

For Sissy and Uli

# A Confusion of the Spheres

*Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein on  
Philosophy and Religion*

GENIA SCHÖNBAUMSFELD

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#### Introduction

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## A Confusion of the Spheres—Kierkegaard's and Wittgenstein's Conception of Religious Belief

Disobedience is the secret in the religious confusion of our age. This same disobedience also lies at the base of what is the fundamental hidden and unconscious, at the base of what is the fundamental harm in modern speculation, that there has been a confusion of the spheres: profundity has been mistaken—for authority; the intellectual—for the ethical; being a genius for being an apostle.

Petrus Minor, *The Book on Adler*<sup>1</sup>

### INTRODUCTION

In one of his most controversial and misunderstood remarks Wittgenstein writes: 'If Christianity is the truth then all the philosophy that is written about it is false' (CV 83e). Not only could this statement serve as a second motto for the current chapter, it also comprises a fitting epiphany to Climacus' polemic against Hegel discussed in section V of the previous one. The remark, in other words, not only contains in a nutshell some of Wittgenstein's best insights on religion, it also testifies yet again to the Kierkegaardian pedigree of much of Wittgenstein's thought on this theme. In the present chapter I hope to cast further light on this connection by showing that Kierkegaard's and Wittgenstein's work on religion can be read as offering a trenchant critique of one of the most pervasive, but, to my mind, misconceived, ways of construing

<sup>1</sup> Petrus Minor, BA 5.

religious belief in both philosophy and theology. I shall call this the 'target view' of religion.

In the first two sections of this chapter I will focus on the claims that the 'target view' is committed to and on the criticisms that Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein bring forward against it. Subsequently, in section III, I will consider some of the most important objections levelled at Kierkegaard's and Wittgenstein's alternative vision, notably the charge that their account removes the 'content' from religious belief and reduces it to the expression of 'emotional attitudes', as well as Kai Nielsen's related objection that it gives rise to a 'fideism'<sup>2</sup> which renders religious belief 'incommensurable' with other forms of discourse and thus immunizes it against rational criticism. I intend to show that these kinds of criticism misfire, as they all spring from a false dichotomy between 'practice' and 'belief' or between 'living a certain way' and 'believing certain things' that, if we understand Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein correctly, cannot be upheld.

### I THE 'TARGET VIEW' OF RELIGION

For a brief characterization of the kind of position that Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein are targeting in their work, we can turn to Richard Swinburne whose conception of religious belief exhibits all the hallmarks of what I am calling the 'target view'.<sup>3</sup> In his essay, 'Philosophical Theism', for example, Swinburne describes the 'theory that there is a God' in the following way: 'God is supposed to be roughly a person without a body, essentially omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly free, perfectly good, creator and sustainer of any universe there may be, a source of moral obligation, eternal and necessary'.<sup>4</sup> Of course,

<sup>2</sup> Kai Nielsen, 'Wittgensteinian Fideism', *Philosophy* XLII/161 (1967).

<sup>3</sup> This view is by no means peculiar to Swinburne. Other firm advocates of it, although coming from the opposite direction, are, among others, Anthony Kenny, J. L. Mackie, and Antony Flew (although he has apparently recently switched sides without, however, abandoning a version of the 'target view' of God). More nuanced proponents of the target view on the theistic side are, for example, Paul Helm (see his *Faith With Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000)) and the Reformed Epistemologists, such as Plantinga and Woltersdorff. For a detailed analysis and criticism of the Reformed project, see D. Z. Phillips's excellent book, *Faith After Foundationalism* (London: Routledge, 1988), especially Part One.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Swinburne, 'Philosophical Theism', in D. Z. Phillips and Timothy Tessin (eds), *Philosophy of Religion in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 8–9.

Swinburne concedes, 'to talk of the source of all being involves using words in somewhat stretched senses', but then, he adds, so does—albeit in a 'humbler way'—'talk about photons and protons'.<sup>5</sup>

Given that (ordinary) persons, according to Swinburne, are 'beings with power to bring about effects intentionally, beliefs (true or false) about how things are, and some degree of freedom to exercise their power',<sup>6</sup> God, on Swinburne's conception, 'is postulated as a being with zero limits to his power, to his true beliefs, and to his freedom'.<sup>7</sup> The making of such an assumption is, to Swinburne's mind, good scientific practice which always prefers 'on grounds of simplicity hypotheses which postulate one entity rather than many, and entities with zero or infinite degrees of their properties rather than some finite degree thereof'.<sup>8</sup> And although Swinburne admits that the 'existence of anything at all is perhaps enormously improbable a priori, the existence of a very simple being [such as God] has a far higher prior probability than does the existence of anything else'.<sup>9</sup>

On Swinburne's construction, therefore, the claim that God exists is a scientific theory or hypothesis, which differs only in scope and not in kind from the question, say, of whether elementary particles exist or not. Furthermore, it is the purpose of philosophical theism, on Swinburne's conception, to provide cogent arguments for the existence of such a being<sup>10</sup> by way of appealing to the only 'true set of criteria' we have, the 'modern scientific criteria'. Swinburne says:

We all have the modern scientific criteria of what is evidence for what, and to say that we have these criteria is just to say that we believe that the results which they yield about what is probable to be correct results. If we thought that there are no true criteria of what is evidence for what, we would think it just as likely that if we jump from a window we will fly, as that we will fall to the ground. Our conduct shows that we do not think so.<sup>11</sup>

Swinburne's account, in other words, commits him to the following three interrelated theses which I take to be constitutive of what I am calling the 'target view':

1. God is the name of a super-empirical entity or being.
2. There is one correct way of describing the world and this description either contains an object (entity, item) such as God or it doesn't.

<sup>5</sup> Swinburne, 'philosophical Theism', 6 *Ibid.*, 9.      <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*  
<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.      <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.      <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.      <sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

3. The proposition 'God exists' is a hypothesis to be investigated empirically and/or by a priori argument.

Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein, it should come as no surprise, would reject all three of these claims. In the next section, by way of developing their own distinctive account of religious belief, I will explicate their reasons for doing so.

## II A CRITIQUE OF THE 'TARGET VIEW': THE KIERKEGAARD-WITTGENSTEIN CONCEPTION

So far we have seen that Swinburne, like Wittgenstein's Father O'Hara, 'is one of those people who make it a question of science' (LC 57). Wittgenstein's response to this account is brusque:<sup>12</sup>

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)

What Wittgenstein is saying here, in other words, is that if the Swinburne-O'Hara view of religious belief is correct, then religion is reduced to nothing more than superstition, that is to say, to a form of false science. Kierkegaard would concur: as we already saw in the previous chapter, Climacus castigates the Christians in Christendom precisely for deluding themselves into believing they are Christians, when they are, in his eyes, really nothing more than pagans or idol-worshippers who believe that God is some externality in the sense that a policeman is (SUD 80). Recall Climacus' sarcastic remark that:

if God had taken the form, for example, of a rare, enormously large green bird with a red beak, that perched in a tree on the embankment and perhaps even whistled in an unprecedented manner—then our parrying man would surely have had his eyes opened. . . . All paganism consists in this, that God is related directly to a human being, as the remarkably striking to the amazed. (CUP 245)

The error that Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein first and foremost seek to expose, then, consists in taking the existence of God to be on a par with the existence of some super-empirical object or entity which one

<sup>12</sup> See also chapter 1, section II.

could, in principle, encounter if only one possessed the relevant faculties. That is to say, the conception that Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein have within their sights is of the kind exhibited by the Soviet astronaut Yuri Gagarin's remark that God is an object he would have observed, had it existed, during his first space flight.<sup>13</sup> For, on this sort of view, there is no *qualitative* difference between being God and being some other kind of entity—that is, something one could encounter—but merely a quantitative one: God, as Swinburne says, is merely an (invisible) entity with 'zero limits to His power', as opposed to an entity (such as a human being) with infinitely many limits to its power. But such a view leaves open the possibility that, for all we know, God could, for instance, be a Giant Pumpkin since, as Swinburne himself concedes, if we allow that God is the name of a super-empirical something, the question immediately arises *which* 'super-empirical' entity—there might conceivably be more than one—the word 'God' is supposed to be referring to and it consequently becomes a matter of trying to distinguish belief in God from belief in other, similarly powerful, entities.<sup>14</sup> <sup>15</sup> This is none too easy a thing to do, though, for, *prima facie*, Swinburne's definition of God as a super-powerful person without a body, if it makes any sense at all,<sup>16</sup> does not appear to make any more (or less) sense than the idea of a super-powerful pumpkin. That is to say, if it were in fact possible to assign probability values to the existence of such supernatural entities, as Swinburne clearly seems to believe, then an argument is needed to show why the existence of a bodiless super-human should have more 'prior probability' than the existence of an omnipotent super-pumpkin. Swinburne's claim that the postulated 'simplicity' of God's nature gives us a presumption in favour of His

<sup>13</sup> See John Hick, 'Religious Belief and Philosophical Enquiry', in D. Z. Phillips (ed.), *Faith and Philosophical Enquiry* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970); see also D. Z. Phillips, 'Wittgenstein and Religion: Some Fashionable Criticisms', in D. Z. Phillips and Kai Nielsen, *Wittgensteinian Fideism?*, 48.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>15</sup> On Kierkegaard's and Wittgenstein's view the question of whether God might not be a Great Pumpkin doesn't so much as arise, since, on their conception, it is not a *matter of fact*—that is, something that could be otherwise—that God is *not* a Great Pumpkin. Rather, that He is not is ruled out by the grammar of the concept of God.

<sup>16</sup> For a very clear exposition of why it does not make sense, see Peter Geach, 'Immortality', in his *God and the Soul* (Indiana: St Augustine's Press, 1969). (I do not have space to go into this issue here). In this article Geach argues that the concept of a human person without a body does not make sense, but, if he is right, then *a fortiori* the concept of a super-human and super-powerful 'person' without a body does not make sense either.

existence clearly isn't going to do this trick. For why should the Great Pumpkin, or, let us say, in order to make the analogy to Swinburne's God closer still, the Great Bodiless Pumpkin, not be just as 'simple' an entity as Swinburne's person-without-a-body—whatever 'simple' could really mean in such cases.<sup>17</sup>

What is more, Swinburne's argument that having 'zero limits to one's power' is a criterion for 'simplicity', since scientists also postulate that 'photons have zero mass' rather than some very small mass,<sup>18</sup> is just fallacious, as this is to construct a pseudo-analogy that relies on equivocation on the word 'zero': having 'zero limits', that is, being unlimited or limitless, is clearly not the same thing at all as having no weight. That is to say, the 'postulate' that God has no limits to his power is not even remotely comparable to the 'postulate' that protons have no weight or zero mass. Otherwise we might just as well say that having a temperature of 0K<sup>19</sup>—having *zero* temperature—is analogous to being unlimited which is absurd. Consequently, *contra* Swinburne, there simply is no analogy with science here. But even if there were, this would not of itself solve the reference problem of the word 'God', as nothing is easier than simply 'postulating' that the Great Bodiless Pumpkin (or what have you) has 'zero limits to its power' (provided the latter is even a coherent notion which, I suspect, it is not).

Wittgenstein tackles (what I have called) the target view's (henceforth TV) first thesis head-on when he says that 'the way you use the word "God" does not show *whom* you mean—but, rather, what you mean' (CV 50e). In other words, on Wittgenstein's conception, the word 'God' does not denote some *thing* that one could encounter independently of having the concept in the sense that one could, for example, encounter a unicorn or the Great Pumpkin, if there happened to be such things. For, although, as Wittgenstein says in LC, the word 'God' is amongst the earliest learnt, I didn't learn the word 'God' by being shown a picture of him (LC 59). That is to say, even though the word is used like a word representing a person (God sees, rewards, etc.), 'it plays an entirely different role to that of the existence of any person or object I ever heard of' (*ibid.*). In the later Wittgenstein's parlance: the surface grammar of the word 'God' functions in many ways analogously to

<sup>17</sup> And here it is important to bear in mind Wittgenstein's warning that the mere fact that one can "imagine" something does not mean that it makes sense to say it' (*Zettel* §250) 250).

<sup>18</sup> Swinburne, *op. cit.*, 9.

