Gardiner, *Kierkegaard* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

¹⁰ See, for example, John Hyman, 'The Gospel according to Wittgenstein', in Robert Arrington and Mark Addis (eds), *Wittgenstein and Philosophy of Religion* (London: Routledge, 2001), 1–11, and Kai Nielsen's collected articles in Kai Nielsen and D. Z.

Hyman, this commitment 'has the interesting consequence that, as Writgenstein [himself] said, "if Christianity is the truth then all the philosophy written about it is false"' (*Culture and Value*, 83), but it has little else to recommend it.¹¹

It is no accident that such similar kinds of criticism should be levelled at both Kierkegaard and Writgenstein by the philosophical Inquisition. For, as this book will show, Writgenstein's account of religious belief is very clearly indubited to Kierkegaard's. But this is not the only parallel between them. A remarkable congruence of philosophical method also exists between both authors that makes the attempt to cash out their thought in a set of propositions as point-missing as it is to construe Porté's work as a kind of theoretical *scala paradisi*. Neither Kierkegaard nor Writgenstein is concerned with combating a philosophical theory in order to replace it with another, but rather with undermining the philosophical misapprehensions that stand in the way of seeing that what we take to be the only available alternatives, are in fact a set of false dichotomies. That is to say, what is revolutionary in Kierkegaard's and Writgenstein's conception is precisely to challenge the idea that as regards religious faith only two options are possible—either adherence to a set of metaphysical beliefs (with certain ways of acting following from these beliefs) or passionate commitment to a 'doctrineless' form of life; *tertium non datur* (there is no third way).

II

Part of the reason why the two philosophers who I am concerned with have been so widely misrepresented is, of course, that both pose notorious interpretative problems. The problems that they pose are, as a matter of fact, quite dissimilar: in Kierkegaard's case, the difficulties revolve around the pseudonymous and 'literary' character of many of his most important writings; while, in Writgenstein's case, one of the most prominent issues concerns the relation between his earlier and his later work. The principal problems are different, then, but both are thorny, and whole books could be—indeed have been—written about either. The present book's purposes are different, however; and I will not be trying to

Phillips, *Writgensteinian Fideism?* (London: SCM Press, 2005). The latter will be the subject of detailed discussion in chapter 4.

¹¹ John Hyman, *op.cit.*, 10.

add to that literature here. Nevertheless, because there are genuine interpretative difficulties to be faced, it would probably be sensible to say a few words at the outset about the approach that I intend to take. The remarks that follow are necessarily brief and programmatic, but they should provide an indication, at least, as well as due warning perhaps, of the guiding interpretative principles that I have adopted in what follows. None of these principles, in my view, should strike anyone as very radical.

Kierkegaard's writings are all by Kierkegaard. Some of them he published under his own name; others he published under a variety of pseudonyms (sometimes presenting himself as editor); and others again, such as his journals, he didn't publish at all. But he did write all of them, and it is important to give this homely fact its proper weight if the task of interpreting him is not to lapse into one or another form of eccentricity—a genuine danger when confronted with an *oeuvre* of such diverse and unusual character. Here are four interpretative strategies that might appear to be licensed by the nature of Kierkegaard's production.

The first—let's call it the 'literal-minded reading'—is over-impressed by the fact that Kierkegaard wrote all of Kierkegaard's writings, and treats everything, whether signed or pseudonymous, published or unpublished, as a straightforward report of his views. This reading has the advantage that it takes Kierkegaard seriously, in one sense at least, as a thinker—that is, as someone who did actually have some views to report. But it doesn't take him seriously enough. In conflating the published and unpublished writings it fails to do Kierkegaard the basic courtesy, due to any writer, of distinguishing between what he thought worth reading and what he (perhaps) did not; and—still more damagingly—it fails to leave room for the possibility that there might have been some *point* to his decision to publish certain of his works pseudonymously. I will not be adopting a reading of this sort here.

The second strategy—call it the 'purely literary reading'—is the mirror image of the first, and treats all of Kierkegaard's writings as if they were some sort of high-spirited romp, pieces of the merest ventriloquism designed, as it might be, to prove that this particular author, at any rate, is well and truly dead. This reading has the advantage that it at least notices, and tries to make something of the fact, that Kierkegaard's work often has a strongly literary dimension (signalled among other things by his use of pseudonyms). But it flattens his *oeuvre* out every bit as crassly as the literal-minded reading does, while reducing him at the same time to a pointless—indeed a thoughtless—one-joke wonder. I will not be adopting this strategy either.

The third strategy, which we might term the 'killjoy reading,' is alert to the literary dimension of Kierkegaard's work, but is suspicious of it, and is inclined to regard the pseudonymous writing as a kind of alarming hobby of Kierkegaard's, to be sidelined in favour of the signed works (and perhaps also of the journal entries). On this reading, Kierkegaard is to be taken seriously as a thinker—but only, or at any rate pre-eminently, when he writes in a reasonably ordinary way and does so under his own name. When he adopts an alias, he's up to something funny, and what he writes under it had better be treated with caution. A reading of this sort is certainly to be preferred to either of the other two that I have canvassed. But I will not be advancing such a reading—partly because it shares with the literal-minded reading a reluctance to entertain the possibility that what Kierkegaard is up to when he writes pseudonymously might actually be germane to his thought, and partly because, in my view at least, the pseudonymous works are often among his most interesting, and I would not wish to soft-pedal them in what follows.

Nor, finally, will I adopt a fourth strategy (mentioned here largely for the sake of completeness, and for which no label springs readily to mind), which reverses the emphasis of the killjoy reading, and gives absolute interpretative priority to the more overtly literary aspects of Kierkegaard's production, while discounting everything that he wrote under his own name (including, implicitly, his journals). It is hard to see what might be said in favour of such an approach, and no one, so far as I am aware, has ever seriously embraced it.

None of these strategies seems warranted to me, for the reasons that I have given. My own strategy—which I think might reasonably be described as 'moderate'—is different. It begins, as I have said, from the observation that Kierkegaard wrote all of Kierkegaard's writings, and from the presumption that any of them might therefore be helpful in interpreting his thought. In this much, I have some sympathy with the literal-minded approach set out above. I am, however, mindful that his writings are of different sorts; and I try to reflect that fact in the readings that I offer. So, for example, I give priority to the published works, and draw on the unpublished ones only where they corroborate or amplify something that Kierkegaard said in print. I am also convinced that there is a serious philosophical point to Kierkegaard's deployment of pseudonyms and other literary devices—I try to say what that point is in chapters 2 and 4—and so am careful not simply to conflate Kierkegaard's voice with those of his aliases. Nevertheless, and this strikes me as just as important, if hardly very surprising, certain themes,

preoccupations and views are quite demonstrably shared by Kierkegaard and (at least some of) his pseudonyms; and, where this is the case, I do not hesitate to enlist Climacus, say, or Johannes *de Silentio*, as Kierkegaard's spokespersons. To refuse to do this, it seems to me, would be the merest asceticism, however apt the killjoy reading's caution may be in some respects. And by taking this approach, or so I hope to show, it is possible to give proper interpretative weight to every aspect of the Kierkegaard's *oeuvre* while doing justice to, and making sense of, the fact that much of that *oeuvre* is highly 'literary' and the fact that a lot of it was published pseudonymously.

The interpretative conundrums confronting a potential exegete of Wittgenstein's work are somewhat different. The first concerns the question of how Wittgenstein's early work, the *Tractatus*—a work that notoriously declares itself to be nonsense—is to be read. This (already in itself almost insurmountable) exegetical difficulty has recently acquired a new spin given the rise to prominence of the so-called 'resolute reading' of the *Tractatus*, challenging the 'traditional' approaches taken to Wittgenstein's book that see it as promoting a self-undermining conception of attempting to say what, by the book's own lights, can only be 'shown'. The alternative vision offered by 'resolute readers' is that early Wittgenstein did not endorse—most of—what the *Tractatus* purports to be saying, but is deliberately drawing the reader into a nonsensical trap to be seen through and discarded. This reading not only has the advantage of saving Wittgenstein from refuting himself, it also confers the benefit of making the man appear less 'disappointed' in the sense that, on this reading, many of the same principles seen to be at work in Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* can already be found in the *Tractatus*. Nevertheless I will not be adopting such a reading here, for the price we have to pay for it—coming in the way of simply writing off two-thirds of what Wittgenstein actually says—strikes me as much too high.

