ESSAYS ON Wittgenstein's
Tractatus

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An Epistle

On the Subject of the Ethical and Aesthetic Beliefs of
HERR LUDWIG WITTGENSTEIN
(Doctor of Philosophy)

to
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(Fellow of King’s Collège)

JULIAN BELL

TIMID, I venture on a doubtful field,
The heaviest weapon in our verse to wield;
Presume with Dryden’s couplet to engage
The wild philosophers in all their rage.
Well knowing how I merit the reproach
In learned fields, unlearned, to encroach;
Well knowing that, a puny Jonah, I
The great Behemoth of the seas defy;
Whose learning, logic, casuistry’s so vast,
He overflows the metaphysic waste.

Yet still I hope a line or two may stick,
And that, like Jonah, I shall make him sick.
If, Richard, this analogy alarms,
I do but fight the foe with his own arms;
Whose tortuous mind we often see compare
An opera to begetting of a chair.
(This process may propriety confuse,
But it’s a metaphor I’ve heard him use.)
My own beliefs are trite and few, as fit

Julian Bell

The narrow compass of a rustic wit:
Good Sense and Reason; for the rest I hope
Voltaire had owned them, and adorned them Pope
The rational Common Sense, the easy rule,
That marked for centuries the Cambridge school.
In Rabelais abbey may I graduate,
In Epicurus garden, Candide’s mate;
Tho’ life looks silly, laugh that it’s no worse,
With Herrick, love my mistress and good verse.
We know what’s what, and that, so Butler\(^1\) says,
For metaphysic is the highest praise.
If further you should ask, I take my stand
On principles we all can understand
And think one certain truth we yet shall find
‘Value is known and found in States of Mind’.
Then, if your question you again repeat,
Why should I rush upon a clear defeat;
Since my opponent, logic being his trade,
Will sure confute me, or if not, evade?
To such a question I might well reply
Let him first mind his trade, then so will I.
But who, on any issue, ever saw
Ludwig refrain from laying down the law?
In every company he shouts us down,
And stops our sentence stuttering his own;
Unceasing argues, harsh, irate and loud,
Sure that he’s right, and of his rightness proud.
Such faults are common, shared by all in part,
But Wittgenstein pontificates on Art.

So, Richard, chivalry is my excuse,
I but defend a violated Muse:
What though she has been rather used to rape,
Is that a reason monsters should escape?
But this most urges me, and lulls my fear,
That he declares all reasoning useless here.
Either we know, or nothing can be known;
He’s right, and we are different in the bone:
With privileged omniscience soaring high
He sees the Universe before him lie;
Each whirling, lost electrons motion planned
He reads as easy as a watches hand.
Seeing at once each individual fact,

\(^1\) Hudibras, not Analogy.
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Knowing the consequence of every act,
Plotting a graph on spaces winding curves,
Conscious that instant if one atom swerves.
Knows too the black depths of the human mind,
Motive and thought their name, shape, cause assigned
The highest ecstasy, most black despair,
Moments when beauty lights the laden air;
Moments when lovers part, or when they meet,—
Omniscient Wittgenstein grows indiscreet:
Knows every stray reflection, joke and whim,
Hopes, fears and fancies, all are known to him.
Yet, though he searches every thought and shape
The flying values from the net escape.

He tells us so; and yet it seems to me,
(Perhaps its only my simplicity)
That perfect map, where everything is shown,
Remains as yet, even to him, unknown.
Ludwig's omniscient; well, I would be civil,
But is he God Almighty, or the Devil?
Still let me state his case as best I can
Before his logic and his facts we scan;
And, whether we may think them false or true
At least the Devil here shall get his due.

On the world's walls the fluttering Values beat—
—Like drunken mot’rists skidding down a street—
Unknown, touch'd, tast'd, heard, smell’d, undescried,
The Values ring the bell, but stay outside.
All statements men can make, or false or true,
Have facts for predicate, and object too.
This being admitted, it is clearly seen
All statements about Value nothing mean.
His case, if rightly I have understood,
Is he talks nonsense when he talks of Good.
And what there is of fairest and of best
Remains by human language unexpressed.
Thought cannot think of, Science cannot show
The element of value here below.

And yet, should I suggest that right and wrong
Are silly burthens of a foolish song;
All actions, thoughts and feelings much the same,
And Value nothing but an empty name:
Or, venturing to try the stuff on art,
Julian Bell

Say that his whistlings better than Mozart;  
Say Milton should with Humbert go to school  
Say Arnold were, by Brémond's side, a fool:  
Why, if such statements nonsense are alone,  
Do they seem even sillier than his own?  
For he talks nonsense, numerous statements makes,  
Forever his own vow of silence breaks:  
Ethics, aesthetics, talks of day and night,  
And calls things good or bad, and wrong or right.  
The universe sails down its charted course,  
He smuggles knowledge from a secret source:  
A mystic in the end, confessed and plain,  
The ancient enemy returned again;  
Who knows by his direct experience  
What is beyond all knowledge and all sense.

Accept his statements, and what can we find  
In all this mystery, but a State of Mind?  
Valued by him, and doubtless rightly so,  
But fact one day psychology will know.  
It seems the great logician has forgot  
That either these things are, or they are not;  
Even for the mystic does this rule persist,  
His visions, if they do exist, exist;  
Subject as much to science scrutiny  
As copulation or the rule of three.  
His visions, in that universal view,  
Were shown—and in asylum case books too.