<sup>19</sup> That is, -273.15°C.

that of an outlandish person while its depth grammar is actually quite different. This is shown, for example, by the fact that it is impossible, even in principle, to paint a picture of God<sup>20</sup> or to hear Him speak to someone else (*Zettel* §717). Neither of these features are *contingent* descriptions of God as they would be if, *per impossibile*, they happened to apply to a human person. Rather, they serve to constitute (aspects of) the meaning of the word 'God'. Perhaps this is why Wittgenstein cites theology as his first example when he says in one of the most famous passages from the PI: 'Grammar tells what kind of object anything is. (Theology as grammar.)' (§373). Consequently, if Wittgenstein is right, it is a *grammatical* (conceptual/logical) feature of the concept 'God' that you can't hear him talk to someone else. It is not due to the fact that God is a person with an impossibly low voice (or, indeed, a disembodied one).

Climacus seems to have something similar in mind when he says that 'God is not a name but a concept, and perhaps because of that his *essentia involvit existentiam* [essence involves existence]' (PF 41). Existence, according to Climacus, is a temporal phenomenon that presupposes change: every *Existenz* (existing thing) comes into and goes out of existence, but God is said to be eternal and immutable. *A fortiori* he cannot be said to 'exist' in the same sense as human beings do. 'Can the necessary come into existence?' Climacus asks himself at PF 74 and responds:

Coming into existence is a change, but since the necessary is always related to itself and is related to itself in the same way, it cannot be changed at all... Precisely by coming into existence, everything that comes into existence demonstrates that it is not necessary, for the only thing that cannot come into existence is the necessary, because the necessary *is*.

Stripped of some Hegelian jargon, what Climacus appears to be saying here is this. What is necessary is changeless—it always is and couldn't

<sup>20</sup> And Michelangelo's painting of God creating Adam is not a 'picture of God' in the relevant sense. As Peter Winch says in his illuminating essay 'Wittgenstein, Picture and Representation': 'In other words, what makes the picture a religious picture is not its pictorial relationship to some event. If it is said that it is a relationship to a *supernatural* event, that of course makes a difference: but the chances are that in this context the speaker will be conceiving the 'supernatural' event as a weird sort of *natural* event. So it is best to leave aside talk about 'a relationship to an event' altogether... let us not overlook the fact that what makes the picture a representation of God the Father (rather than of a man in a queer blanket) is not itself something pictorial.' (In Peter Winch, *Trying to Make Sense* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987), 79–80.)

be otherwise without changing its nature or essence. Consequently, it makes no sense to speak of its 'coming into existence', for if it came into existence, it would precisely thereby become subject to change and cease to be necessary, as everything that is actual exists only contingently—it could always not exist (but the necessary, *per definitionem*, always is). Hence, God's 'existence' cannot be analogous to that of human beings, say, for it is part of the definition of the concept 'God' that His 'existence' is non-contingent and changeless. This is why Climacus says that 'God does not think, he creates; God does not exist, he is eternal' (CUP 332). In a nutshell: 'necessary existence' is not a *kind* of existence.<sup>21</sup>

This is also the conclusion that Wittgenstein draws when he says—perhaps alluding to the aforementioned passage from PF:

God's essence is supposed to guarantee his existence—what this really means is that what is at issue here is not the existence of some *thing*<sup>22</sup> [*daß es sich um eine Existenz nicht handelt*]. Couldn't one actually say equally well that the essence of colour guarantees its existence? As opposed, say, to white elephants. Because all that really means is: I cannot explain what 'colour' is, what the word 'colour' means, except with the help of a colour sample. So in this case there

<sup>21</sup> Norman Malcolm is essentially making the same point as Climacus when he says in his article 'Anselm's Ontological Arguments': 'If God, a being a greater than which cannot be conceived, does not exist then He cannot *come* into existence. For if He did He would either have been *caused* to come into existence or have *happened* to come into existence, and in either case He would be a limited being, which by our conception of Him He is not. Since He cannot come into existence, if He does not exist His existence is impossible.' (In *The Philosophical Review* 69/1 (1960): 49.) However, Climacus would quarrel with Malcolm's drawing the conclusion from this that if the concept of God is not logically absurd, then the ontological argument is valid, for according to it God's existence is either logically necessary or logically impossible. So, if the former is false, the latter must be true. Climacus, who accepts the view that existential propositions are contingent would regard this as a confused way of putting the valid point that God's 'existence' is not akin to that of ordinary empirical objects (whose existence is contingent). Hence Climacus would reject the claim Malcolm makes later in the paper that the proposition 'God necessarily exists' is a kind of 'existential proposition'. This Climacus would regard as misleading, for it invites us to construe—something Malcolm himself would want to reject—the sense of 'God exists' à la Swinburne as meaning something like 'protons exist'. See also note 26.

<sup>22</sup> Peter Winch translates '*daß es sich hier um eine Existenz nicht handelt*' as 'what is at issue here is not the existence of something which is ambiguous between '*daß es sich hier um keine Existenz handelt*' (or '*daß es sich hier nicht um Existenz handelt*') and the original. But the phrase Wittgenstein actually uses implies that what he means is that what is at issue is not the existence of some entity (an existing thing—*eine Existenz*), and this gets lost in Winch's translation which could also be read as saying that what is at issue here is that something doesn't exist rather than that it is not about the existence of something (some *thing*).

is no such thing as explaining 'what it would be like if colours were to exist'. And now we might say: There can be a description of what it would be like if there were gods on Olympus—but not: 'what it would be like if there were such a thing as God'. And to say this is to determine the concept 'God' more precisely. (CV 82e)

What Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein are suggesting, then, when they say that 'God' is not the name of an entity and that what is at issue is not the existence of something, is *not*, as a superficial reading of these remarks might lead one to believe, that there is no God, but rather that it makes no sense to construe God's existence as meaning something like 'a white elephant exists'. In other words, the grammar of the concept 'God' does not function, *pace* Swinburne and TV, like the grammar of *etne Existenz* (of an entity). For if it did and we also accepted that as regards the concept *essentia involvit existentiam*, then Descartes and Hegel would appear to be right and the ontological argument would seem valid.<sup>23</sup> But this cannot be the case, since, as Climacus rightly insists, the ontological argument is either a 'fraudulent form of developing a predicate, a fraudulent paraphrase of a presupposition' (CUP 334) or else a mere tautology: 'the more perfect, the more being; the more being, the more perfect'—that is, 'the more perfect the thing is, the more it is; but its perfection is that it has more *esse* in itself, which means the more it is, the more it is' (PF 41). The problem with the argument,<sup>24</sup> as Climacus goes on to point out, is that no distinction is made in it between 'factual being' [*Væren/Sætning*] and 'ideal being' [*Væren/Wæsen/essence*]: 'With regard to factual being, to speak of more or less being is meaningless. A fly, when it is, has just as much being as the god . . . Factual being is indifferent to the differentiation of all essence-determinants' (PF 41–2). Existence, in other words, doesn't come in degrees and therefore nothing that exists can have more 'being' than something else that exists. Hence, when Leibniz, for example, says that if God is possible, he is *eo ipso* necessary,<sup>25</sup> what he is really talking about, according to Climacus, is God's 'ideal being'—His essence—not His 'factual being' (PF 42). Consequently, the argument can't be employed. Climacus says, in the manner of Spinoza and Descartes in order 'to bring God's ideality into factual being' (*ibid.*) If, however, the argument is construed only as a means of developing a concept—a way of explicating

<sup>23</sup> But see notes 21 and 26.

<sup>24</sup> In PF Climacus uses Spinoza's version from *Principia philosophiae Cartesianae*.

<sup>25</sup> See, for example, *Monadology*, para 44–5.

the concept's grammar—then, according to Climacus, 'the tautology is in order' (*ibid.*).<sup>26, 27</sup>

This is also the reason why Wittgenstein says that it is possible to describe what it would be like if there were gods on Mount Olympus, but not 'what it would be like if there were such a thing as God'. For in pagan religions, just as on TV, the deities are conceived as on a par with other empirical objects, only vastly more powerful.<sup>28</sup> There is therefore no grammatical difference between talk of Poseidon, say, and talk of an ordinary human being, except that Poseidon happens to have super-human powers. But, as we have already seen, this is not qualitatively different from encountering a new species from a distant planet who have powers surpassing our own or, indeed, from encountering the Great Pumpkin. In Christianity, however, as we have just seen, talk of God is not like that. Consequently, it is possible to give an account of what would have to be the case, if there were a Poseidon or if there were a Great Pumpkin—since the opposite of these scenarios can also be imagined and described—but not how it would be if there were a God, or how it would be if God existed, for in these cases there simply is no such thing as imagining or describing 'the opposite'; the 'phenomena' in the world remain the same whether there is a God or not. To become aware of God's presence is therefore nothing like becoming aware of the existence of some esoteric object whose presence had hitherto escaped one's notice. This is the significance of Wittgenstein's remark that:

Life can educate one to a belief in God. And *experiences* too are what bring this about; but I don't mean visions and other forms of sense experience which show us 'the existence of this being', but, e.g., sufferings of various sorts. These neither show us God in the way a sense impression shows us an object, nor do

<sup>26</sup> 'The ontological argument also comes out as a tautology on Malcolm's construal of it: "The a priori proposition "God necessarily exists" entails the proposition "God exists", and only if the latter also is understood as an a priori proposition: in which case the two propositions are equivalent. In this sense Anselm's proof is a proof of God's existence' (*op. cit.*, 50). But it is precisely for this reason that Climacus thinks it is misleading to call this a proof, for ordinarily people who want a proof of God's existence want God's 'ideal being' brought into 'factual being' and it's just this that the ontological argument, *qua* tautology or conceptual development, can't give you.

<sup>27</sup> This concludes Wittgenstein's and Kierkegaard's critique of TV's first thesis that God is the name of a super-empirical entity or being (but of course discussion of all three theses hangs together and there is consequently no entirely non-arbitrary way of marking off one stage of the overall argument against TV from the others).

<sup>28</sup> That this is, indeed, Swinburne's view is shown by the fact that he conceives of God as a 'super-human', i.e. as possessing all positive human attributes in superlative (infinite) form. See Swinburne, *op. cit.*, 12.

they give rise to *conjectures* about him. Experiences, thoughts—life can force this concept on us. So perhaps it is similar to the concept of 'object'. (CV 866)

What Wittgenstein is suggesting here by drawing an analogy between the concept 'God' and the concept 'object' is that the former functions more like the *formal* concept 'object' (*Gegenstand*) than like a word referring to a particular thing, such as a table, chair, white elephant or what have you. In other words, the two concepts are grammatically similar, according to Wittgenstein, in the sense that they would both make for nonsense when employed in the subject-place of ontological assertions: it would make as little sense, on Wittgenstein's view, to assert (or to deny) that objects exist as it does to assert (or to deny) that God exists. The reasons for this, initially perhaps rather baffling, claim are as follows.

Contrary to Moore, who insisted on the truth of this proposition against the sceptic, Wittgenstein thinks that the proposition 'there are physical objects' is a piece of philosophical nonsense, as, according to him, it is not an empirical proposition for which one could have evidence. Wittgenstein says, 'But can't it be imagined that there should be no physical objects? I don't know. And yet "there are physical objects" is nonsense. Is it supposed to be an empirical proposition?—And is *this* an empirical proposition: "There seem to be physical objects"? (*On Certainty*, §35).

In order for the proposition 'there are physical objects' to make sense, it would have to be possible to know or to explain what would have to be the case if there were *no* physical objects. Should the proposition make sense, then it would have to be a kind of *hypothesis*, for which one could have evidence. But what would such evidence look like? Moore held the view that it is possible to infer 'there are physical objects' from the proposition 'here is a hand', but this was an illusion. For the latter means no more than that a hand *is* a physical object, and far from being an ontological hypothesis, this, according to Wittgenstein, is no more than a grammatical proposition that tells us what kind of thing a hand is. If this were an ontological hypothesis, then we would have to be able to indicate what would count as evidence for it, what as evidence against it, how the question could be settled beyond any reasonable doubt. But it is just this that is impossible, for we cannot explain what would be different if there were *no* physical objects, and, consequently, we also cannot explain what is the case when physical objects *do* exist. Furthermore, it is even less possible to give criteria for what would

have to be the case if physical objects only *seemed* to exist, but do not actually do so (the classical sceptical scenario). All of this indicates that the proposition 'there are physical objects' is not an empirical one. No sense-perception or impression of an object (such as a hand) can lead us to the conclusion that there are physical objects, for the concept of 'physical object' is not a theoretical one, nor is it employed in the same way as the concept of a particular object. Therefore it makes sense to say 'there are frogs' or 'there are no unicorns', as the opposite of these sentences also makes sense, but not to say 'there are physical objects'.