Despite this substantial disagreement (which will be the focus of chapter 3) with 'resolute readers', however, I do share with them the sensible thought that whatever the differences between the author of the *Tractatus* and the author of the *Investigations*, 'early' and 'later' Wittgenstein are nevertheless the same person. That is to say, while I believe that many of Wittgenstein's philosophical views have clearly changed significantly in the later work—such as, for example, his thoughts on language and what lies beyond its limits—his conception of philosophy, and of the ethical dimension of the practice of philosophy, remains (or so I will argue) essentially the same.

Finally, something needs to be said about where Kierkegaard stands in relation to the development of Wittgenstein's thought. Here I intend to show that while interesting parallels can be discerned between Kierkegaard and the *Tractatus*, by far the most significant similarities between the two thinkers are to be found in Wittgenstein's later work. This explains why I have specifically devoted only one—albeit very long—chapter to a discussion of the relation between Kierkegaard and the *Tractatus* (chapter 3), while, in the other chapters, drawing mainly from Wittgenstein's post-*Tractatus* writings.

III

The aims of this book are threefold. First, to trace the extent of Kierkegaard's influence on Wittgenstein. Second, to show how remarkably like-minded the two philosophers are on such important issues as the nature of philosophy and religious belief. Third, to rectify the distortions that Kierkegaard's and Wittgenstein's views have been subjected to in the philosophical literature and to dispel the illusions that stand in the way of taking their concerted critique of the orthodox conceptions of philosophy and religion as seriously as it deserves.

The first chapter of the book will be devoted to the task of assembling biographical as well as textual evidence for the claim that Wittgenstein read and was deeply involved with Kierkegaard's work throughout his life. The second will be devoted to a discussion of the parallels to be found in Kierkegaard's and Wittgenstein's conception of philosophy. This will set the stage for a discussion, in chapters 3 and 4, of the parallels in the ways in which Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein conceive of religious belief. While it will be shown that much of the later Wittgenstein's thought on religion can be said to be directly modelled on a Kierkegaardian view, the connection between early Wittgenstein's conception and Kierkegaard's is altogether more subtle.

More specifically, it will be shown (in chapter 3) that where the parallels between the two thinkers are generally thought to be found, namely in a common doctrine of 'ineffable truth'—whether this doctrine is taken to be rejected or endorsed by both authors¹²—there aren't in

¹² C. Steven Evans thinks both philosophers endorse it (see Evans, *Kierkegaard's Fragments and Postscript*, 222), whereas James Conant believes Kierkegaard's and Wittgenstein's common strategy consists in the dispelling of this illusion. For an in-depth discussion of the latter, see chapter 3.

fact any. This will go some way towards deflating Mackie's critique, mentioned earlier, by showing that we need not choose between a 'plain nonsense view' of religious belief—what 'resolute readers' of the *Tractatus* appear to propound—or a form of fideistic irrationalism. More will then be said about the latter type of criticism in chapter 4, where Kierkegaard's and (the later) Wittgenstein's account of religious belief will be developed and the charges of 'fideism' and 'incommensurability' examined and rejected. If this endeavour succeeds, I hope, among other things, to have pulled the rug away from under some surprisingly ingrained philosophical prejudices, and to have illuminated a potentially very rich 'third way' of approaching issues concerning religious faith. And, as the Inquisition no longer seems very active, I hope to have nothing more to fear from my efforts than scholarly censure.

1

Kierkegaard's Influence
on Wittgenstein's Thought

Kierkegaard was by far the most profound thinker of the last century. Kierkegaard was a saint.

Ludwig Wittgenstein¹

INTRODUCTION

In his biographical sketch of Wittgenstein G. H. von Wright writes, '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.'² This seems to me an accurate assessment. Indeed, it has almost become a commonplace today that Wittgenstein held Kierkegaard in incredibly high regard. Nevertheless, although many commentators take heed of this fact, few go beyond merely noting it.³ Much, therefore, still needs to be

done when it comes to tracing the extent of Kierkegaard's influence on Wittgenstein and the deep-running intellectual affinities between them. The greater availability of biographical material on Wittgenstein, notably his diaries and letters, has made this task easier than it would have been only a couple of decades ago.

I believe that the main reason for the still perceptible lacuna in scholarship as regards this issue stems from the fact that what Wittgenstein cared about most—ethics, aesthetics and religion—he, in Tractarian fashion, passed over in silence, for the most part, while Kierkegaard's pseudonymous authorship is, by comparison, astonishingly prolific on these matters.⁴ This fact has no doubt fuelled the common misunderstanding that Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein are engaged in radically different—even incommensurable—projects. An excellent example of this 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 felt in his (Wittgenstein's) book (the *Tractatus*) 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, and he seriously contemplates becoming a monk.'⁵ Even more recent critics of Wittgenstein's work, however, often either fail to see the extent to which Kierkegaard influenced Wittgenstein's views on religion or else underestimate the points of contact in their respective authorships. The following will serve as two examples.

In his perceptive account of logic and sin in the writings of Wittgenstein, Philip Shields writes:

While... St. Augustine, Kierkegaard, Tolstoy and William James, were clearly read by Wittgenstein and in some sense deeply admired by him, there generally appears to be little direct influence... No doubt there are some strands of influence in places, but, with the possible exception of Schopenhauer, Wittgenstein's views of religious matters seem to be fairly well developed long before we have clear evidence of his having read particular writers.⁶

published journals throwing new light on Wittgenstein's interest in Kierkegaard or of the current debates surrounding the interpretation of Kierkegaard's and Wittgenstein's work.

⁴ The stereotyping of Kierkegaard as a 'Continental' philosopher and of Wittgenstein, despite his 'Continental' origin, as 'analytic', has no doubt also contributed to this.

⁵ Quoted in *Ludwig Wittgenstein: Cambridge Letters*, ed. Brian McGuinness and G. H. von Wright (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 140.

⁶ Philip Shields, *Logic and Sin in the Writings of Ludwig Wittgenstein* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 7.

¹ Quoted by M. O.C. Drury, in Rhees, *Recollections of Wittgenstein*, 87.

² In Norman Malcolm, *Ludwig Wittgenstein, A Memoir* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 19.

³ To my knowledge only two monographs exist on this subject: Charles Creagan, *Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard—Religion, Individuality and Philosophical Method* (London: Routledge, 1989), and Mariele Nientied, *Kierkegaard und Wittgenstein—'Hinterwärdchen in das Wahre'* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2003). In the latter book Nientied concentrates exclusively on the subject of 'indirect communication' and its inherent problems, as she believes that 'Søren Kierkegaard and Ludwig Wittgenstein neither have an academic discipline nor an era in common, and least of all a school or a domain of discourse' (Introduction, 4, translation mine). I don't see why that should matter, if it can be shown that Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard share common views on religion and the point of philosophical activity. Creagan's book, on the other hand, does not suffer from such over-hasty generalizations, but came too early to take account either of the recently

I am not going to take issue with this claim as regards Augustine, Tolstoy and James, but, with respect to Kierkegaard, Shields's verdict seems to me to be patently wrong. In this chapter I therefore intend to show that the evidence speaks against Shields's view.

The other common misconception—that Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard were engaged in very different enterprises—can be found, among other places, in the writings of D. Z. Phillips. Although I agree with him in rejecting James Conant's recent interpretations of the revocations to be found in Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard,⁷ I think that Phillips over-emphasizes the discontinuities in Kierkegaard's and Wittgenstein's work by claiming that, in the end, the former is a purely religious author and that his writings, in this sense, are 'partisan,'⁸ while Wittgenstein, on the other hand, offers a 'non-partisan,' 'contemplative'⁹ conception of philosophy. He says, 'I claim that a contemplative conception of philosophy is not to be found in Kierkegaard. He is a religious thinker, concerned with specific confusions concerning Christianity. Kierkegaard never doubts the categories of the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious, whereas Wittgenstein wonders at their very possibility. An asymmetry therefore exists between their authorships.'⁹ While I do not intend to demonstrate that what seems different is really the same—how ironic that would be given that Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard both chastise Hegel for doing just that!¹⁰—I am going to show that the distinction Phillips draws isn't as clear-cut as he supposes.