How many saints and sages past have raved  
The self same nonsense to a world unsaved.  
Since of the truth but portions are our own  
How can we know aught must remain unknown?  
Still science marches on with steady feet,  
The map grows yearly more and more complete;  
And proves the visions that a saint believed  
The sick illusions of a mind deceived.

But in these matters, as he has confest,  
Reason's worth little, even at the best.  
Agreed: from which I should have thought it clear  
The perfect place for tolerance was here.  
Let each one choose, but for himself alone,  
Nor busy prophets cast the foremost stone.
An Epistle

But Ludwig will have none of this, and would
Issue pope’s orders what is bad, what good.
   Reason dismiss, how can he get his way?
He may command, but we need not obey.
His only method then is to persuade;
He should have come to us to learn his trade.
Persuasions, verse’s great prerogative,
By which the poets love, and sometimes live.
Values that all philosophers escape
The poets catch, and give them form and shape.
His words t’express his meaning were too weak,
But what if Racine, Milton chose to speak?
In ten neat syllables forever lies
All heroes feel, all knowledge of the wise:
Where Dryden’s couplets march with ringing stride
There is no value missed, or left outside.
But let us once more to his creed return,
Its essence scan; what is it, but to burn?
Religion once again shall raise its head—
A general resurrection of the dead:—
A battered harlot, who, though old, has found
A silly priest, whose lechry thinks her sound.
We, like good rationalists, have never been
Tempted by Jesus, or by Magdalene.

The murder’s out; if now we disagree
Cast into darkness, millstones and the sea.
So he persuades us, but he well may find
The world has got itself another mind,
Since Calvin saved our souls with rack and flame,
And Calas died to save a Catholic’s name.
He’d raise religion; has he never thought
How Voltaire laughed God, once and all, from court?
When fiends arise, the water that we take
And sprinkle on them comes from Ferney’s lake.
   To us today what can Religion give,
What secrets can it teach us, how to live?
What is the offer that old Blockhead makes
To calm our minds, unriddle our mistakes?
On Moscow’s walls religion stands decreed
The people opium: he who runs may read.
But honest minds, of thinking unafraid,
By no desires and by no passions swayed,
With self-reliant courage that can face
Julian Bell

Life’s brevity, the silences of space:
Sure to all problems by which men are tried
Good sense alone the answer can provide:
Reject such prophets, whose hell painted grave
But fills with misery the short time we have.

Then, Richard, why must we, who know it vain,
Seek value in his tortured maze of pain;
When in mere common nature we can find
Every delight of body and of mind.
I pity Ludwig while I disagree,
The cause of his opinions all can see,
In that ascetic life, intent to shun
The common pleasures known to everyone.
Round his brains’ convolutions wildly hurled
The secrets hidden from a sober world,
Both good and evil, ecstasy and sin,
He does not seek without, but finds within.
Therefore to him the plan was void and null,
Therefore the world seemed valueless and dull.
He makes a virtue of his own defects,
And what he cannot understand, rejects.
For had he ever used his hands or eyes
He might have turned from learning to be wise.

If once in closing winter he had seen,
When crisp air rings as the hard frost bites keen,
The blue sky faintly veiled with hoary white,
And on the elms the golden leaves hang light;
Seen from a ploughland slope clearly revealed
The wood’s bright colours, crimson hedgèd field;
With farm and church th’ enormous plain extends
To low-hung mists, where the horizon ends;
And moulded hills and flashing river lie
Like a great map beneath the vaulting sky.
With sparkling blood our quickened pulses beat,
And all earth’s beauty lies before our feet.
Yet, should it rain, should even a cloud arise,
The vision leaves our souls, the scene our eyes:
Should indigestion, or a cold, attack,
We curse the frost, and see the world in black.
On matter all our highest good depends.
And, matter failing, every value ends.
The world is ours, with all its kingdoms brave
No more exists of what we want to have.

My case were won, the question had not been
An Epistle

If Ludwig ever had fair Chloe seen.  
Had mark'd a gestures or a movements grace,  
Or seen warm firelight flick'ring on her face;  
He'd owned that here all Good, all Beauty lies,  
Nor sought a world transcending Chloe's eyes.  
Yet, like her flowers, of common earth she's made,  
She too is mortal, and she too must fade;  
And matters victory is easy told;  
Chloe, for all her beauty, must grow old.  
The landscape changes with the changing year,  
The music ends, the visions disappear;  
The wrangle of philosophers must cease,  
And even Wittgenstein must hold his peace;  
To self-same darkness they and we descend  
And Ludwig's one with Chloe in the end.

Richard, my sermon's old, my moral trite,  
Yet, at the last, will you not own I'm right?  
The issue's simple, as it seems to me  
Between good sense, sainted insanity;  
To alter facts till facts our passions fit,  
Or face the truth, and make the best of it.

(The author wishes to make it clear that this satire is not intended as a personal attack, nor as a criticism of the purely logical and philosophical achievements of Dr Wittgenstein, but solely as a criticism of certain views on art and morals advocated by him three years ago.)