In other words, it only makes sense to doubt whether there are physical objects, if it also makes sense to assert it. But it only makes sense to assert it, if, at least in principle, there exists a means of settling the question. In the case of physical objects in general, we have no such means. For we might, for example, have evidence for the existence of life on Mars, but we couldn't have evidence for the existence of physical objects in general, as neither 'sense-data' nor Quinean 'surface irradiations' constitute such evidence. *Pare* Moore, I don't infer the existence of an object from the sense-impression. Of course I know that someone or something is present inasmuch as I see them. But to see an object is not a 'surface irradiation' or 'sense-datum' and although it involves perceptual stimuli, I am ignorant of them and make no inferences from them. That is to say, perceiving an object is not evidence for its existence in the way that fingerprints, for example, are evidence for someone's having been at the scene of a crime. Consequently, there is no such thing as 'demonstrating' that my hand exists.

Climacus is essentially making the same point as Wittgenstein when he says that:

it is generally a difficult matter to want to demonstrate that something exists. Worse still, for the brave souls who venture to do it, the difficulty is of such a kind that fame by no means awaits those who are preoccupied with it. . . whether I am moving in the world of sense palpability or in the world of thought I never reason in conclusion to existence, but I reason in conclusion from existence. For example, I do not demonstrate that a stone exists but that something which exists is a stone. The court of law does not demonstrate that a criminal exists but that the accused, who does indeed exist, is a criminal. Whether one wants to call existence an *accessorium* or the eternal *primum*, it can never be demonstrated. (PF 40)

That is to say, there are cases where it makes sense to speak of having evidence for the existence of something—life on Mars, distant planets, Great Pumpkins, etc.—but where it is a matter of being directly



confronted by something in ordinary circumstances, such as by a hand, say, it does not make sense, since in such cases doubt is logically excluded: talk of evidence is only meaningful if there is also logical space for being wrong and here there is none. As Wittgenstein says, 'If Moore were to pronounce the opposite of those propositions which he declares certain, we should not just not share his opinion: we should regard him as demented' (*On Certainty* §155).

The implications of Wittgenstein's conception are quite radical. For, if his account is correct, there is no such thing, nor could there be such a thing, as a wholesale validation of our practices: our language-games or forms of life are not metaphysical or ontological theories that can 'track' or fail to 'track' what is the case in the world—as Phillips emphasizes, we do not stand in an *epistemological* relation to our world-picture.<sup>29</sup> But, if so, then it obviously makes no sense to demand evidence for the 'correctness' of this world-picture, as this would be as absurd as demanding evidence for the rules of a game (and no practice or set of practices can justify themselves). In Wittgenstein's words: 'I did not get my picture of the world by satisfying myself of its correctness; nor do I have it because I am satisfied of its correctness. No: it is the inherited background against which I distinguish between [what is] true and [what is] false' (*On Certainty* §95–6).

Consequently, if Wittgenstein is right, Swinburne is making the same mistake as Moore when he insists that 'there is one true set of criteria'—'the modern scientific criteria'.<sup>30</sup> For as Wittgenstein points out: 'Well, if everything speaks for an hypothesis and nothing against it—is it then certainly true? One may designate it as such.—But does it certainly agree with reality, with the facts?—With this question you are already going round in a circle' (*On Certainty* §191). That is to say, TV not only misdescribes religion, it misdescribes religion precisely *because* it misdescribes what it means to have a world-picture (whether it be that of 'modern science' or any other). And it is primarily for this reason that Wittgenstein draws the analogy between the concept 'God' and the concept 'object': for just as we can't infer 'there are objects' from the proposition 'there is a hand', in the case of religious belief it is also not a matter of making inferences from sense-experience or, as adherents of the cosmological and design arguments would have it, from the

<sup>29</sup> Afterword to Rush Rhees, *Wittgenstein's On Certainty—There Like Our Life*, ed.

D. Z. Phillips (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 171.  
<sup>30</sup> Swinburne, *op.cit.*, 18.

existence of the universe or of human beings.<sup>31</sup> We are not, therefore, confronted by factual (or fictional) claims about the world, but rather with misbegotten attempts<sup>32</sup> at articulating something which 'can't be expressed like that' (*On Certainty* §37).<sup>33</sup>

It is for these reasons that Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein agree that it is a mistake to want to demonstrate God's existence. As Climacus so aptly puts it:

If, namely, the god does not exist, then of course it is impossible to demonstrate it [that he exists]. But if he does exist, then it is foolishness to want to demonstrate it, since I, in the very moment the demonstration commences, would presuppose it not as doubtful—which a presupposition cannot be, inasmuch as it is a presupposition—but as decided, because otherwise I would not begin, easily perceiving that the whole thing would be impossible if he did not exist. (PF 39–40)

That is to say, just as in the case of the ontological argument, I am either assuming what is to be proved or I cannot begin at all, since, contrary to what Hegel thought, I cannot begin with nothing.

If, for example, I wanted to demonstrate Napoleon's existence from Napoleon's works, I can only do this if I already assume that Napoleon's works are 'his' works, that is, if I already assume that Napoleon exists (PF 40). For, if I do not do this, all I can demonstrate is that the works in question have been accomplished by a great general, but this in itself is not sufficient to demonstrate *Napoleon's* existence (as opposed to someone else's), as another person could have accomplished the same works (*ibid.*). This is why Climacus says in the aforementioned passage that I can never reason in conclusion to existence, but only in conclusion from existence. And the same, of course, applies to demonstrating God's existence from his 'works', that is, from the existence of the universe: I cannot infer the existence of God from the existence of the universe, since God's works do not exist immediately and directly in the way that

<sup>31</sup> Swinburne appeals both to cosmological and design arguments. He says, for example, 'But unless there is a God, it is most unlikely that there would be a universe at all... That it should exist, on its own, uncreated, is therefore—by normal scientific criteria—very much less likely than that God should exist' (*op.cit.*, 10). For a good criticism of this view (which accepts Swinburne's overall programme), see J. L. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism*, 95–101.

<sup>32</sup> And in some sense the ontological argument qualifies as such a 'misbegotten attempt'—as Climacus has tried to show.

<sup>33</sup> This concludes Wittgenstein's and Kierkegaard's argument against TV's second thesis that there is one correct way of describing the world and this description either contains an object (entity, item) such as God or it doesn't.

tables and chairs do. Hence, even if we assume that nature is the work of God, only nature is directly present, not God (CUP 243). Therefore, just as in Napoleon's case, I can only demonstrate God's existence from these works (nature/the universe), if I already regard them ideally as *God's*, that is, if I already assume what is to be proved, namely that the universe is ordered according to providential or divine principles. Climacus says:

God's works, therefore, only the god can do. Quite correct. But, then, what are the god's works? The works from which I want to demonstrate his existence do not immediately and directly exist, not at all. Or are the wisdom in nature and the goodness or wisdom in Governance right in front of our noses? Do we not encounter the most terrible spiritual trials here . . . ? . . . Therefore, from what works do I demonstrate it [God's existence]? From the works regarded ideally—that is, as they do not appear directly and immediately. But then I do not demonstrate it from the works, after all, but only develop the ideality I have presupposed. (PF 42)

That I cannot, just as in the case of the ontological argument, get beyond a *petitio principii* here—I can only see divine governance in nature or the universe if I already believe in divine governance (and vice versa)—again shows that what is at issue is not something which could, even in principle, be amenable to empirical or philosophical investigation. For just as I cannot demonstrate to the sceptic that physical objects exist, neither can I demonstrate to the atheist that God exists—and the important thing here is to realize that this is not a shortcoming, but rather that it could not be otherwise. This is the whole point of Wittgenstein's analogy between the concept 'object' and the concept 'God': both concepts function as principles of judgement within the relevant form of life and therefore can't be 'demonstrated', since they must already be presupposed (or denied) in the demonstration itself. As Climacus ironically puts it:

Therefore, anyone who wants to demonstrate the existence of God (in any other sense than elucidating the God-concept . . .) proves something else instead, at times something that perhaps did not even need demonstrating, and in any case never anything better. For the fool says in his heart that there is no God, but he who says in his heart or to others: Just wait a little and I shall demonstrate it—ah, what a rare wise man he is! (PF 43)<sup>34</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Now one might want to object that while losing one's religious faith would neither wholly undermine one's ability to act in and think about the world, nor leave that ability entirely unaltered, denying that there are physical objects would (either undermine one's

Hence, if I am not religious already nothing will count as 'evidence for the existence of God' for me. Given that there is no such thing as a self-validating experience or a self-interpreting rule, the way I perceive certain events will itself already be shaped by my world-picture. I can therefore go on examining nature *ad infinitum* in order to find traces of God in it, but such an investigation will never be able to tell me whether nature is the work of God or the product of chance, just as a historical investigation of the New Testament will never be able to tell me whether Christ was God. As Anti-Climacus so perceptively points out:

a footprint on a way is indeed the result of someone's having walked this way. It may happen that I make the mistake that it was, for example, a bird, but by closer scrutiny, following the prints further, ascertain that it must have been another animal. But can I by close scrutiny and by following prints of this sort, at some point reach the conclusion: ergo it is a spirit that has walked along this way, a spirit—which leaves no print? (PC 28)

If this could be done, then, Anti-Climacus goes on to argue in Wittgensteinian vein, the following questions could also be answered: 'What results must there be, how great the effects, how many centuries must pass in order to have it demonstrated from the results of a "human being's" life (this, after all, is the assumption) that he was God?' (PC 27). Clearly, this question admits of no answer, for, I cannot, without somewhere or other being guilty of a shifting from one genus to another, suddenly by way of a conclusion obtain the new quality, God, so that as a consequence the result or results of a human being's life at some point suddenly demonstrate that this human being was God' (PC 27). Hence, Anti-Climacus concludes, one cannot come to know anything at all about Christ *qua* Son of God, that is, nothing that pertains to *faith*, from history or from biblical scholarship, since believing in the *Gospels qua sacred texts* is qualitatively different from treating them as

ability or leave it completely unaltered). This is true and in this respect there is indeed a significant disanalogy between the concept 'God' and the concept 'object'. But this is compatible with the view that Wittgenstein's analogy nevertheless shows something important, namely, that just as one can't make an inference from the existence of tables and chairs to the existence of physical objects, so one can't make an inference from the existence of the universe (or of religious experience, etc.) to the existence of God. 'There is a God' is consequently just as little an ontological (hypo)thesis as 'there are physical objects'. So there are no a priori reasons why a community should possess the concept of 'God', any more than a society need have our abstract concept of 'physical object'. That is to say, a tribe could perfectly well have the concepts 'chair', 'turnip', 'pigeon' and so on, and treat these things in the way that we do without thinking that they all have one property in common, namely, that they are all *physical objects*.

ordinary historical documents. This is also what Wittgenstein means when he says that:

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)

Consequently, if Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein are right, then, *pace* Swinburne and TV, there is no such thing as 'quantifying' oneself into faith (CUP 11). Rather, it is, in Petrus Minor's words, a 'confusion of the spheres'—a kind of category mistake—to believe that a scientific or probabilistic investigation of religious claims is possible:

What is it that the erroneous exegesis and speculative thought have done to confuse the essentially Christian? Quite briefly and with categorical accuracy it is the following: they have shifted the sphere of the paradoxical-religious back into the aesthetic and thereby have achieved the result that every Christian term, which by remaining in its sphere is a qualitative category, can now, in a reduced state, serve as a brilliant expression that means all sorts of things. (BA 173)

Shoving the religious back into the aesthetic (the in-principle-directly-perceivable) is the cardinal sin of TV and this, according to both authors, is not just a philosophical error, but also, and much more importantly, tantamount to abolishing Christianity altogether. One could therefore be forgiven for (anachronistically) supposing that the following passage is aimed at Swinburne:

If one were to describe this entire orthodox apologetic endeavour in a single sentence, yet also categorically, one would have to say: Its aim is to make *Christianity probable*. Then one must add: If this succeeds, then this endeavour would have the ironical fate that on the very day of victory it would have forfeited everything and completely cashiered Christianity. . . . To make Christianity probable is the same as to falsify it. Indeed, what is it that atheists want? Oh, they want to make Christianity probable. That is, they are well aware that if they can only get Christianity's qualitative extravagance tricked into the fussy officiousness of probability—then it is all over with Christianity. (BA 39)

The very idea, in other words, of attempting to 'calculate the odds' for something as absolutely extraordinary as that God became man, is incoherent, for it betrays the qualitative (grammatical) confusion that

the claims of Christianity are on a par with *secular* claims to which it is possible to assign probability values. But this is not only as confused as 'assuming that the kingdom of *heaven* is a kingdom along with all other kingdoms on *earth* and that one would look for information about it in a geography book' (CUP 391), it is also, in Anti-Climacus' eyes, *blasphemous* (PC 29), for it presupposes that we are in a position to tell what it is probable for *God* to do—the height of philosophical *hubris*—and according to which criteria should we ever be in a position to tell whether it is probable, for example, that Christ was God or that he rose from the dead? As Anti-Climacus' *alter ego* puts it: 'Comedies and novels and lies must be probable, but how could [the paradox] be probable?' (PF 52).