For, firstly, Wittgenstein, too, was motivated by religious concerns. After all, he once said to Drury, 'I am not a religious man but I cannot help seeing every problem from a religious point of view.'¹¹ This remark rightly led Drury to wonder 'whether there are not dimensions in Wittgenstein's thought that are still largely being ignored'. 'Have I seen,' he goes on to ask himself, 'that the *Philosophical Remarks* could have

been inscribed "to the glory of God"?'¹² Or that the problems discussed in the *Philosophical Investigations* are being seen from a religious point of view?¹³ Secondly, I will be arguing that Kierkegaard was not a purely religious author in the sense that he was *only* concerned with the dispelling of the 'monstrous illusion' that Christianity exists in Christendom. Rather, I will show that Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard are united in their common aim of paving the way, in their writings, for an *authentic existence*—an existence that is free of self-deception and illusion. In both authors, I will argue, this rigorous demand is an ethical one, and, although both Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard would agree that philosophy cannot help one to become the kind of person capable of leading such a life, it can certainly clear away the conceptual confusions and obstacles that might stand in the way of leading it. Indeed, it seems to me that Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard both desire the kind of reader for whom, ideally, philosophical clarity *would* lead to *existential* clarity, that is, to a breakdown of the distinction between a 'contemplative' and a 'partisan' conception of philosophy. This, I will argue, is the ethical lynchpin uniting their work.

In other words, I intend to show that Phillips's asymmetry (just like the asymmetry between Wittgenstein's relative silence on ethical-religious matters and Kierkegaard's comparative verbosity) is only an apparent one, which ultimately reveals more, rather than less, common ground between the two thinkers. In the present chapter, though, our task will be to assemble evidence for the claim that Wittgenstein read and was deeply involved with Kierkegaard's work throughout his life. Only then will we be in a position to assess the extent to which Kierkegaard's thought left its mark on Wittgenstein's own philosophical activity.

I TESTIMONIAL EVIDENCE

There is every reason to suppose that Wittgenstein was introduced to the writings of Kierkegaard from a very early age.¹⁴ During his

⁷ See chapter 3.
⁸ D. Z. Phillips, *Philosophy's Cool Place* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1999), 14.

⁹ Wittgenstein once said to Drury, 'Hegel seems to me to be always wanting to say that things which look different are really the same. Whereas my interest is in showing that things which look the same are really different. I was thinking of using as a motto for my book a quotation from *King Lear*: "I'll teach you differences."' (Some Notes on Conversations with Wittgenstein, 157.) Wittgenstein couldn't be more in agreement with Kierkegaard on this point.

¹⁰ For an interesting discussion of what exactly Wittgenstein could have meant by that, see Norman Malcolm, *Wittgenstein, A Religious Point of View?*, edited with a response by Peter Winch (New York: Cornell University Press, 1993).

¹² In the introduction to the *Philosophical Remarks* Wittgenstein wrote: 'I would like to say, "This book is written to the glory of God", but nowadays this would be the trick of a cheat, i.e. it would not be correctly understood.' Quoted in Rhees, *Recollections of Wittgenstein*, 78.

¹³ M. O'C. Drury, 'Some Notes on Conversations with Wittgenstein', in Rhees, op. cit., 79.

¹⁴ This section deals primarily with evidence that Wittgenstein read Kierkegaard—testimony collated from conversations with friends, correspondence, etc.—that is not

childhood and adolescence his elder 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.'¹⁵ Given that Kierkegaard was Gretl's favourite author¹⁶ and was generally very much in 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 appeared in *Der Brenner* between 1913 and 1921 are the preface to *Præfates*, 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 *Die Kraft Gottes in der Schwachheit des Menschen*.¹⁷ 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.¹⁸ Further evidence of Wittgenstein's engagement with Kierkegaard can be gleaned from his extensive correspondence during the war period. Wittgenstein's sister, Hermine, for example, writes in her letter to Ludwig from 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,

taken from Wittgenstein's own notebooks, diaries or published writings (occasional reference to some of the latter is of course unavoidable). Section II, on the other hand, deals specifically with references to Kierkegaardian themes in Wittgenstein's own writings.

¹⁵ Ray Monk, *The Duty of Genius* (London: Vintage, 1991), 16.

¹⁶ See Kurt Wuchterl and Adolf Hübner, *Wittgenstein* (Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1979), 30.

¹⁷ I have so far not managed to locate an English translation of this discourse.
¹⁸ See Monk, *Duty*, 106–9.

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.¹⁹

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 speaks for itself.

Kierkegaard also comes up in the correspondence between Wittgenstein and his close wartime friend, Paul Engelmann,²⁰ 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 stayed with her'²¹ It seems to me that you are lacking in faith.²² 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 to turn him into 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 riddle when everything is as clear as a slap.²³

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.²⁴

¹⁹ *Wittgenstein Familienbriefe*, ed. Brian McGuinness, Maria Ascher and Otto Pflersmann (Vienna: Holder-Pichler-Tempsky, 1996), 48, translation mine.

²⁰ Wittgenstein first met Engelmann when he was at the Front in Ohmutz. They became very close friends and Engelmann later collaborated with Wittgenstein on the house he built for his sister Gretl in the Kundmannngasse in Vienna. See Monk, op.cit., 150–1 and 235.

²¹ This is an allusion to Kierkegaard's tortured relationship with his ex-fiancée, Regine Olsen.

²² Letter from 8.1.1918; translation mine. In Paul Engelmann, *Ludwig Wittgenstein. Briefe und Begegnungen* (Vienna and Munich: Oldenbourg, 1970), 18.

²³ Letter from 16.1.1918. Ibid.

²⁴ See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tagebücher 1914–16*, in *Werkausgabe Band 1* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1993c), 168–9. All subsequent translations mine.

In the *Notebooks* Wittgenstein equates doing God's will with coming to terms with the facts,²⁵ and at *Tractatus* 6.4321 he writes, 'The facts all merely belong to the task, not to the solution.'²⁶ 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.²⁷ 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.'²⁸ 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. The parallels with Anti-Climacus²⁹ *The Sickness Unto Death*, be they conscious or not, are striking. Anti-Climacus says, '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.'³⁰ From what has been said so far, it seems that Wittgenstein would therefore also have agreed with the central Kierkegaardian notion that the opposite of sin is not virtue, but *faith*. Wittgenstein appears to have accepted, too, Kierkegaard's central contention that only Christianity provides a real solution to the 'problem of life',³¹ as one of his coded diary entries from 1914 reveals:

Bought Nietzsche volume 8 [containing *The Antichrist*] and read around in it. Was deeply 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?³²

²⁵ See *Tagebücher*, 8.7.16, 168–9.

²⁶ *Werkausgabe* Band 1, 84, translation mine.

²⁷ For a more detailed discussion of this, see chapter 3, section VIII.

²⁸ *Werkausgabe* Band 1, 187.

²⁹ Kierkegaard's 'highest', i.e. most Christian, pseudonym.

³⁰ Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death*, ed. and trans. Howard and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980a), 46, henceforth SUD.

³¹ 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.

³² *Gehime Tagebücher*, ed. Wilhelm Baum (Venna: Turia and Kant, 1991), 49. Letter dated 8.12.1914, translation mine.

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. In this revolt against contingency, we are again hard pressed not to hear echoes of Kierkegaard. In *Fear and Trembling*, for example, Kierkegaard's pseudonym, Johannes *de Silentio*, expresses the same idea as the quotation above, just 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,³³ what would life be then but despair?'³⁴

It seems, therefore, that Wittgenstein read much Kierkegaard both during and after the First World War (during which time he wrote the *Tractatus*). He also discussed Kierkegaard's works with his friends Paul Engelman and Ludwig Hänsel, a fellow schoolteacher of Wittgenstein's in Tattenbach, in whose correspondence with Wittgenstein we find mention of the trouble that Hänsel had with sending Wittgenstein Kierkegaard's *Practice in Christianity*. In the notes to this volume of correspondence, the editors claim that it is certain that Wittgenstein was also reading other Kierkegaardian works at that time, for Karl Gruber, one of Wittgenstein's most talented pupils, recalls seeing books with 'weird titles' in Wittgenstein's room (and most of Kierkegaard's writings would fit that description). One of them contained the word 'anxiety' and it is sensible to assume that this was Kierkegaard's *The Concept of Anxiety*.³⁵ More frequent direct references to the Danish thinker, however, only start to abound in Wittgenstein's later remarks to friends. Especially rich sources of these are the recorded conversations that Wittgenstein had with Maurice Drury,³⁶ Norman Malcolm³⁷ and O. K. Bouwsma.³⁸ I will attempt to present a synoptic view of the most important themes

³³ This is also reminiscent of Pascal's oft-quoted aphorism: 'Le silence éternel des espaces infinis m'effraie.'

³⁴ *Fear and Trembling*, ed. and trans. Howard and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 15, henceforth FT.

³⁵ See *Ludwig Hänsel—Ludwig Wittgenstein. Eine Freundschaft*, ed. Ilse Somavilla, Anton Uiretkircher and Christian Paul Berger (Innsbruck: Haymon, 1994), 56 and 278. See also Wüchertl and Hübner, *Wittgenstein*, 96.