Hence, if Kierkegaard's and Wittgenstein's conception of religious belief is correct, it is not even remotely analogous to a form of correct (or false) science and neither is faith the result of scientific or philosophical speculation. Rather, both philosophers agree, Christianity is an existence-communication that demands not an intellectual, but an existential response, as truth 'in the sense in which Christ is the truth is not a sum of statements, not a definition etc., but a life' (PC 205). The Christian is called to exist in the truth as lived out by Christ, the paradigm or pattern—he is not supposed speculatively to 'comprehend' a teaching (PC 141). For Christ, according to Climacus, did not come to bring new speculative knowledge about God into the world, but in order to offer the promise of redemption and this is an *ethical* (that is, in Climacus' parlance, a 'subjective') category, not a metaphysical ('objective') one. Hence, Christianity, by providing a 'radical cure' (CUP 294) for the problem of life, requires something much more fundamental than assent to a sum of tenets. As Wittgenstein points out in LC, 'there is this extraordinary use of the word "believe". One talks of believing and at the same time one doesn't use "believe" as one does ordinarily. You might say (in the normal use): "You only believe—oh well. . . ." (LC 59–60). But in the religious case it makes no sense to say 'oh well', for, as Anti-Climacus approvingly quotes from the Bible: 'Thou shalt believe' (SUD 115). The call to have faith is therefore an ethical imperative—it is an injunction to repent and transform the self; it is not a demand to change one's ontology.

If Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard are right, therefore, atheist and believer do not diverge in *opinion*, but in form of life. And in this respect they are, to adapt a phrase of Davidson's, not *words*, but *worlds* apart: the believer looks at life in a different way, uses different pictures, holds

other things dear than the atheist, all of which is something that goes much deeper than a simple difference in opinion does—an opinion alone does not regulate for all in one's life. This is why Wittgenstein says in a passage that is clearly indebted to the Danish philosopher: 'It strikes me that a religious belief could only be something like a passionate commitment to a system of reference. Hence, although it's *belief*, it's really a way of living, or a way of assessing life. It's passionately seizing hold of *this* interpretation' (CV 64e).

What Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard are saying, then, is that one does not come to Christianity through argument and intellectual deliberation, but that it is the shape of one's life and experiences that will (or will not) teach one a use for the Christian concepts. The exigencies of life may thrust these concepts upon one. As Wittgenstein says:

A man can . . . be in infinite torment and require infinite help. The Christian religion is only for the one who needs infinite help, solely, that is, for the one who experiences infinite torment. The whole planet can suffer no greater torment than a *single* soul. The Christian faith—as I see it—is a man's refuge in this *ultimate* torment. Anyone in such torment who has the gift of opening his heart, rather than contracting it, accepts the means of salvation in his heart. (CV 46e)

That is to say, the genesis of religious concepts does not, according to Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein, spring from metaphysical or quasi-scientific considerations, but from *transformations of soul*:

Christianity is not a doctrine, not, I mean, a theory about what has happened and will happen to the human soul, but a description of something that actually takes place in human life. For 'consciousness of sin' is a real event and so are despair and salvation through faith. Those who speak of such things . . . are simply describing what has happened to them, whatever gloss anyone may want to put on it. (CV 28e)

That the consciousness of sin is a necessary prerequisite for finding one's way to Christianity is of course also Anti-Climacus' view.<sup>35</sup>

But if the essentially Christian is something so terrifying and appalling, how in the world can anyone think of accepting Christianity? Very simply and, if you wish that also, very Lutherany: only the consciousness of sin can force one, if I dare to put it that way (from the other side grace is the force) into this horror . . . Admittance is only through the consciousness of sin; to want to enter by any other road is high treason against Christianity. (PC 67–8)

<sup>35</sup> See also Malcolm, 'Anselm's Ontological Arguments'.

In this respect it is interesting to note that Wittgenstein, who, on all accounts of him, was obsessed by his 'sins', nevertheless could not become a genuinely religious person. So, it seems that Anti-Climacus' claim that only 'consciousness of sin' can force one into Christianity leaves something rather fundamental out. It is not only consciousness of sin that is necessary, but also the belief that one's sins will ultimately be forgiven by Jesus Christ, the Redeemer.<sup>36</sup> It appears to be the latter that Wittgenstein could not bring himself to accept. As Wittgenstein says:

I read: 'No man can say that Jesus is the Lord, but by the Holy Ghost'—And it is true: I cannot call him *Lord*, because that says nothing to me. I could call him the 'paragon', 'God' even—or rather, I can understand it when he is called thus; but I cannot utter the word 'Lord' with meaning. *Because I do not believe that he will come to judge me; because that says nothing to me. And it could say something to me, only if I lived completely differently.* (CV 33e)<sup>37</sup>

### III OBJECTIONS TO THE KIERKEGAARD-WITTGENSTEIN CONCEPTION

Before we go any further, let us pause in order to dispel a common misapprehension of Kierkegaard's and Wittgenstein's religious thought which might be threatening at this point in the discussion. This is an objection that Climacus himself anticipates in a footnote: 'now, if only a hasty pate does not promptly explain to a reading public how foolish my whole book is, which is more than adequately seen in my alleging anything such as: Christianity is not a doctrine' (CUP 379). That is to say, Climacus seems to be warning: do not be misled into thinking, à la Kai Nielsen, for example, that because the 'existential' dimension of faith is emphasized, Climacus is really propagating a kind of 'artitudinal' conception of religious belief whose aim is to reduce religious claims to the expression of emotional attitudes (non-cognitivism) in the manner of the Logical Positivists<sup>38</sup> or of Braithwaite,<sup>39</sup> say. In other words,

<sup>36</sup> This is an issue that Anti-Climacus discusses in *The Sickness unto Death*.

<sup>37</sup> This concludes Kierkegaard's and Wittgenstein's critique of TV's third thesis that the proposition 'God exists' is a hypothesis to be investigated empirically and/or by a priori argument.

<sup>38</sup> See A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic* (London: Penguin, 1971), especially chapter 6.

<sup>39</sup> See R. B. Braithwaite, *An Empiricist's View of the Nature of Religious Belief* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1953).

Climacus is at pains to head off the charge that 'the most crucial error common to both Nietzsche and Wittgenstein is to argue that Christian practice is everything and Christian belief, belief that involves doctrines, is nothing'.<sup>40</sup> For, as Climacus goes on to point out in the same passage:

Surely a philosophical theory that is to be comprehended and speculatively understood is one thing, and a doctrine that is to be actualized in existence is something else. If there is to be any question of understanding with regard to this latter doctrine, then this understanding must be: to understand that it is to be existed in, to understand the difficulty of existing in it, what a prodigious existence-task this doctrine assigns to the learner.

And in the main text he adds:

I cannot help it that our age has reversed the relation and changed Christianity into a philosophical theory that is to be comprehended and being a Christian into something negligible. Furthermore, to say that Christianity is empty of content because it is not a doctrine is only chicanery. When a believer exists in faith, his existence has enormous content, but not in the sense of a yield in paragraphs. (CUP 380)

Two senses of the word 'doctrine' appear to be in operation here. On the one hand Climacus says 'what a prodigious existence-task this doctrine assigns to the learner' (italics mine); on the other he admonishes: 'to say that Christianity is empty of content because it is *not* a doctrine is only chicanery' (my emphasis). So Christianity, according to Climacus, seems both to be and not to be a doctrine. To understand how this apparent inconsistency is to be resolved is, I will argue, to understand why Kierkegaard's and Wittgenstein's account is *not* an attempt to reduce religious belief to emotional attitudes. And this will also equip us with the means of providing a response to Kai Nielsen's objection mentioned above. But before I press on with an explication of this, a more detailed account of what it is to understand religious language is required and to this end I will examine what Wittgenstein has to say about 'religious pictures' in LC.

A good way into the discussion in Wittgenstein's third lecture on religious belief is his remark: "'God's eye sees everything'"—I want to say of this that it uses a picture. . . . We associate a particular use with a picture' (LC 71). One of the students in the lecture, Smythies, isn't satisfied with this way of putting things and objects: 'This isn't all he

does—associate a use with a picture' (ibid.). Wittgenstein's response to this interjection is curt since he appears to think that it betrays a misunderstanding:

Rubbish. I meant: what conclusions are you going to draw? etc. Are eyebrows going to be talked of, in connection with the Eye of God? 'He could just as well have said so and so'—this [remark] is foreshadowed by the word 'attitude'. He couldn't just as well have said something else. If I say he used a picture, I don't want to say anything he himself wouldn't say. I want to say that he draws these conclusions. (ibid.)

Smythies, in other words, like Nielsen and Climacus 'haspy pare', is worried that Wittgenstein's account threatens to take the 'content'—the 'doctrine'—out of religious belief. That is to say, as Cora Diamond points out in an excellent essay, Smythies seems to think that there are only two possible ways of conceiving of the meaning of religious language:

either we allow that people really do mean what they say in such cases (and Wittgenstein thinks that Smythies takes him to reject that alternative), or we think of them as simply expressing a resolve to live in a certain way (or something of the kind), the expression of resolve being accompanied by a picture (and Wittgenstein thinks Smythies sees him as insisting on the correctness of this alternative).<sup>41</sup>

Smythies' either/or is misconceived, however, for Wittgenstein isn't denying that people mean what they say when making religious utterances. Rather, he is insisting that we cannot understand what *meaning* the utterances comes down to unless we understand the *use* to which the religious 'pictures' are put. As Wittgenstein explains at CV 85c: 'Actually I should like to say that . . . the *words* you utter or what you think as you utter them are not what matters, so much as the difference they make at various points in your life. How do I know that two people mean the same when each says he believes in God? . . . *Practice* gives the words their sense.'

In passages such as these Wittgenstein is really not saying anything different than when he is, for example, tackling the philosophical (or logical) problem of what it is to mean something in the Pl: 'For a large class of cases—though not for all—in which we employ the word

<sup>40</sup> Kai Nielsen, 'Wittgensteinian Fideism Revisited' in Kai Nielsen and D. Z. Phillips, *Wittgensteinian Fideism?*, 116.

<sup>41</sup> Wittgenstein on Religious Belief: The Gulfs Between Us' in *Religion and Wittgenstein's Legacy* ed. D. Z. Phillips and Mario von der Ruhr (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 118.

"meaning" it can be defined thus: the meaning of a word is its use in the language' (PI §43). So, if Wittgenstein is denying anything in the LC, it is only the correctness of the familiar philosophical prejudice that meaning (or understanding) something consists of a peculiar 'mental process': 'In our failure to understand the use of a word we take it as the expression of a queer *process*' (PI §196). This explains why, in lecture III of LC, we get the apparent non sequitur of Wittgenstein suddenly asking, after a brief discussion of what it would be like to imagine oneself as a disembodied spirit, 'If you think of your brother in America, how do you know that what you think is, that the thought inside you is, of your brother being in America? Is this an experiential business?' (LC 66).

Wittgenstein is compelled to ask these questions at this point in the discussion, as Smythies has fallen into the trap of believing that you can talk of understanding a word 'without any reference to the technique of its usage' (LC 68). And the significance of Wittgenstein's interpolation is precisely to show that just as you cannot, as it were, 'read off' from your thought that it is the thought of your brother in America, so you can't find out the meaning of words (or sentences) by inspecting what goes on inside you while you utter (or 'mean') them. For, as Wittgenstein asks, 'What is the connection between these words, or anything, substitutable for them, with my brother in America?' (LC 67).

Smythies seems to think that when it comes to thought, we can be absolutely sure, right from the start (and independently of any sense-giving context), that *this* is a thought of *that*—as if 'thought' were an international, self-interpreting sign-language which left no question of interpretation (or connection) open, or as if it were a kind of 'super-picture' (LC 67) of reality that required no 'method of projection' in order to be understood. But, as Wittgenstein points out in the *Lectures on Aesthetics*:

If a Frenchman says: 'It is raining' in French and an Englishman also says it in English, it is not that something happens in both minds which is the real sense of 'It is raining'. [Rather,] (1) Thinking (or imagery) is not an accompaniment of the words as they are spoken or heard; (2) The sense—the thought 'It's raining'—is not even the words *with* the accompaniment of some sort of imagery. It is the thought 'It's raining' only within the English language. (LC 30)

That is to say, by ruling out options (1) and (2), Wittgenstein is also rejecting both sides of Smythies' dichotomy: meaning a word or phrase

is not a mental 'accompaniment' to the written or spoken words and neither does it consist of merely acting in a certain way 'with the accompaniment of some sort of imagery'—the conception Smythies erroneously believes Wittgenstein has in mind when he says that the person who says 'God's eye sees everything' is associating a particular use with a picture. This is why, in the *Brown Book*, Wittgenstein calls it 'a kind of general disease of thinking' to believe that meaning something is 'a mental state from which all our acts spring as from a reservoir'.<sup>42</sup>

Consequently, Wittgenstein is not denying that the religious person means what he says (as Smythies believes), but is rather rejecting Smythies' conception of what meaning something consists in. In other words, far from holding that the religious person *only* uses a picture—as opposed to something better—Wittgenstein insists that 'the whole *weight* may be in the picture' (LC 72). But what does this mean? In the PI Wittgenstein gives us some helpful clues:

If we compare a proposition to a picture, we must think whether we are comparing it to a portrait (a historical representation) or to a genre-picture. And both comparisons have point. When I look at a genre-picture, it 'tells' me something, even though I don't believe (imagine) for a moment that the people I see in it really exist, or that there have really been people in that situation. But suppose I ask: 'What does it tell me then? I should like to say "What the picture tells me is itself." That is, its telling me something consists in its own structure, in its own lines and colours. (PI §522–3)

In other words, Wittgenstein is suggesting here that there are two ways that a picture, and consequently, if his analogy is correct, a sentence, can 'tell' me something. It can either tell me something in the way that a historical portrait depicts a historical event—something that can also be described without using the picture—or it can 'tell' me something in a way that is not specifiable independently of the picture itself. Wittgenstein explains:

We speak of understanding a sentence in the sense in which it can be replaced by another which says the same; but also in the sense in which it cannot be replaced by any other. (Any more than one musical theme can be replaced by another.) In the one case the thought in the sentence is something common to different sentences; in the other, something that is

<sup>42</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *The Blue and Brown Books* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), 143.

expressed only by these words in these positions. (Understanding a poem.) (PI §531)

Now, when Wittgenstein says to Smythies that the whole weight may be in the picture, I believe that what he means is that the sentence in question cannot straightforwardly be replaced by another 'which says the same' and hence that the picture is irreplaceable in the sense of being non-paraphrasable. This is why Wittgenstein says:

Isn't it as important as anything else, what picture he does use? Of certain pictures we say that they might just as well be replaced by another—e.g. we could, under certain circumstances, have one projection of an ellipse drawn instead of another. [He *may* say]: 'I would have been prepared to use another picture, it would have had the same effect.' (LC 71)

In this example the picture employed is therefore *not* essential to what is being communicated—it is not irreplaceable—for it can easily be swapped for another which 'has the same effect'. In this respect, to borrow Aaron Ridley's terminology, the picture is 'instrumentally intersubstitutable'<sup>43</sup>—it can be replaced by another which says the same thing (or brings about the same end). I take it that it is Smythies' worry that this is how Wittgenstein conceives of *all* pictures, namely, as being merely the means to some independently specifiable end (such as, say, living in a certain way),<sup>44</sup> whereas the whole point of Wittgenstein's distinction between 'essential' (irreplaceable/non-paraphrasable) and 'inessential' (replaceable/paraphrasable) pictures in LC is precisely to show that 'religious pictures' are *not* instrumentally intersubstitutable in the way that Smythies fears.

Naturally, when Wittgenstein says in the aforementioned passage from the PI that in the case of paraphrasable sentences 'the thought in the sentence is something common to different sentences', while in the non-paraphrasable case 'the thought' can be 'expressed only by these words in these positions', we must not take this to mean, *à la* Smythies, that 'the thought' is something over and above *all* the sentences in which it occurs. That is to say, there is no way of 'independently specifying the thought' short of offering another sentence that also conveys it. As Wittgenstein says in 1931 in CV—still using the vestiges of Tractarian

<sup>43</sup> See *The Philosophy of Music: Theme and Variations* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), 28.

<sup>44</sup> Compare also Diamond's list of examples of the non-essential use of pictures in her 'Wittgenstein on Religious Belief', 119.

terminology—'The limit of language is shown by its being impossible to describe the fact which corresponds to (is the translation of) a sentence, without simply repeating the sentence' (CV 10e). But there is of course nothing mysterious or 'limiting' about this fact about thought. For the idea that 'thoughts' (or 'facts') should be specifiable independently of language-use is only lent credence by the incoherent 'mental process' picture of thought. If, however, as Wittgenstein says, we come to recognize that the thought 'it is raining' only is *this thought* within the English language (LC 30), then it becomes perfectly obvious why there is no other way of saying 'it is raining' than by saying 'it is raining' or by employing some paraphrase thereof—such as, for instance, to adapt a French expression, 'it is pissing from the sky'.<sup>45</sup>

So the point of Wittgenstein's distinction between the essential and the inessential use of pictures (sentences) is not to draw a distinction between sentences which can and sentences which can't latch on to independently specifiable thoughts or facts. Neither, therefore, is it to make a distinction between language-use which 'refers' to reality and language-use which doesn't. In other words, and *contra* most—including Smythies'—misreadings of him, Wittgenstein is *not*, as Putnam emphasizes, saying the following: 'in ordinary language we have pictures (and, of course, words) and uses of pictures and words, *and* something beyond the words and pictures, while in religious language we have only pictures and words and uses of pictures and words'.<sup>46</sup> We only ever have pictures and words and uses of pictures and words. There is no such thing as 'latching on to reality' *simpliciter*, say by correlating words with 'transcendent' or 'mental' objects that are supposed to 'anchor' our language to a non-linguistic 'beyond' (*pace* the author of 'TLP').<sup>47</sup> In this respect religious language is no different from 'ordinary' language. Where it *is* different, according to Wittgenstein, is that in the religious case I cannot do without the picture, I cannot

<sup>45</sup> The expression is *il pleut à vache qui pisse* which of course wouldn't be a paraphrase, but a qualification.

<sup>46</sup> See Hilary Putnam, *Renewing Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 159.

<sup>47</sup> That is, what Wittgenstein is rejecting here is the view that in ordinary language the meaning of a word is the object it stands for, while in religious language there is nothing for which the words stand and they therefore refer, at best, to emotional attitudes. That is to say, Wittgenstein is both rejecting a naïve realism as well as a naïve anti-realism about language here; he is not saying something Derridaesque such as 'there is nothing outside the text'.

describe my use of the picture without using the picture,<sup>48</sup> whereas in 'ordinary' language, I often can do without the 'picture' (or without this particular turn of phrase—but not, of course, as we have just seen, without *any* form of words) and use something else, a different picture or another form of words, instead. In this sense 'ordinary' language is often 'instrumentally intersubstitutable', whereas religious language (generally) isn't. And this is a feature that religious language shares with artistic<sup>49</sup> language-use—hence Wittgenstein's aside at PI §531 about 'understanding a poem'.

Two different senses of the word 'understanding' can therefore be distinguished which mirror the 'essential' and 'inessential' use of pictures discussed above. Following Ridley, I will call these two different senses 'internal' and 'external' understanding respectively. That is to say, Wittgenstein's notion of understanding a sentence 'in the sense in which it cannot be replaced by any other' (PI §531) will be called 'internal', to register the fact, as Ridley says, 'that what is grasped in it is, because "expressed only by these words in these positions", understood as internal to *this* particular arrangement of words',<sup>50</sup> whereas understanding a sentence 'in the sense in which it can be replaced by another which says the same' (PI §531) will be called 'external' to mark the fact that what is grasped in it is, because "something common to different sentences", not understood as internal to any one specific formulation'.<sup>51</sup> Taken together, these two senses comprise the concept of understanding (PI §533) which can therefore be said to consist of both a paraphrased and a non-paraphrased aspect.<sup>52</sup>

We can now apply this distinction in order to understand what Wittgenstein means when he speaks of understanding religious utterances such as 'God's eye sees everything' or 'we might see one another after death' (LC 70). If what I have been arguing so far is correct, then, if I am to understand sentences of this kind, I must primarily understand

<sup>48</sup> See Diamond, *op.cit.*, 128.

<sup>49</sup> The natural word to use here would, of course, be 'aesthetic', but in order not to get the ordinary sense of 'aesthetic' confused with what Kierkegaard means by the 'aesthetic' (a notion that plays a complex role in Kierkegaard's *oeuvre*, but that Julia Watkin has usefully summarized as 'to do with the life of the senses; it [the aesthetic] thus encompasses not only ordinary human instincts and desires but also their expression through the arts, and through artistic creativity that at its highest achievement finds its expression in works of genius', in *Historical Dictionary of Kierkegaard's Philosophy* (Oxford: Scarecrow Press, 2001), 14. See also chapter 2.), I have used 'artistic' instead.

<sup>50</sup> Ridley, *op.cit.*, 32–3.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

them 'internally', as a purely 'external' understanding based on a grasp of what the individual words mean in everyday contexts will not be sufficient to effect a real understanding of what is going on here. It is for this reason that Wittgenstein says:

In one sense, I understand all he [the person who says he believes in a Judgement Day] says—the English words 'God', 'separate', etc. I understand. I could say: 'I don't believe in this', and this would be true, meaning I haven't got these thoughts or anything that hangs together with them. But not that I could contradict the thing. (LC 55)

What Wittgenstein seems to be saying here is that in order to be able to contradict a religious statement, you not only need to understand what the 'atoms'—that is, the individual words—it is comprised of mean in ordinary contexts, but what the sentence as a whole means, and, for this to be possible, you must understand how the words are functioning in *this* specific context—you must, that is, understand their technique of application *here*—something that cannot be accomplished by, for example, simply hazarding a guess about what the words composing the sentence might or might not be 'referring' to.<sup>53</sup> This is why Wittgenstein says that in one sense he understands all the religious person says, because he understands, for example, the ordinary words 'God' or 'separate',<sup>54</sup> but that, in another sense, he doesn't understand the sentence *at all*, for, in this particular context, he has no grasp of how these familiar words are used: 'my normal technique of language leaves me' (LC 55).

Wittgenstein's case, to borrow an example of Diamond's, is similar to someone who understands the ordinary use of the word 'beautiful', say, but who is at a loss when someone applies it to a person like George Eliot, for example. For according to the habitual criteria George Eliot obviously isn't beautiful. If I am therefore to understand this new application of a familiar concept, my ordinary vision must, as it were, first be transformed. In Diamond's words:

She [George Eliot], that magnificently ugly woman, gives a totally transformed meaning to 'beauty'. Beauty itself becomes something entirely new for one, as one comes to see (to one's own amazement, perhaps) a powerful beauty residing in this woman. . . . In such a case, she is not judged by a norm available through

<sup>53</sup> See also Putnam, *op.cit.*, 165.