³⁶ See Rhees, *Recollections*.³⁷ See Malcolm, *Memoir*.

³⁸ See O. K. Bouwsma, *Wittgenstein. Conversations 1949–51*, ed. J. L. Craft and Ronald E. Husrwit, (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1986).

that emerge from these remarks, starting with Drury's account, followed by Malcolm's and Bouwsma's.

In 'Some Notes on Conversations with Wittgenstein' Drury mentions the first time that Wittgenstein spoke to him about Kierkegaard. Wittgenstein says, 'Kierkegaard was by far the most profound thinker of the last century. Kierkegaard was a saint.'³⁹ This statement is remarkable in two ways. First, Wittgenstein was not prone to use superlatives, especially not of other philosophers. Second, the juxtaposition of 'profound thinker' and 'saint' is interesting, as it reveals how closely entwined the philosophical and the ethical dimensions of someone's character are for Wittgenstein. A 'profound thinker' is not simply a person who has 'profound' thoughts, but someone whose life expresses—or is emblematic of—these thoughts. Kierkegaard would have wholeheartedly agreed. Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard concur, in other words, that there is no profundity without authenticity and that it is therefore imperative for the philosopher to strive for both. It seems to me that much of Wittgenstein's great admiration for Kierkegaard derives from his thinking that Kierkegaard, more than perhaps any other philosopher, managed to make both his life and his work into an 'existence-communication'.

Drury then relates how Wittgenstein went on to speak of the three existence-spheres that dominate Kierkegaard's writing: 'the aesthetic, where the objective is to get the maximum enjoyment out of this life; the ethical, where the concept of duty demands renunciation; and the religious, where this very renunciation itself becomes a source of joy'. About the latter Wittgenstein says—and here again the 'personal' and the 'philosophical' aspects of a problem appear to merge—"Concerning this last category I don't pretend to understand how it is possible. I have never been able to deny myself anything, not even a cup of coffee if I wanted it. Mind you I don't believe what Kierkegaard believed, but of this I am certain, that we are not here in order to have a good time.⁴⁰ The latter remark again reveals what has already been noted with respect to the 'earlier' Wittgenstein, that although he did not (quite) come to have faith himself, he did regard his life and work from a 'religious point of view', that is, as Anti-Climacus would say, as a task to be mastered 'before God' (SUD 79–82) and therefore in the most ethically rigorous way possible.⁴¹

Drury's records, however, not only show that Wittgenstein agreed with Kierkegaard about the ethical dimension of philosophy, but that he also shared many of Kierkegaard's views on the nature of religious belief. Here is an especially good example. On one occasion Drury discussed with Wittgenstein his intention to become a priest to which Wittgenstein reacted sceptically. He said, 'I would be afraid that you would try and give some sort of philosophical justification for Christian beliefs, as if some sort of proof was needed. . . . The symbolisms of Catholicism are wonderful beyond words. But any attempt to make it into a philosophical system is offensive.'⁴² Here one would be forgiven for thinking that it is Johannes Climacus, the author of *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*,⁴³ who is doing the talking.

This impression is reinforced by the following two remarks which again reveal that Wittgenstein shared with Kierkegaard a disdain for giving religion a 'rational' foundation and making it 'more probable': 'But the New Testament doesn't have to be proved to be true by historians either. It would make no difference if there had never been a historical person as Jesus is portrayed in the Gospels; though I don't think any competent authority doubts that there really was such a person.'⁴⁴ And in a similar vein: 'If you can accept the miracle that God became man, then all these difficulties are as nothing. For then it is impossible for me to say what form the record of such an event should take.'⁴⁵ The views Wittgenstein expresses here are identical to those propounded by Climacus in CUP, where an entire chapter is devoted to 'The Historical Point of View', in order to show that history is irrelevant to faith. Climacus says:

Thus everything is assumed to be in order with regard to the Holy Scriptures—what then? Has the person who did not believe come a single step closer to faith? No, not a single step. Faith does not result from straightforward

for example, *Tagebücher*, 11.6.1916, 167 (translation mine): 'What do I know about God and the purpose of life? I know that this world is. . . . That something is problematical about it which we call its meaning. That this does not lie within the world, but outside it. . . . That life is the world. That my will penetrates the world. That my will is good or evil. That Good or Evil are therefore somehow connected with the meaning of the world. The meaning of life, i.e. the meaning of the world, we can call God.' See also *A Lecture on Ethics*, in Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Occasions*, ed. James Klägge and Alfred Nordmann (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1993a), 36–44.

³⁹ Rhees, *Recollections*, 102.

⁴⁰ Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, ed. and trans. Howard and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992a); henceforth CUP.

⁴¹ *Recollections*, 101.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 164.

³⁹ See note 1.

⁴¹ Wittgenstein (especially the 'early' one) often did not make a distinction at all between what he called the 'ethical' (or 'Ethics' with a capital 'E') and the religious. See

scholarly deliberation, nor does it come directly; on the contrary, in this objectivity one loses that infinite, personal, impassioned interestedness, which is the condition of faith. . . if passion is taken away, faith no longer exists, and certainty and passion do not hitch up as a team. (CUP 29)

That the *Postscript* was often on Wittgenstein's mind is also borne out by Drury's recalling how Wittgenstein once quoted to him the following remark of Lessing's:

If God held closed in his right hand all truth, and in his left the single and untrifling striving after truth, adding even that I always and forever make mistakes; and said to me: Choose! I should fall humbly before his left hand and say: Father grant me! the pure truth is for you alone.⁴⁶

It is curious that Drury, who knew the work of Kierkegaard well, does not go on to mention that this quote by Lessing occupies a central place in CUP, which is where Wittgenstein might have originally got it from. This episode also shows that Wittgenstein, who, according to Drury, 'quoted with great emphasis Lessing's remark', seems to be in agreement with its spirit: a rejection of philosophical *hubris* and system-mongering. Kierkegaard naturally quotes it as a gibe against his favourite adversary, Hegel:

When Lessing said these words, the system was presumably not finished; alas, and now he is dead! If he were living now, now when the system has been completed for the most part or is at least in the works and will be finished by next Sunday, believe me, Lessing would have clutched it with both hands. (CUP 106)

That Wittgenstein knew the *Postscript* well and greatly esteemed it is also corroborated by Norman Malcolm who says the following about Wittgenstein's conception of religion:

I believe that Wittgenstein was prepared by his own character and experience to comprehend the idea of a judging and redeeming God. But any cosmological conception of a Deity, derived from the notions of cause or infinity, would be repugnant to him. He was impatient with 'proofs' of the existence of God, and with attempts to give religion a *rational* foundation. When I once quoted to him a remark of Kierkegaard's to this effect: 'How can it be that Christ does not exist, since I know that He has saved me?', Wittgenstein exclaimed: 'You see! It isn't a question of *proving* anything!'

Malcolm continues, 'Kierkegaard he [Wittgenstein] also esteemed. He referred to him, with something of awe in his expression, as a "really

⁴⁶ *Recollections*, 134.

religious" man. He had read the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*—but found it "too deep" for him.⁴⁷ By the latter Wittgenstein meant, I think, that this work exhibits a level of religiousness which he felt to be beyond him. As Malcolm says:

I suspect that he regarded religious belief as based on qualities of character and will that he himself did not possess. Of Smyrthes and Ansonbe, both of whom had become Roman Catholics, he once said to me: 'I could not possibly bring myself to believe all the things that they believe.' I think that in this remark he was not disparaging their belief: It was rather an observation about his own capacity.⁴⁸

These remarks again suggest a strong affinity between Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard: both believe that coming to be religious cannot be the result of a philosophical argument and is not tantamount to accepting a metaphysical theory. Rather, it is a matter of becoming a certain sort of person—one conscious of his sins and prepared to accept the help of a redeemer. On this view, therefore, only the *ethical* can lead one to religion,⁴⁹ not metaphysical speculation.

In this respect it is interesting to note that in 1983, in the 'Notes' to the second edition of his *Memoir*, Malcolm (as a result of finding that religious remarks permeate *Culture and Value* and that religious thoughts and feelings dominate Drury's 'Conversations with Wittgenstein') modifies his earlier claim, made in 1958, that Wittgenstein was not a religious man.⁵⁰ Malcolm says, 'Thus, if it is right to say that Wittgenstein was not a religious person, there must be weighed against this the fact that his reflections about himself and mankind, and even about the aims of his intensive philosophical work, were penetrated by thoughts and feelings of a religious character.'⁵¹ And it should have become apparent by now that Wittgenstein's religious thoughts are clearly inspired by, and therefore cannot be seen in isolation from, his admiration for Kierkegaard.