<sup>54</sup> It is unclear why Wittgenstein speaks of 'separate' in connection with a discussion of a Last Judgement, but I presume he is thinking of sentences such as 'the soul is separate from the body' or some such thing, but of course this is only a guess. What exactly Wittgenstein meant is irrelevant to our discussion, though.



the concept of beauty; she shows the concept up, she moves one to use the words 'beauty' and 'beautiful' almost as new words or as renewed words. She gives one a new vocabulary, a new way of taking the world in in one's words, and of speaking about it to others.<sup>55</sup>

That is to say, a 'conceptual reorientation'<sup>56</sup> must take place if I am to understand the application of the word 'beautiful' to George Eliot—a reorientation which, as Diamond says, makes possible new ways of speaking about the world. And something similar, if Wittgenstein is right, happens in religious contexts, when I am, for instance, suddenly brought to understand, perhaps through certain kinds of experiences of dependence and dependability,<sup>57</sup> what it means to call God 'Father'. In this respect, just as George Eliot 'moves one to use the words "beauty" and "beautiful" almost as new words', so, it could be said, does God move the religious believer to use the words 'father' or 'fatherly love' almost as new words.

Consequently, one could now say that for someone for whom this 'conceptual reorientation' does not occur, no real understanding of the sentence (or words) in question is possible. That is to say, someone like Wittgenstein, who does not know what to make of the 'after death man's'<sup>58</sup> words, can be said only to 'understand' such sentences in the sense that he recognizes, for example, the ordinary English words 'scrutiny', 'soul' and so on that might comprise them, but without being able to understand, to speak with Diamond, the 'renewed use' of these words. This would be similar to someone who knows that the sun is a star located at the centre of our Solar System, but who fails to see the aptness of the phrase 'Juliet is the sun'.<sup>59</sup> And such a failure of understanding cannot be remedied by, say, pointing at Juliet and at the sun and saying, 'she is like that', but rather by drawing attention to aspects of the sun that make the comparison with Juliet meaningful. If this still does not help, then perhaps getting the person to read more poetry will gradually make understanding dawn.<sup>60</sup>

It is ironic that in most philosophical domains, it is fairly commonplace nowadays to appeal to context and practice when it comes to the

<sup>55</sup> Diamond, *op.cit.*, 125.

<sup>57</sup> Compare Wittgenstein's talk of 'feeling absolutely safe' in the *Lecture on Ethics*.

<sup>58</sup> This phrase is Diamond's.

<sup>59</sup> This example is Ridley's.

<sup>60</sup> Of course it is possible that regardless of what one tries, understanding will never occur. In such cases one may want to speak, like Wittgenstein, of a kind of 'aspect blindness'.

question of effecting an understanding of something; indeed, as regards understanding ethical and artistic concepts, for example, one even speaks of cultivating certain virtues of character said to be necessary for making such understanding possible. But when it comes to understanding religious language, these lessons are generally forgotten and it is assumed that here the only pertinent question to ask is whether religious language 'refers'—as if there were only *one* thing referring could be, as if what constitutes 'referring' doesn't itself, in many ways, depend on *context*. Noticing a 'religious fact', if one wants to talk that way, requires an understanding of theological concepts—such as, for example, seeing the point of calling God 'Father'—just as understanding a 'mathematical fact' needs the established practice of mathematics.<sup>61</sup> As Wittgenstein so aptly puts it in *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*:

'If calculation is to be practical, then it must uncover facts.' But what things are 'facts'? Do you believe that you can show what fact is meant by, e.g. pointing to it with your finger? Does that of itself clarify the part played by 'establishing' a fact?—Suppose it takes mathematics to define the *character* of what you are calling a 'fact'! 'It is interesting to know *how many* vibrations this note has!' But it took arithmetic to teach you this question. It taught you to see this kind of fact. Mathematics—I want to say—teaches you, not just the answer to a question, but a whole language-game with questions and answers.<sup>62</sup>

Similarly, I would like to say, religion teaches you not just the answer to a question—say to the meaning of life—but a whole language-game with questions and answers.

So when Wittgenstein is, for example, saying that Christianity is not a doctrine, he does not mean that it has no conceptual—or paraphrasable—content. Rather, what he is suggesting is that being able, say, to recite the Creeds or Catholic dogma is not sufficient for having any real (that is, internal) understanding of religious concepts, as this requires being able to see religious utterances non-instrumentally, that is to say, it requires being able to see their *point* and aptness rather than their ability, as it were, to convey 'information' about God. And being able to see this is not possible, if Wittgenstein is right, independently of having some familiarity and grasp of the Christian

<sup>61</sup> The circularity involved here is analogous to that of paraphrase presupposing itself and is therefore harmless. For a good exposition of this, see Ridley, *op.cit.*, 26–30.

<sup>62</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*, ed. G. H. von Wright, R. Rhees, G. E. M. Anscombe, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 2001), Part VII, section 18, 381.

form of life and the phenomenology of experience that gave rise to it. Hence, when Wittgenstein says that the important thing with regard to the Christian 'doctrine' is to understand 'that you have to change your *life*' or 'the *direction* of your life', he is not implying that it is somehow possible to do this *without* committing oneself to the Christian claims. For to say that much more than rote-reciting is required, is not to say that therefore the 'doctrine'—the Christian claims—are irrelevant, as this would be as absurd as thinking that because a song can be sung both with and without expression, you could have the expression without the song (LC 29). Similarly, when Climacus states that the important thing with regard to the Christian doctrine is 'to understand that it is to be existed in, to understand the difficulty of existing in it, what a prodigious existence-task this doctrine assigns to the learner', what he means is that a proper understanding of what these claims actually amount to—what these claims *are*—is only possible from within the context of a lived religious life.<sup>63</sup> Hence, there is no tension in Climacus' position when he says that Christianity both is and is not a doctrine, for of course it is a doctrine, if by 'doctrine' we mean 'having paraphrasable content', but it is not a 'doctrine' in the sense of being a philosophical theory whose purpose is to be comprehended speculatively. Rather, the point of the 'doctrine' is to exist in faith, to acquire an understanding of it 'from the inside' as it were.

Consequently, it is simply not the case, as Nielsen seems to be assuming, that on the one hand we have the 'beliefs', while on the other we have the 'practice' and, if we are very lucky, there are a handful of religious believers for whom the two come in a package. For it makes no sense to think that the 'beliefs' can be specified (in anything but a purely minimalist—'external'—sense) completely independently of the practices in which they are embedded (and vice versa), just as it makes no sense to believe that 'the meaning or thought is just an accompaniment of the word' (LC 29), and word and thought, like 'belief' and 'practice', can therefore be divorced from each other.

This also helps us to understand what Wittgenstein means when he says that:

in religion every level of devoutness must have its appropriate form of expression which has no sense at a lower level. This doctrine, which means something at a

<sup>63</sup> This is why it makes no sense to think that one can first come to believe in God and then use this 'belief' as a reason for adopting the religious form of life. See also note 70.

higher level, is null and void for someone who is still at the lower level; he can only understand it *wrongly* and so these words are *not* valid for such a person. (CV 32e)

Here Wittgenstein is suggesting that there are different levels of understanding as regards religious doctrines corresponding to the relative depth of devoutness and spiritual development of the person concerned. So, for example, someone who thinks that the expression 'the Lord has given, the Lord has taken away, blessed be the name of the Lord' is a cheap attempt at trying to justify the caprice of the deity, is at a lower level of religious understanding than someone who sees it as a trusting acceptance of God's sovereignty.

If the idea that spiritual development is necessary for a proper understanding of religious expressions to occur strikes us as implausible, it may again be useful to remind ourselves of what goes on in artistic contexts. Someone, for instance, who lacks a musical education and does not possess a 'musical ear' will not be able to contradict the judgement of a connoisseur, as such a person will not have sufficient (musical) sensibility even really to understand what the connoisseur is saying. In other words, such a person will neither possess the vocabulary nor have the appropriate concepts that would enable them to say anything genuinely meaningful about a musical work, short, perhaps, of finding it 'pleasurable' or 'relaxing'.

For exactly analogous reasons Wittgenstein feels that he cannot contradict what the religious person is saying, since he, as yet, lacks a real grasp of the concepts involved. That is to say, just as there is musical sensibility and tone deafness (and, to be sure, much in between), there is also religious sensibility and blindness for religion, and neither musical nor religious sensibility is acquired by learning a set of theses, doctrines, by heart—about who the great composers were, about the laws of counterpoint or about transubstantiation—since this would only bring about an 'external', that is, purely intellectual, understanding of the subject comparable to having learnt a code.<sup>64</sup> But what is required here is the kind of understanding that makes the musical work or the prayer (the religious words) *live* for me, not the kind that allows me to parrot a form of words. And such an understanding can only be brought about by immersing oneself in the culture or practice that has given rise to these phenomena. This is why Wittgenstein says in the *Lectures*

<sup>64</sup> See also Ridley, *op. cit.*, 31.

on *Aesthetics*: 'In order to get clear about aesthetic words you have to describe ways of living' (LC 11). If we understand that this is so in the case of aesthetics, it is only prejudice which prevents us from seeing that this applies in exactly the same way to religion. Hence Writgenstein's remark that he could only utter the word 'Lord' with meaning, if he lived *completely* differently (CV 33e).

Consequently, neither Kierkegaard nor Writgenstein is concerned with taking the 'content' out of religious claims and reducing it 'to merely living in a certain way'. Rather, both philosophers are at pains to show that the either/or we seem to be confronted with is really a false dichotomy. For no such thing as a fully fledged understanding of any domain of discourse is possible without both aspects of understanding being present, without, that is, both the 'external' and the 'internal' aspect being available to the 'understander'. Hence, it is simply not the case that we have to choose between a purely 'external'—that is to say 'doctrinal'—account of religious belief and a kind of arbitrary, 'mystical' commitment to living a certain kind of life, as both alternatives involve serious distortions: if we don't want to have a purely 'external', code-like understanding of religious beliefs—which is really no understanding at all—then religious beliefs cannot be understood and specified independently of the mode of life that gives them sense.

Conversely, if we do not want to have mere religious passion—a kind of 'internal' understanding without any 'external' aspect, something, I take it, that is either unintelligible or some bizarre sort of rapture—then religious feeling must be expressible within the Christian conceptual framework.<sup>65</sup> To put it in a more Kantian way: external understanding without internal understanding is empty; internal understanding without external understanding is blind. Or in the words of Petrus Minor:

One does not become a Christian by being religiously moved by something higher; and not every outpouring of religious emotion is a Christian outpouring. In other words, emotion that is Christian is controlled by conceptual definitions, and when deep emotion is transformed into or expressed in words in order to be communicated, this transformation must continually take place within the conceptual definitions. (BA 113)

<sup>65</sup> But this of course does not imply that the one can be described independently of the other; any more than practice and belief can be specified completely independently of each other.

These words are a far cry from the usual stereotyping of Kierkegaard as the advocate of 'blind' religious passion.

Kierkegaard and Writgenstein agree, therefore, that, as with all ordinary (non-religious) cases of understanding, both the 'external' and the 'internal' aspects of it are necessary. That is to say, although, as I have argued, the internal aspect is crucial in religious (and artistic) contexts, this does not imply that it is possible to have this on its own. Consequently, *pate* Nielsen, if Writgenstein and Kierkegaard are right, there is no such thing as 'simply living in a certain way' as opposed to 'believing certain things' or, indeed, vice versa. *Genuine* beliefs can never be divorced from and understood completely independently of the difference they make in one's life, for there is no such thing as believing something *in vacuo*—without a context (or practice)—unless one thinks, like Smythies, that believing something is tantamount to holding a certain mental image before one's mind (and we've already seen that this is confused). Hence, it is not the case, as is often supposed, that Writgenstein denies that religious people believe different things to non-religious people. What he is denying is that any sense can be made of *what* those things are independently of paying attention to the form of life (or practice) which gives them sense. For there is no such thing, nor could there be such a thing—in religion or elsewhere—as simply inspecting the words alone in order to find out whether they make sense or not.