Naturally, Wittgenstein also said some 'critical' things about Kierkegaard. Here is an example from a letter to Malcolm from 1948. Wittgenstein says, 'I've never read the *Works of Love*. Kierkegaard is far

⁴⁷ *Memoir*, 59–60. ⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 60.

⁴⁹ In this respect Kierkegaard's and Wittgenstein's conception also has strong affinities with Kant's.

⁵⁰ With the publication of *Denkbelegungen* (Wittgenstein's diaries 1930–2 and 1936–7) this assessment is thrown even more into question.

⁵¹ *Memoir*, 83.

too deep for me, anyhow. He bewilders me without working the good effects which he would in deeper souls.⁵² This remark again reveals that Wittgenstein regarded Kierkegaard as being on a higher spiritual and religious level than himself, a fact that Wittgenstein sometimes seemed to feel ambivalent about. This is, for instance, brought out in the following comment made to Bouwsma, although the latter is not entirely confident about its correctness: 'Kierkegaard is very serious. But he [Wittgenstein] could not read him much. He got hints. He did not want another man's thought all chewed. A word or two was sometimes enough. But Kierkegaard struck him almost as like a snob, too high, for him, not touching the details of common life.'⁵³ It is interesting to compare this remark, made in 1949, with the following diary entry from 1937: 'Nothing is as difficult for me as modesty. I am noticing this again now that I am reading Kierkegaard. Nothing is as difficult for me as feeling inferior; although it is only a matter of seeing things in their true light.'⁵⁴ Although I don't want to put too much weight on this remark, I do think that it perhaps helps to explain Wittgenstein's relative reticence as regards acknowledging his intellectual debt to Kierkegaard. If Wittgenstein did indeed feel 'inferior' to Kierkegaard, he may have wanted to downplay the influence that the latter had on him. This view is also given some plausibility by H. D. P. Lee's report that '(Wittgenstein) told me that he learned Danish in order to be able to read Kierkegaard in the original,⁵⁵ and clearly had a great admiration for him, though I never remember him speaking about him in detail.'⁵⁶

II REFERENCES TO KIERKEGAARD IN WITTGENSTEIN'S WRITINGS⁵⁷

Apart from the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein published nothing—with the exception of a book review and 'Some Remarks on Logical Form'—during

⁵² *Memoir*, 106. ⁵³ O. K. Bouwsma, op.cit., 46.

⁵⁴ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Denkbelegungen*, ed. Ilse Sommariva (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1999), 81; translation mine (ibid. all the others taken from this work).

⁵⁵ This is also corroborated by Maurice Drury who says, 'When some years later Kierkegaard was translated into English, largely by Walter Lowrie, Wittgenstein was displeased with the poor style of this translator. He completely failed to reproduce the elegance of the original Danish' (in Riees, *Recollections*, 88).

⁵⁶ H. D. P. Lee, 'Wittgenstein 1929–31', *Philosophy* 54 (1979): 218.

⁵⁷ This includes discussion of obviously Kierkegaardian themes, even where Kierkegaard is not mentioned directly by name.

his lifetime. His second major work, the *Philosophical Investigations*,⁵⁸ was published posthumously in 1953 and throughout his lifetime Wittgenstein remained dissatisfied with the book he kept attempting to write and which, apart from the first part, remained fragmentary. He once said to Drury, 'It is impossible for me to say in my book one word about all that music has meant in my life. How then can I hope to be understood?'⁵⁹ This remark might equally well be applied to religion. While the concluding, 'mystical' remarks in the *Tractatus* are notorious, in the *Investigations* there is only a single allusion to theology—§373: 'Grammar tells what kind of object anything is. (Theology as grammar.)'—and yet it is clear from everything that has been said so far that religion and religious thoughts occupied a central place in Wittgenstein's life. The fact that Wittgenstein remained silent about these matters in his most influential work should therefore not be seen, as it often has been, as an indication that these things did not greatly concern him. In fact, *Culture and Value*, as well as the recently published diaries from the thirties (some of whose entries overlap with remarks in CV), testify to Wittgenstein's lifelong involvement with religious issues. We can therefore only speculate as to what the reasons might have been for Wittgenstein's reticence.⁶⁰ Perhaps he did not find a natural way of incorporating the remarks he made, for example, in CV into the PI; perhaps his intense desire to do these problems justice demanded such exacting standards that Wittgenstein, with characteristic modesty, felt that he could not possibly meet them (after all, he was extremely critical of his own work in general). In this respect, Wittgenstein may have wanted, in Tractarian fashion, to confine himself to silence, rather than to 'dirty a flower with muddy hands'.⁶¹

Although we have found in the previous section that there are many points of contact between Kierkegaard and the early Wittgenstein, Kierkegaard's influence on Wittgenstein's later views on religion appears to have been much more profound. Given that the *Tractatus* and the *Tractatus*-inspired *Lecture on Ethics* will be the subject of detailed

⁵⁸ Ed. G. E. M. Anscombe, Rush Riees and G. H. von Wright (Oxford: Blackwell, 1958), trans. G. E. M. Anscombe; henceforth PL.

⁵⁹ Riees, op.cit., 79.

⁶⁰ None of this implies, of course, that Wittgenstein's philosophy in general doesn't have important implications for the philosophy of religion.

⁶¹ This is what Wittgenstein, while his student in Cambridge, once said to Russell, when the latter chastised him for not stating any arguments for his point of view. To which Russell replied 'that he had better acquire a slave to state the arguments'. See Monk, op.cit., 54.

discussion later on and there aren't any direct references to Kierkegaard in these works,⁶² I will move straight on to a discussion of the diaries from the thirties, which contain a plethora of remarks that very clearly allude to the Dane. Indeed, most of the entries revolving around spiritual matters (and these make up more than half of the text) deal overtly with Kierkegaardian issues. I will give a few examples and will then move on to a discussion of CV, the *Lectures and Conversations on Religious Belief* and Wittgenstein's *Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough*.

The following entry, for instance, immediately calls to mind Anticlimacus' *Practice in Christianity*:

To know oneself is awful, because one knows at the same time the living requirement and that one falls short of it. But there are no better means for coming to know oneself than by seeing the paragon (*den Vollkommenten*). This is why the paragon must cause a storm of outrage in human beings, if they don't want utterly to humble themselves. I think the words 'Blessed is he who is not offended at me' [Mat 11:6] mean: blessed is he who can endure the sight of the paragon. For you would have to sink down into the dust before him, and you don't like doing that.⁶³

The theme of 'offence' dominates the whole of *Practice in Christianity* and an entire chapter of this work is devoted to Matthew 11:6 'Blessed is he who is not offended at me.' We already know that Wittgenstein was reading this book in 1921 and there seems to be no doubt that he went back to it in 1937.

In the diaries there is also textual evidence to support the claim that Wittgenstein read *The Concept of Anxiety*, *Philosophical Fragments* and *The Sickness Unto Death*:

God as a historical event in the world is as paradoxical, exactly as paradoxical, as that a certain action in my life has been at such and such a point sinful. This means that a moment (*ein Augenblick*) of my history's having eternal validity is not more or less paradoxical than that a moment or a certain period of time in world history should have eternal validity.⁶⁴

⁶² An exception is the following remark from the *Lecture on Ethics*: 'And I will make my point still more acute by saying "It is the paradox that an experience, a fact, should seem to have supernatural value"' (in *Philosophical Occasions*, 43). It is the paradox 'is a very Kierkegaardian turn of phrase, a connection Wittgenstein himself noticed (see the end of section II above). It also calls to mind Lessing's remark that 'contingent historical truths can never become a demonstration of eternal truths of reason', which is the subject of discussion on 93–106 of CUP.

⁶³ *Denkbelegungen*, 95.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 63.

This is a succinct reformulation of two of the central ideas—the paradoxical nature of Christ and the paradoxical nature of sin—pervading all the aforementioned writings. Indeed, Wittgenstein is even employing Kierkegaard's own concepts: 'paradox', 'sin', 'the moment', 'eternal validity' and even Hegel's term—'world history'. Wittgenstein's reaction to these ideas is also thoroughly Kierkegaardian: 'If I now think about my sins and that I have performed these actions is only a hypothesis, why do I repent of them as if no doubt about them were possible? That I now remember them is my evidence and the basis for my repentance and the reproach that I am too cowardly to confess them.'⁶⁵ That the consciousness of sin can't be approached hypothetically, as if a subject for scientific enquiry, is the main contention of Vigilius Haufniensis, the pseudonymous author of Kierkegaard's *The Concept of Anxiety*.

The editor of the diaries, Ilse Somavilla, suggests that Wittgenstein also seems to have read Constantin Constantius' (a further Kierkegaardian pseudonym) *Repetition*,⁶⁶ as she believes that this is what Wittgenstein is referring to when he says in the following entry from 1931: 'What show I, so to speak, put on in the theatre (Kierkegaard) in my soul doesn't make its condition any more beautiful but rather more reprehensible. And still I go on believing that its condition can be ameliorated by a beautiful scene in the theatre.'⁶⁷ Somavilla thinks that this is an allusion to Constantius' rumination about the theatre audience at the Königstädtler Theatre in Berlin, in Part One of *Repetition*, but it is far from clear that Wittgenstein had this in mind. In fact, it is much more plausible to assume that Wittgenstein's comment is directed at the following passage in CUP:

A king sometimes has a royal theatre solely for himself, but this difference, which excludes ordinary citizens, is accidental. Not so when we speak of God and the royal theatre he has for himself. Accordingly, the individual's ethical development is the little private theatre where God certainly is the spectator, but where on occasion the individual also is himself a spectator, although essentially he is supposed to be an actor, not, however, one who deceives but one who discloses, just as all ethical development consists in becoming disclosed before God. (CUP 157–8)

But even if it can't be settled once and for all which Kierkegaardian work Wittgenstein was, in the end, really referring to, the entry itself

⁶⁵ *Ibid.* I have reproduced the awkward grammar of the original German sentence.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 132.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 54.

at least clearly shows that Wittgenstein generally regarded Kierkegaard's writings as a kind of ethical admonishment—one that he often found disturbing: 'My conscience is tormenting me and is preventing me from working. I have been reading in Kierkegaard's writings and this has made me even more anxious than I was already.'⁶⁸ This again illustrates how deep and how personal Wittgenstein's engagement with Kierkegaard was. He clearly did not regard him as simply a philosopher, but as a kind of moral and religious 'paradigm' against which he had to measure himself, often, according to Wittgenstein himself, to his own detriment, for, after all, as Wittgenstein said to Drury, Kierkegaard was 'a saint'.

This comes out even more strongly in an earlier journal entry from 1922 which has recently been found between scraps of paper in the Brenner Archives in Innsbruck. In it 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 obey. . . 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.'⁶⁹

This is rather striking—not only does the entry contain an obvious reference to the Danish philosopher, but it is almost as if Kierkegaard himself had written it. Wittgenstein here identifies doing God's will with what Johannes *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. In spite of this, however, Climacus would probably say that Wittgenstein is nevertheless poised on the brink of faith, for the feeling of complete self-annihilation before God that Wittgenstein mentions is, according to Climacus, one of the most decisive features 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' (CUP 461).

Although the diaries give the impression that Wittgenstein was generally in agreement with Kierkegaard's conception of things, there are two passages—one from 1931, the other from 1937—where Wittgenstein doesn't seem entirely to share Kierkegaard's vision. Here is the first:

Kierkegaard's writings are teasing and this is of course their intention, although I am not sure whether the exact effect they produce in me is intentional. Undoubtedly, the person who is teasing me is forcing me to take notice of his cause and if this cause is important, then this is a good thing. Nevertheless, there is something in me that rejects this teasing. . . The idea that someone uses a trick in order to make me do something is unpleasant. I am sure that this (using the trick) requires great courage and that I wouldn't in the least have such courage, but it is questionable whether, if I had this courage, I would have the right to employ it. I believe that what would also be required, apart from the courage, is a lack of love for one's neighbour. One could say: What you call loving your neighbour is selfishness. Well, then I know no love without selfishness, for I cannot meddle with the eternal blessedness [*Selgkeiti*] of someone else. I can only say: I will love him in such a way as I—who am concerned about my soul—would wish that he would love me.⁷⁰

Here we have a disagreement about philosophical method, which is important, as it provides evidence against James Conant's⁷¹ view that the *Tractatus*, like Kierkegaard's *Pastscript*, is an exercise in 'deceiving the reader into the truth'. Such an endeavour, as this remark suggests, would, I believe, be alien to Wittgenstein,⁷² for he seems to regard it as in some sense 'unethical'.

The second passage runs as follows:

I think that the word 'belief' has caused much mischief in religion. All these intractable thoughts about 'paradox', the eternal meaningfulness of a *historical* state of affairs etc. However, if instead of saying 'belief in Christ you say 'love of Christ', then the paradox vanishes, the vexation of the understanding ceases. . . Not that one could now say: Yes, now everything

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 62.

⁷¹ See James Conant, 'Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein and Nonsense', in Ted Cohen, Paul Guyer and Hilary Putnam (eds), *Pursuits of Reason* (Lubbock, TX: Texas Technical University Press, 1993), 195–224.

⁷² For a detailed discussion of this point, see chapter 3.

⁶⁸ *Denkbewegungen*, 77.

⁶⁹ 13.1.1922. In *Licht und Schatten*, ed. Ilse Somavilla (Innsbruck: Haymon, 2004), translation mine. I am grateful to Allan Janik for drawing my attention to this passage.

is simple or comprehensible. Nothing is comprehensible, but it is no longer incomprehensible either.⁷³

Although Wittgenstein doesn't mention Kierkegaard by name in this remark, he clearly has him and his frequent use of his central category, 'paradox', in mind. Wittgenstein seems rightly worried here that this concept can give rise to all sorts of misunderstandings. He may also be rejecting the implications of his own earlier endorsement of the idea that Kierkegaard's concept of paradox is analogous to what he, Wittgenstein, called the ineffable in the *Tractatus* and to what he meant by 'running up against the limits of language' in the *Lecture on Ethics*. It may therefore indicate that he is rejecting what he once said to Waismann—'Man has the urge to thrust against the limits of language . . . Kierkegaard, too, recognized this thrust and even described it in much the same way (as a thrust against paradox).'⁷⁴—for, after all, as Wittgenstein came to realize, 'language is not a cage'.⁷⁵ The criticism implicit in Wittgenstein's aforementioned remark from the diaries may therefore be directed as much at himself and at his perhaps earlier reading of Kierkegaard as at the latter himself.

Much of what Wittgenstein says in the diaries also accords well with the remarks he makes about Kierkegaard in CV. In a passage from 1937, for example, Wittgenstein says:

Kierkegaard writes: If Christianity were so easy and cosy, why should God in his Scriptures have set Heaven and Earth in motion and threatened with *eternal* punishments?—Question: But in that case why is this Scripture so unclear? If we want to warn someone of a terrible danger, do we go about it by telling him a riddle whose solution will be the warning?—But who is to say that the Scripture really is unclear? Isn't it possible that it was essential in this case to 'tell a riddle'? And that, on the other hand, giving a more direct warning would necessarily have had the *wrong* effect? God has *four* people recount the life of his incarnate Son, in each case differently and with inconsistencies—but might we not say: It is important that this narrative should not be more than quite averagely historically plausible *just so that* this should not be taken as the essential, decisive thing? So that the *letter* should not be believed more strongly than is proper and the *spirit* may receive its due . . . The Spirit puts what is essential, essential for your life, into these words. The point is precisely

⁷³ *Denkbelegungen*, 103–4.

⁷⁴ *Lesung Wittgenstein und der Wiener Kreis*, conversations recorded by Friedrich Waismann, ed. Brian McGuinness (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1984), 68, translation mine.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 117. This remark occurs almost exactly a year after the previous one: the first is from 30 December 1929; the second from 17 December 1930.

that you are only SUPPOSED to see clearly what appears clearly even in *this* representation. (I am not sure how far all this is exactly in the spirit of Kierkegaard.) (CV 31e–32e)

Wittgenstein's point of departure in this remark seems to be a phrase from Kierkegaard's *Attack Upon 'Christendom'*, which Wittgenstein must have read:

if what we mean by being a Christian really is being a Christian—what then is God? He is the most comical being that ever lived, His word the most comical book that ever has come to light: to set heaven and earth in motion . . . so threaten with hell, with eternal punishment . . . in order to attain what we understand by being Christians [i.e. to bring about what we already are anyway].⁷⁶

Wittgenstein's reflections on this issue strike me as being very much in the spirit of Kierkegaard, although they call to mind Anti-Climacus' diatribes in *Practice in Christianity* against the 'direct recognizability' of Jesus Christ and his insistence on the 'incognito' of the Son of God, rather than anything Kierkegaard says in the *Attack*. Here is Anti-Climacus on a closely related theme:

They [the pastors] say that Christ himself has directly said that he was God, the only begotten Son of the Father. They reject with horror any concealment as unworthy of Christ, as vanity and conceit in connection with so earnest a matter, the most earnest of all matters, the salvation of mankind. They maintain that Christ has given us a direct answer to a direct question. (PC 135)

But:

it is easily seen that direct communication is an impossibility when one is so kind as to take the communicator into account . . . In relation to unrecognizability or for someone in unrecognizability, direct communication is an impossibility, because the direct communication does indeed directly state what one essentially is—but unrecognizability means not to be in the character of what one essentially is. Thus there is a contradiction that nevertheless makes direct communication indirect, that is, makes direct communication impossible. (PC 133)

What Anti-Climacus is saying here is that because there is an 'infinite qualitative distinction' between being God and being an individual human being, Christ, who claims to be both, is a 'sign of contradiction'. Given that there is nothing in itself remarkable about Christ, he is also,

⁷⁶ Kierkegaard's *The Attack Upon Christendom*, translated, with an introduction, by Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), 110.

in this much, 'incognito' (that is, it is not 'directly perceivable' that he is also God). Therefore, whatever such a person says will *eo ipso* be indirect communication and to that extent ambiguous (that is, it can either be taken as coming from God or from a mere human being and there are no objective criteria enabling one to adjudicate between the two options). Even the miracles that Christ is supposed to have performed are not a species of 'direct communication', as 'the miracle can demonstrate nothing, for if you do not believe him [Christ] to be who he says he is, then you deny the miracle. The miracle can make aware—now you are in the tension, and it depends upon what you choose, offence or faith; it is your heart that must be disclosed' (PC 97).

In other words, Anti-Climacus agrees with Wittgenstein that the 'riddle' is the essential thing. Given that no outward signs whatever can determine once and for all who Christ was, it simply does not matter, on this conception, whether there are inconsistencies in the Gospels or not. For even the most consistent and most historically accurate account could not 'prove' more, in this respect, than the more deficient ones. It is exactly as Wittgenstein said to Drury, 'If you can accept the miracle that God became man, then all these difficulties are as nothing. For then it is impossible for me to say what form the record of such an event should take.'⁷⁷

Similar themes are to be found throughout CV. I will give two more examples. Here is another remark from 1937, which, like the previous one quoted from the diaries of the same year, seeks to understand what Climacus/Kierkegaard is saying, without employing the concept of paradox:

Christianity is not based on a historical truth; rather, it offers us a (historical) narrative and says: now believe! But not, believe this narrative with the belief appropriate to a historical narrative, rather: believe through thick and thin, which you can only do as a result of a life. Here you have a narrative, don't take the same attitude to it as you take to other historical narratives. Make a quite different place in your life for it.—There is nothing paradoxical about that! (CV 32e)

In 1946 we again find Wittgenstein agreeing with Kierkegaard that Christianity is not a theory and that faith is consequently not a matter of assenting to a sum of tenets. He says:

I believe that one of the things Christianity says is that sound doctrines are all useless. That you have to change your life. (Or the direction of your life.) . . . The

⁷⁷ Rhees, op.cit., 164.

point is that a sound doctrine need not take hold of you; you can follow it as you would a doctor's prescription.—But here you need something to move you and turn you in a new direction. . . . Once you have been turned round, you must stay turned round. Wisdom is passionless. But faith by contrast is what Kierkegaard calls a *passion*. (CV 53e)

This remark clearly echoes the following passage from Climacus' earlier book, *Philosophical Fragments*⁷⁸—'Inasmuch as he was untruth, he was continually in the process of departing from the truth; as a result of receiving the condition in the moment, his course took the opposite direction, or he was turned around. Let us call this change *conversion*' (PF 18)—but also seems to be influenced by what Climacus says about 'subjective appropriation' and the 'existential' dimension of faith in the *Postscript*:

The way of objective reflection turns the subjective individual into something accidental and thereby turns existence into an indifferent, vanishing something. The way to objective truth goes away from the subject, and while the subject and subjectivity become indifferent, the truth becomes indifferent, and that is precisely its objective validity, because the interest, just like the decision is subjectivity. (CUP 193)

In other words, Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard agree that 'objective' or speculative thought ('wisdom') is incapable of solving 'the problem of life', because what is needed here is something that 'takes hold of you', something that engages you ethically as an individual. The teachings of Christ are supposed radically to change the way you live, not your theoretical commitments. For, as Wittgenstein says in another remark, 'it is my soul with its passions, as it were with its flesh and blood, that has to be saved, not my abstract mind' (CV 33e).

Some of the themes only touched upon in CV are developed further in the *Lectures and Conversations on Religious Belief*⁷⁹ and here, too, the parallels with Kierkegaard are extremely striking.⁸⁰ Compare, for

⁷⁸ *Philosophical Fragments*, ed. and trans. Howard and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985); henceforth PF.

⁷⁹ In *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*, ed. Cyril Barrett, compiled from notes taken by Yorick Smythies, Rush Rhees, and James Taylor (Oxford: Blackwell, 1966); henceforth LC.

⁸⁰ Although Wittgenstein does not refer to Kierkegaard by name at any point in the LC, Kierkegaard does get an oblique reference towards the end of the lectures: 'A great writer said that, when he was a boy, his father set him a task, and he suddenly felt that nothing, not even death, could take away the responsibility [in doing this task]; this was his duty to do, and that even death couldn't stop it being his duty. He said that

example what Wittgenstein says about Father O'Hara, who is 'one of those people who make it [religious belief] a question of science' (LC 57), with what Climacus says about 'objective Christianity' in CUP. Here is Wittgenstein:

I would definitely call O'Hara unreasonable. I would say, if this is religious belief, then it's all superstition. But I would ridicule it, not by saying it is based on insufficient evidence. I would say: here is a man who is cheating himself. You can say: this man is ridiculous because he believes, and bases it on weak reasons. (LC 59)

Climacus, characteristically, is rather more long-winded, but is essentially saying the same thing:

When an individual infinitely, impassionedly interested in his own eternal happiness [*Salighed*] is placed in relation to the Church theory in such a way that he intends to base his eternal happiness on it, he becomes comic. He becomes comic not because he is infinitely, impassionedly interested. . . . but he becomes comic because the objectivity is incongruous with his interest. If the historical aspect of the Creed (that it is from the apostles etc.) is to be decisive, then every iota must be infinitely insisted upon, and since this can be attained only *approximando*, the individual finds himself in the contradiction of tying, that is, wanting to tie his eternal happiness to it and not being able to do so because the approximation is never finished. . . . The individual is tragic because of his passion and comic because of staking it on an approximation. (CUP 43)

Interestingly, in connection with these questions, Wittgenstein even employs another very central Kierkegaardian term, the 'absurd'. He says, 'Where what is said sounds a bit absurd I would say: "Yes, in this case insufficient evidence." If altogether absurd,⁸¹ then I wouldn't' (LC 60). On the face of it, this seems an incredible claim to make. But if it is juxtaposed with what Wittgenstein says about bent-rule following, both

this was, in a way, a proof for the immortality of the soul—because if this lives on [the responsibility won't die]. The idea is given by what we call the proof. Well, if this is the idea, [all right] (LC 70). This story is, of course, Kierkegaard's own. In the passage about evidence Wittgenstein also uses the example of Napoleon, which is the example Climacus/Kierkegaard uses to make the selfsame point in *Philosophical Fragments*: 'It has been said a thousand times by intelligent people that indubitability is not enough in this case. Even if there is as much evidence as for Napoleon. Because the indubitability wouldn't be enough to make me change my whole life' (LC 57). By 'intelligent people' Wittgenstein presumably primarily means Kierkegaard.

⁸¹ I don't mean to imply that Wittgenstein is using the term in anything like as complex a way as Kierkegaard does, but I do think it testifies to a similar underlying thought.

in the LC and in the PI, it will start to make some sense. Further down in the LC Wittgenstein says:

If you compare it with anything in Science which we call evidence, you can't credit that anyone could soberly argue: 'Well, I had this dream. . . . therefore. . . . Last Judgement.'⁸² You might say: 'For a blunder, that's too big.' If you suddenly wrote numbers down on the blackboard, and then said: 'Now, I'm going to add,' and then said: '2 and 21 is 13' etc. I'd say: 'This is no blunder.' (LC 61–2)

In other words, what Wittgenstein is saying is that if you believe that religious beliefs are based on 'evidence' in the way that scientific beliefs can be said to be based on evidence, then you are either cheating yourself or you are mad. For, if you *really* believed that one *could* soberly argue 'dream—therefore Last Judgement' or 'miracles—therefore Son of God', then this is no ordinary mistake—no simple blunder, but rather an intellectual aberration. But given that we don't (necessarily) want to come to the conclusion that all religious people are mad, an alternative explanation must be found: 'There are cases where I'd say he's mad, or he's making fun. Then there might be cases where I look for an entirely different interpretation altogether' (LC 62). The 'entirely different interpretation' might comprise, for example, a refusal to interpret religious beliefs as being in any way *analogous* to scientific beliefs. In other words, the person concerned isn't (necessarily) mad, but is rather engaged in a different kind of activity: 'Whether a thing is a blunder or not—it is a blunder in a particular system. . . . You could also say that where we are reasonable, they are not reasonable—meaning they don't use *reason* here' (LC 59). Again, the parallels with Climacus' views are striking.