And it is just this that—despite making claims to the contrary—Nielsen does when attempting to dismiss 'God-talk' as incoherent:

It is not . . . that I think that God is an object among objects, but I do think . . . that he must—in some very unclear sense—be taken to be a particular existent among existents though, of course, 'the king' among existents, and a very special and mysterious existent, but not an object, not a kind of object, not just a categorical or classificatory notion, but not a non-particular either. Though he is said to be infinite, he is also said to be a person, and these two elements when put together seem at least to yield a glaringly incoherent notion. He cannot be an object—a spatio-temporal entity but he is also a he—a funny kind of he to be sure—who is also said to be a person—again a funny kind of person—who is taken to be a person without a body, a purely *spiritual* being. This makes him out to be a 'peculiar reality' indeed. He gets to be even more peculiar when we are told he is an *infinite* person as well. But now language has really gone on a holiday.<sup>66</sup>

<sup>66</sup> Nielsen and Phillips, *op. cit.*, 123.

In spite of repeatedly expressing contempt for what I have called TV, it seems that Nielsen has momentarily endorsed this conception, for, like advocates of the latter, he is, in this passage, taking religious language crudely *au pied de la lettre*. That is to say, Nielsen is simply assuming that because I can understand what 'person' and 'infinite' mean in ordinary contexts, I am able to understand the religious expression 'God is infinite'—as if this were just a matter of combining the two linguistic 'atoms' of 'person' and 'infinite' into a 'peculiar' complex.

But if what I have been arguing is correct, such an idea just doesn't make any sense. For if it did, it would, among other things, spell doom for most other domains of discourse as well. For example, we should be just as much at a loss about how it is possible to apply emotive language to music, say. That is, if Nielsen's 'analysis' of 'God-talk' is anything to go by, we would be confronted by the following dilemma: either we understand sentences such as 'the string quartet is tearful' because it makes sense for sounds or bits of marks on a page to be sad—an analogue to Nielsen's strictly literal rendering of religious language—or such sentences are, as Nielsen is fond of emphasizing, purely 'symbolic', that is, the 'tearful' is merely a fancy way of saying something like 'arousing feelings of sadness in most perceivers'—a correlate of Nielsen's claim that if religious language can't be construed literally, then it reduces to 'morality touched by emotion'.<sup>67</sup> But, although philosophers have at one time or another held such views,<sup>68</sup> Nielsen's dilemma is surely just as much of a false dichotomy as the one between 'practice' and 'belief' discussed (and dismissed) earlier.

So, if we have, as Mulhall puts it, such a 'remarkably impoverished conception of the kinds of non-factual or non-descriptive uses of language . . . there might be',<sup>69</sup> then it should, of course, come as no surprise that, on such a conception, 'God-talk'—along with moral and artistic language—will turn out to be incoherent. Rather than celebrating this fact, however, Nielsen should offer an argument showing why his narrow conception of language which can see no alternative to a factual (metaphysical)/symbolic divide should be the only game in town.<sup>70</sup>

<sup>67</sup> Nielsen and Phillips, 314 (for an especially stark expression of this either/or).

<sup>68</sup> See, for example, Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism*, 219–22.

<sup>69</sup> See Stephen Mulhall's critique in Nielsen and Phillips, op. cit., 308.

<sup>70</sup> I take the foregoing also to constitute an argument against John Hyman's very similar view that 'Wittgenstein defends two principal doctrines: first a doctrine about the meaning of religious discourse, and second, a doctrine about the epistemology of religious beliefs. The first is that the expression of a religious belief in words is

The odd claim to have followed 'the very logic of God-talk'<sup>71</sup> isn't sufficient here, for, if I am right, this is precisely what Nielsen has *not* done.<sup>72</sup>

If what I have been arguing so far is correct, this disposes of Nielsen's charge that Wittgenstein's most crucial error consists in claiming that 'Christian practice is everything and . . . belief that involves doctrines, is nothing.' It is therefore now time to address the related criticisms of incommensurability and fideism mentioned in the introduction to this chapter. That is to say, I will now confront Nielsen's objection that Kierkegaard's and Wittgenstein's conception, by turning religion into a form of life 'incommensurable' with other forms of life, has effectively sealed religion off from all possible criticism.<sup>73</sup>

### III.1 'Incommensurability'

In Nielsen's words:

not a prediction or a hypothesis, but instead expresses "something like a passionate commitment to a system of reference". And the second is that religious beliefs are therefore immune from falsification and verification. (See "The Gospel According to Wittgenstein", 7) These remarks clearly imply that Hyman can also see no alternative to a factual (metaphysical)/symbolic (metaphorical) dichotomy and therefore simply assumes it without argument. (For a critique of the 'second doctrine' Hyman ascribes to Wittgenstein, see the discussion of Nielsen's charge of 'fideism' and 'incommensurability' in the main text below.) See also Stephen Mulhall's excellent critique of Hyman's paper, in his 'Wittgenstein and the Philosophy of Religion' (in D. Z. Phillips and Timothy Tessin (eds), *Philosophy of Religion in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*), especially the following passage: "But if, according to this [Wittgenstein's] approach, no one can so much as understand what a belief in God's existence amounts to without grasping the location of that concept in the grammatical network of religious concepts that Wittgenstein here describes as a system of reference, it makes no sense to think that one can first establish the truth of that-belief and then use it as a reason for adopting the system of reference. On the contrary, one could not acquire a belief in God's existence without both understanding and committing oneself to the broader grammatical system in which the concept of God has its life. Consequently, Hyman's objection to Wittgenstein's remark simply begs the question against Wittgenstein's whole approach—not only to the philosophy of religion but to philosophy in general." (101) And the same can of course be said of Nielsen.

<sup>71</sup> Nielsen and Phillips, op. cit., 123.

<sup>72</sup> Compare also Diamond's remark that talk of God having scattered his people 'no more depends on a metaphysical conception of how an incorporeal being can intervene in human history than does talk of Ford Motor Company as having acted [as when it was charged with manslaughter]'. Diamond, op. cit., 129.

<sup>73</sup> See for example, *ibid.*, 320–1. Whether Nielsen believes this objection also applies to Kierkegaard is unclear, but given Kierkegaard's conception of 'existence spheres', which I have argued is in many ways analogous to Wittgenstein's notion of a form of life, it seems to me that it must.

The distinctive domains of discourse (e.g. science, religion, morality) *initially* give us our criteria of reasonability, justifiability distinctive to each domain of discourse, but domains are not unconnected and the form of life that is there with their practices can, and should, be appealed to where some practice or practices in one domain of discourse fits or fit badly with another. . . . This is what Wittgensteinian Fideism does not allow with its conception of incommensurable domains determining what constitutes a rational authority unique to each domain of discourse. Rejecting along Davidsonian lines incommensurability. . . . we can assess whole domains of discourse. . . . We need not, that is, be struck with just saying that these are our practices and these are the language-games we play, this is where we stand; this is what we do around here, these are the rules we have and we can do no other.<sup>74</sup>

I will take the 'incommensurability' objection first and will then consider the 'stonewalling' charge.

Given that Nielsen has brought Davidson into the picture, let us first of all ask whether the Kierkegaard-Wittgenstein conception of religion implies that religious believers have a 'conceptual scheme' which is in some sense 'incommensurable' with that of the atheist. Two responses to this question are possible, neither of which advances Nielsen's case. If we take 'incommensurable' to mean what Davidson means by it, namely, 'largely true but not translatable',<sup>75</sup> then the answer to this question is 'no', as any good Wittgensteinian would take Davidson's 'short line' on this issue: 'nothing, it may be said, could count as evidence that some form of activity could not be interpreted in our language that was not at the same time evidence that that form of activity was not speech behaviour'.<sup>76</sup> That is to say, given that I have argued that you cannot have internal understanding without the 'external aspect', and 'external understanding' depends on the paraphrasable use of words, there can, *ex hypothesi*, be no *complete* failure of 'translation'. So, for example, I cannot explain what 'God's eye sees everything' means to someone who does not understand the habitual senses of the words comprising the sentence. Neither, *pace* Nielsen, could I explain what 'eye' means in this context by pointing, say, to God's 'anatomy', since it is obvious that the word 'eye' in the sentence 'God's eye sees everything' does not function

<sup>74</sup> Nielsen and Phillips, 128–9.

<sup>75</sup> Donald Davidson, 'On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme', in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 194. By 'not translatable' Davidson means 'not translatable at all'.

<sup>76</sup> Davidson, *op. cit.*, 185.

in the same way as the word 'eye' does in the sentence 'a racoon's eye can see in the dark'. It is equally obvious that I could not apply the word 'eye' to God; if I could not employ the word 'eye' in everyday contexts—if, that is, I could not understand 'a racoon's eye can see in the dark' and similar sentences. Religious discourse cannot, therefore, be 'self-contained' or 'sealed off' from other linguistic 'domains', for it is precisely the quotidian senses of words that make possible the 'renewed' uses or applications of these words in religious contexts. In this respect, religious discourse, like artistic language-use, involves an *extension* or *transformation* of everyday discourse<sup>77</sup> and consequently can't be 'incommensurable' with it.<sup>78</sup>

If all we mean by 'incommensurable', however, is that there can be a partial 'translation failure'—in the sense that religious expressions are not instrumentally intersubstitutable—then the answer to our question is 'yes', but unsurprising and harmless. For such a 'translation failure' would be similar to a lyrical novel's (or poem's) resisting translation into another language. That is to say, although it can of course be done, what is distinctive about the poetic work will get 'lost in translation', something that will be apparent to anyone who ever tried to translate Proust's *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu* into English.

If this is correct, then Nielsen's bringing Davidson into the discussion at all is either irrelevant or merely a diversionary tactic, for Davidson seems to allow for partial translation failure.<sup>79</sup> Furthermore, given that Nielsen seems, in some sense, to regard himself as a faithful

<sup>77</sup> In this (religious) respect Diamond speaks, following Franz Rosenzweig, of the 'conversion' of our concepts. Diamond, *op. cit.*, 125.

<sup>78</sup> So, for example, if 'sun' did not, in ordinary contexts, denote the heavenly body, it would make no sense to call Juliet the sun.

<sup>79</sup> Some philosophers, such as Hanjo Glock and including presumably Nielsen, read Davidson as not allowing for partial translation failure. I believe, although I cannot argue it in detail here, that such a reading is not borne out by the text. It would, for example, be hard to square with the following passage: 'A language may contain simple predicates whose extensions are matched by no simple predicates, or even by no predicates at all, in some other language. What enables us to make this point in particular cases is an ontology common to the two languages, with concepts that individuate the same objects. We can be clear about breakdowns in translation when they are local enough, for a background of generally successful translation provides what is needed to make these failures intelligible. But we were after larger game: we wanted to make sense of there being a language we could not translate at all.' (*Op. cit.*, 192; see also my quotation in the main text below.) Be that as it may, if Davidson were nonetheless (and in spite of what he just seems to have said) committed to the view that partial translation failure is impossible, then his view is just false, for we clearly get such translation failure all the

disciple of Davidson's, it is ironic that he himself, in his criticisms of Wittgenstein's conception of religious belief, ends up espousing a version of the scheme/content distinction that Davidson deplores. For Nielsen's first charge against Wittgenstein presupposes that it is possible to separate religious 'content'—the 'beliefs', the 'doctrine'—from the 'scheme' (the religious practice and form of life), but, if Davidson is right, then this is something we can't do:

If we choose to translate some alien sentence rejected by its speakers by a sentence to which we are strongly attached on a community basis, we may be tempted to call this a difference in schemes; if we decide to accommodate the evidence in other ways, it may be more natural to speak of a difference of opinion. But when others think differently from us, no general principle, or appeal to evidence, can force us to decide that the difference lies in our beliefs rather than in our concepts.<sup>80</sup>

So when Nielsen says that 'individual practices and clusters of practices forming whole domains of discourse, such as science, religion or morality, can be criticized by reference to their fit with the forms of language/forms of life taken as a whole',<sup>81</sup> this sounds suspiciously like a linguistic version of what Davidson is rejecting—'a neutral ground, or common co-ordinate system'<sup>82</sup> that we can appeal to when criticizing other practices (or 'schemes'). But, if that is so, then Nielsen just hasn't learnt Davidson's lesson.