Suppose that Christianity does not at all want to be understood; suppose that, in order to express this and to prevent anyone, misguided, from taking the road of objectivity, it has proclaimed itself to be the paradox. Suppose that it wants to be only for existing persons and essentially for persons existing in inwardness, in the inwardness of faith, which cannot be expressed more definitely than this: it is the absurd.⁸³ adhered to firmly with the passion of the infinite. (CUP 214)

In other words, the term 'absurd' plays a similar role in Wittgenstein's and Kierkegaard's thought about religious belief. In both authors the

⁸² Wittgenstein is surely exaggerating here. It is very unlikely that any religious person would argue in this way. Despite the exaggeration, though, I think it is possible to see what Wittgenstein is driving at.

⁸³ By 'absurd' Climacus means something resistant to 'objectification' (and consequently Hegelian 'mediation'). See chapter 3.

term is supposed to alert us to the fact that something *different*—not something irrational—is going on in the case of religion which makes it impossible simply to assimilate it to ordinary (empirical or scientific) endeavours. As Wittgenstein says, 'Why shouldn't one form of life culminate in an utterance of belief in a Last Judgement? But I couldn't either say "Yes" or "No" to the statement that there will be such a thing. Nor "Perhaps", nor "I'm not sure"'. It is a statement which may not allow of any such answer' (LC 58).⁸⁴ This is so, Kierkegaard would doubtless add, because given that Christianity is not a philosophical theory, the issue of the Last Judgement, for example, can only arise for someone who actually wants to be a Christian; that is, it has to arise subjectively, for from the objective (speculative) point of view, it couldn't, on this conception, even be asked. Therefore, according to the view that Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard share, saying either 'yes' or 'no' to it would be equally misguided.

That religious beliefs and practices can't simply be reduced to a form of false (or bizarre) science, is also the predominant theme of Wittgenstein's *Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough*.⁸⁵

Frazer's account of the magical and religious views of mankind is unsatisfactory: it makes these views look like *errors*. Was Augustine in error, then, when he called upon God on every page of the *Confessions*? But—one might say—if he was not in error, surely the Buddhist holy man was—or anyone else—whose religion gives expression to completely different views. But *none* of them was in error, except when he set forth a theory. (PO 119)

Wittgenstein's invective against scientism is very reminiscent of Kierkegaard's recurring critique of the 'speculative point of view'. Both the 'scientific' and the 'speculative' approach to religion, by making it out to be some kind of theory, distort religious beliefs and practices to such an extent that they either, in Hegel's case, in the end, abolish Christianity, or else make it impossible to see these practices as anything but sheer 'stupidity' (Frazer). Wittgenstein complains: 'Frazer is much more savage than most of his savages, for they are not as far removed from the understanding of a spiritual matter as a twentieth-century Englishman. His explanations of primitive practices are much cruder than the meaning of these practices themselves' (PO 131). Kierkegaard, naturally, is just as acerbic. This is Climacus' voice:

Speculative thought has understood everything, everything, everything! The ecclesiastical speaker still exercises some restraint; he admits that he has not yet understood everything; he admits that he is striving (poor fellow, that is a confusion of categories). 'If there is anyone who has understood everything,' he says, 'then I admit . . . that I have not understood it and cannot demonstrate everything, and we lesser ones . . . must be content with faith.' (Poor, misunderstood, supreme passion: faith—that you have to be content with such a defender, poor preacher-fellow, that you do not know what the question is! Poor intellectual pauper . . . who cannot quite make it in scholarship and science but who has faith, because that he has, the faith that turned fishermen into apostles, the faith that can move mountains—if one has it) (CUP 31)

Here Climacus is criticizing the type of person who believes that faith is inferior to speculative philosophy and who consequently assumes that faith and speculative philosophy are continuous with each other in the sense that they both, presumably, aim at 'objective knowledge' (the God's eye view of the world), the one (speculative philosophy) just a trifle more successfully than the other (faith). This, just as, in Wittgenstein's words, 'making it a question of science', Climacus calls a confusion of categories. The latter is another key Kierkegaardian term which is also strikingly reminiscent of the later Wittgenstein's 'grammatical distinctions'. Wittgenstein probably noticed this similarity himself, for, towards the end of his life, he once said to Drury:

You are quite right [in saying that Kierkegaard seems always to be making one aware of new categories], that is exactly what Kierkegaard does, he introduces new categories. I couldn't read him again now. He is too long-winded; he keeps on saying the same thing over and over again. When I read him I always wanted to say, 'Oh all right, I agree, I agree, but please get on with it.'⁸⁶

With this avowal of agreement and mild exasperation, I propose to end my survey of Wittgenstein's engagement with Kierkegaard. Naturally, there is much more to be said about each of the cited works, but—lest I incur the same judgement as Kierkegaard—this will have to wait for subsequent chapters.

CONCLUSION

The over-arching aim of this chapter has been to undermine Philip Shields's contention that Kierkegaard had little direct influence on

⁸⁴ See chapter 4 for a more detailed discussion of these points.
⁸⁵ In *Philosophical Occasions*, 118–55; henceforth PO.

⁸⁶ Rhess, *op. cit.*, 88.

Wittgenstein. A survey of all the available evidence shows not only that Wittgenstein was an avid and admiring reader of Kierkegaard, but also that Kierkegaard keeps coming up time and again in almost all of Wittgenstein's reflections about religious belief. Furthermore, these reflections themselves show such remarkable affinities with those of Kierkegaard that it is nigh on impossible not to speak of a direct influence—especially now that we know exactly how much Kierkegaard Wittgenstein actually read. In the words of Ronald Husrwit, Wittgenstein owes a debt to Kierkegaard 'to the extent that any original thinker could owe anything to anyone.'⁸⁷ In the light of all this, Shields's thesis is simply untenable.

I also hope to have gone some way towards showing how difficult it is to separate Wittgenstein's 'personal' reflections (about philosophy and religion) from his 'philosophical' ones (on the same topics). Any account, therefore, that drives a firm wedge between the two, as does that of Phillips, for instance, must remain dangerously one-sided. In the next chapter I will be looking at Wittgenstein's and Kierkegaard's views on the point of their own philosophical activity, in order to get a clearer idea of how an ethical conception of the latter informs the works of both thinkers. More will then be said about Phillips's view.

⁸⁷ Ronald Husrwit, 'Wittgenstein's Interest in Kierkegaard', in *Wittgenstein Studies 2* (1997): 10 (text file).

2

The Point of Kierkegaard's and Wittgenstein's Philosophical Authorship

Such works are mirrors: when an ape looks in, no apostle can look out.

Georg Christoph Lichtenberg. Quoted as a motto in Kierkegaard's *Stages on Life's Way*¹

INTRODUCTION

In the previous chapter I said that Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard agree that a 'profound thinker' is not simply someone who has 'profound' thoughts, but a person whose life expresses—or is emblematic of—these thoughts. For both philosophers profundity and authenticity are intrinsically connected and nowhere more so than in philosophical authorship. This is what distinguishes their work from what Kierkegaard calls 'premise-authors'—authors who are primarily interested in communicating results without paying attention to the method they employ and without understanding themselves in their work. Peruss Minor, the pseudonymous author of the posthumously published *Book on Adler* puts it like this:

And what is profundity really? It is the deep existential carrying out of an idea that through the relationship of conscience is related to God. Nowadays people think that it is very glorious if someone is so fortunate as to be struck by a profound *thought*, to make a profound remark, now and then *horis succisus* to compile something profound that in every other hour one *existentially* denies.

¹ Quoted as a motto to 'In Vino Veritas' by William Atham, one of the pseudonymous authors of Kierkegaard's *Stages on Life's Way*, ed. and trans. Howard and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988b), 8; henceforth SLW. Wittgenstein was also a great admirer of Lichtenberg and quotes him, for example, in CV 65c.