Consequently, I can, of course, criticize other practices, including religious practices, but not by reference to their 'fit' or failure to 'fit' with the forms of life 'taken as a whole'.<sup>83</sup> For there is no such thing, nor could there be such a thing, as a form of life-in-general consisting of all our diverse practices taken together and supplying us with a 'neutral set of criteria' against which individual practices can be measured and found wanting.<sup>84</sup> But if this is so, then Nielsen's notion would seem

time, which is, for example, why we employ German words like *Dasein* when translating Heidegger into English.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 197.

<sup>81</sup> Kai Nielsen, op.cit., 128.

<sup>82</sup> Davidson, op.cit., 198.

<sup>83</sup> For example, one might, as Mulhall points out, share Nietzsche's suspicions of Christianity as embodying sado-masochistic self-hatred or Freud's suspicions of institutionalized religion as pandering to psychologically immature dependence on a father-figure (Wittgenstein and Philosophy of Religion, 106).

<sup>84</sup> Now if Nielsen's suggestion that religion can be judged against forms of language/forms of life taken as a whole meant nothing more objectionable than that someone's religious beliefs should cohere with his/her views about the world generally, this would be a perfectly reasonable demand. Unfortunately, this is not the case: Nielsen is not concerned with the question of whether someone's religious beliefs might (or

to amount to little more than advocacy of a form of (thinly disguised) rationalistic imperialism.

## CONCLUSION

If what I have been arguing in this chapter is correct, then Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein have shown that the target view is untenable. Furthermore, if my arguments against Nielsen have been successful, then this shows that Kierkegaard's and Wittgenstein's single most important criticism of traditional philosophy of religion is summarized in Petrus Minor's topical diagnosis of the 'fundamental harm in modern speculation' as 'a confusion of the spheres' (BA 5): in its efforts always to want to say that 'things which look different are really the same',<sup>85</sup> or, indeed, that 'things which look different are really *incoherent*', adherents of TV—and those who, wittingly or unwittingly, share some of its premises—only succeed in obscuring the qualitative dialectic (grammar) characteristic of religious faith such that this either, in the end, as Kierkegaard's pseudonyms have shown, serves to abolish Christianity, or, as Wittgenstein insists, makes it impossible to see religious practices as anything but sheer stupidity.<sup>86</sup>

Hence, we are now in an even better position to understand the rationale behind Kierkegaard's elaborate pseudonymous strategy: it is precisely because Kierkegaard believes, like Wittgenstein who was inspired by him, that ethical and religious concepts can mean nothing to someone who lives entirely in aesthetic categories, that his pseudonyms try, first of all, to prise the reader away from this particular way of looking at things. Thus, for instance, Judge William in the second part of *EITHER/OR*, does not attempt to coax the young aesthete out of his state of blissful irresponsibility by trying to demonstrate the existence of God to him, say, but rather by attempting to develop him ethically, by as it were preparing the ground 'existentially' in order to make it possible for the relevant concepts to acquire some bite. Similarly, Climacus insists

should) cohere with their other beliefs about the world, but rather seeks to distil a neutral set of criteria from all our practices taken together (whatever that could be) and then to employ this as a stick to beat religion with. That is to say, Nielsen wants to show that by the lights of this 'neutral set of criteria' religious beliefs can be found to be 'inherently incoherent'.

<sup>85</sup> See chapter 1, note 10.

<sup>86</sup> See also chapter 1, end of section II.

throughout CUP that he is not a Christian: given that he wants to show to his readers that, far from being Christians, they actually regard the Christian concepts in completely aesthetic terms, he starts from where they are and hopes in this way to produce the inward deepening necessary for a reconceptualization to take place. In other words, if Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein are right, no internal understanding of the most important human practices—aesthetics, ethics, religion and, indeed (as I have tried to show in the second chapter) philosophy—is possible without cultivation of character or, as Wittgenstein says in CV,<sup>87</sup> self-mastery.

<sup>87</sup> CV 35e. See chapter 2, end of section 1.

## Conclusion

In relation to their systems most systematizers are like a man who builds an enormous castle and lives in a shack close by.

From *The Journals of Søren Kierkegaard*<sup>1</sup>

I may find scientific questions interesting, but they never really grip me. Only conceptual and aesthetic questions do that. At bottom I am indifferent to the solution of scientific problems; but not to the other sort.

Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*<sup>2</sup>

This book, apart from attempting to reveal the extent of Kierkegaard's influence on Wittgenstein, has been animated by two dominant themes: tracing the parallels in Kierkegaard's and Wittgenstein's conception of philosophy and examining the affinities in their thought about religious belief. In the first chapter I showed that Kierkegaard directly influenced Wittgenstein to a much greater degree than is commonly supposed. In the second I argued that the two thinkers share an ethical conception of philosophy and defended this against D. Z. Phillips's criticism that philosophical problems are not 'personal' problems.

In chapter 3, on the other hand, I showed that a 'resolute' way of construing the parallels between early Wittgenstein's philosophical endeavours and Kierkegaard's is misguided: to regard their work as an attempt to draw the reader into a web of nonsense in order to dispel the illusion that there is such a thing as logically alien thought. For, as we have seen, such an interpretation not only distorts the views of both

<sup>1</sup> *The Journals of Søren Kierkegaard*, trans. Alexander Dru (London: G. Cumberlege and Oxford University Press, 1951.), 156.

<sup>2</sup> *Culture and Value* 79c; translation emended.

thinkers, it also lends ammunition to those who, like Nielsen, want to insist that religious concepts are either nonsensical or else 'purely symbolic'.

Finally, in chapter 4, I showed how Kierkegaard's and Wittgenstein's common conception of religious belief mounts a successful attack on the 'target view' of religion and I dispelled Nielsen's 'stonewalling' and 'incommensurability' charges. I hope thereby to have undermined some of the more tenacious myths surrounding Kierkegaard's and Wittgenstein's religious thought and to have shown that the two authors—especially when read in the light of each other—still present the greatest challenge to the received orthodoxies in the philosophy of religion as well as to the subject's (philosophy's) own conception of itself.

By way of concluding, I will now try to weave together the two main strands of the book—Kierkegaard's and Wittgenstein's reflections on the nature of philosophy and religion—by emphasizing, one last time, how the parallels between the two themes ought *not* to be construed. To this end, I will show that Nielsen's criticism encountered in the previous chapter—the objection that, for Wittgenstein, 'Christian practice is everything and Christian belief nothing'<sup>3</sup>—can be seen to match Frege's misreading of the TLP briefly mentioned in the second one. So let us recall Wittgenstein's remark in the Preface to TLP, 'this book will perhaps only be understood by those who have themselves already thought the thoughts which are expressed in it—or similar thought. . . it is therefore not a *Lehrbuch* [textbook],<sup>4</sup> which Frege glosses thus: 'the pleasure of reading [Wittgenstein's] book can . . . no longer be aroused by the content which is already known, but only by the peculiar form given to it by the author. The book thereby becomes an artistic rather than a scientific [*wissenschaftlich*] achievement; what is said in it takes second place to the way in which it is said.'<sup>5</sup>

Nielsen's and Frege's collective error is instructive: both kinds of criticism spring from being taken in by a false dichotomy. In Nielsen's case, as we have seen, it is the mistake of assuming that religious beliefs can be understood completely independently of the form of life that gives them sense; in Frege's, it is thinking that a book's 'content' can be specified completely independently of 'the peculiar form' given to it by the author. But, just as when Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein say

<sup>3</sup> See chapter 4, note 40.

<sup>5</sup> See chapter 2, note 36.

<sup>4</sup> See chapter 2, note 35.

that Christianity is not a doctrine, this should not be taken to mean that Christianity has no conceptual (paraphrasable) content, so when Wittgenstein says in the TLP that the book is not a *Lehrbuch*—or, indeed, when he says later in the PI that philosophy must not advance any *theses*—this should not be taken to imply that the 'content' of his works is consequently redundant. Rather, just as in the case of religious claims, if an internal understanding of them is to be possible, more is required than being able to cite dogma, if we wish to understand what Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein are up to in their work, more is required than being able, say, to quote the (so-called) 'private language argument' or Climacus' 'theses' about 'subjectivity' and the 'absolute paradox'. And this is so, not because these 'theses' cannot be put into words, but rather because these authors aren't *premise-authors*. That is to say, given Kierkegaard's and Wittgenstein's ethical understanding of the subject (of philosophy), believing that their work can be reduced to a set of claims would be as point-missing as rote-reciting is in the case of religion. For, as we have repeatedly seen, the two authors do not seek to construct new philosophical theories, but to root out the false pictures that aid and abet our enslavement to philosophical illusions. Consequently, the hold that these pictures have on us must first be undermined and this requires an effort simultaneously philosophical and ethical.

An internal understanding of the point of Kierkegaard's and Wittgenstein's work therefore becomes possible precisely when I stop regarding their writings as an attempt to convey new 'philosophical' information—an attempt to replace one theory with another—but regard them instead as an invitation to work on myself and 'the deformities of my own thinking' (CV 18e). But, to reiterate, none of this can be done without their works having exactly the kind of content they do, just as it's not possible to convert to Christianity without committing oneself to the Christian claims.

Neither philosophical nor religious problems are solved, then, by gathering together new information or 'finding things out' empirically as in science, since what is difficult about these questions is not, as Wittgenstein says, having to master some abstruse subject (CV 17e), such as, say, astrophysics, but being able to master oneself and the obstacles that stand in the way of seeing things as they are. I take it that it is this that provides the rationale for Wittgenstein's aforementioned remark: 'I may find scientific questions interesting, but they never really grip me. Only conceptual and aesthetic questions do that. At bottom I



am indifferent to the solution of scientific problems; but not to the other sort' (CV 79e). For, in the scientific case, there is no internal connection between the character of the writer and the character of the writing: scientific results can be given without paying (much) attention to the way in which one gives them. But, given that conceptual and aesthetic questions cannot be solved by constructing theoretical systems, the way the 'old facts', as it were, are presented, is of paramount importance and revelatory of the kind of person and philosopher one is. This also motivates Kierkegaard's attack on speculative philosophy: by putting all the emphasis on the communication of results, the speculative thinker has no time for self-development or self-understanding. That is to say, he constructs a large castle, but continues to live in a shack.

Furthermore, Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein would univocally agree, it is characteristic of the 'darkness of these times'<sup>6</sup> to have got the categories confused and to believe that things are really the other way round. That is to say, people regard the communication of results or, in Petrus Minor's parlance, the multiplication of premises, as what *genuine* teaching consists in and think that the arts exist solely to give them pleasure (CV 36e). But, if Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein are right, all that is great and important can precisely not be taught in this way—by teaching someone to reel off formulae—as this would be tantamount to making the following kind of error:

Suppose it was the life-view of a religiously existing subject that one may not have followers, that this would be treason to both God and men; suppose he were a bit obtuse . . . and announced this directly with unction and with pathos—what then? Well, then he would be understood and soon ten would apply who, just for a free shave each week, would offer their services in proclaiming this doctrine; that is, in further substantiation of the truth of his doctrine, he would have been so very fortunate as to gain followers who accepted and spread this doctrine about having no follower. (CUP 75)

We couldn't have a better example of someone who doesn't understand the meaning of a religious (or philosophical) doctrine at all.

'Making it a question of science' (LC 57), if Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein are right, is therefore just as pernicious in philosophy as it is in religion. For it is the scientific paradigm that (more often than not) lies at the root of what Kierkegaard calls a confusion of the spheres: by trying to assimilate everything to this paradigm, what is distinctive about

other forms of discourse either gets lost or distorted beyond recognition. So, for example, it is the attempt to render Christianity probable—an attempt modelled on the 'arguments of scientists'<sup>7</sup>—that gives rise to the target view of religion that Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein have gone to such lengths to discredit.

And here Marguerite Porète once again foreshadows an important dimension in Kierkegaard's and Wittgenstein's thought about religion—which, given how the present book began, makes a fitting note on which to end:

Now Reason, says this Soul, you ask us where we turn for guidance; and I answer you, says this Soul, that it is to him who alone is so mighty that he can never die, whose teaching is not written down either in books of examples or in the teachings of men, for his is a gift which cannot be given by formulation. He knows from all eternity that I indeed believed this without any need for proof. Is there, says the Soul, anything baser than to ask for proofs in love? Truly not, it seems to me, since Love is its own proof, and that is enough for me. If I ask for more, then I do not believe this.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> See Swinburne, 'Philosophical Theism', 6.

<sup>8</sup> *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, 90.

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