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Posted Date: 28 May 2025

doi: 10.20944/preprints202505.2181.v1

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Article

Religious Longing and Modern Life: Wittgenstein's Uneasy Ambivalence

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Abstract: Wittgenstein had significant religious impulses, from his early *Notebooks* to his late entries in *Culture and Value*. Christian religious texts seemed to him to articulate significant human experiences that were worthy of respect. Yet he found himself consistently unable to commit himself to any organized institutional religious life. This essay investigates the reasons (as opposed to psychological peculiarities with causal force) that might lie behind Wittgenstein's stance. Friedrich Schiller describes modern social induce unsatisfiable longings for meaningful life. Northrop Frye describes the rhetorical form of the Christian Bible as having an indispensable role in orienting us toward reconciled life, but in the end more imaginatively than in effective worldly practice. Against this background, Wittgenstein's combination of passionate attraction to Christianity with an inability to accept it emerges as itself an exemplary expression of the human.

Keywords: commitment; modern life; change of heart; Friedrich Schiller; Northrop Frye

Most work on Wittgenstein and the philosophy of religion has focused on the epistemic status of belief in God. Can that belief be justified, or at least held immune from disconfirmation, perhaps as a hinge proposition within the conceptual frameworks of some who hold it? To what extent, if any, is religious language an autonomous language-game that is (or isn't) open to epistemic pressure from other ways of talking and thinking? Was Wittgenstein's conception of religion fideist, in holding that uses of religious language by the faithful stand on their own, without need of further justification and without being open to challenge by non-religious outsiders?

Taking up these questions Gordon Graham argues cogently against the ascription of fideism to Wittgenstein. As Wittgenstein saw, semantic, cognitive, practical, aesthetic, moral, and religious commitments, among others, can jostle against one another; language-games are not sharply discrete and self-authorizing. The real issue at stake for a Wittgensteinian conception of religion, according to Graham, is "the proper place [— if any —] of religion in well-ordered human lives, on both a personal and a social level" (Graham 2014, p. 7). Graham addresses this question, however, primarily by way of attention to the role of Christian liturgical practices in a well-ordered life as he sees it rather than focusing significantly on the roles of religion in non-liturgical social, moral, political, and cognitive life (see Eldridge, 2015). Valuable though much of this work on Wittgenstein and fideism has been, it has also tended to block attention to the questions, "Why did Wittgenstein care about religion?" and "How did he persistently 'live out' a strong attraction to Christianity without being able to embrace it?" Attention to these latter questions might illuminate the place, if any, of Christianity in the modern world, and beyond that the character of life in the modern world, especially if we find ourselves sharing Wittgenstein's combination of passionate interest and hesitation.

Throughout his life, Wittgenstein had significant religious impulses that he took to be at least related to religious experiences. In his 1929 "Lecture on Ethics" he describes an "experience ... which I ... know and which others of you might be acquainted with: it is, what one might call, the experience of feeling absolutely safe. I mean the state of mind in which one is inclined to say 'I am safe, nothing can injure me whatever happens.'" (Wittgenstein [1919] 2014, p. 47). This "experience of absolute safety," he goes on to add, "has been described by saying that we feel safe in the hands of God"

(Wittgenstein [1929] 2014, p. 49). Under the pressures of the First World War, Wittgenstein wrote in his *Notebooks*, as if catechistically:

To believe in a God is to understand the question about the meaning of life.

To believe in God means to see that the facts of the world are not the end of the matter.

To believe in God is to see that life has a meaning.

The world is *given* me, i.e., my will enters into the world completely from outside as into something that is already there. ...

That is why we have the feeling of being dependent on an alien will.

However this may be, at any rate we *are* in a certain sense dependent, and what we are dependent on we can call God (Wittgenstein [1914-1916] 1961, p. 74e).

In a notebook entry from 1944 collected in *Culture and Value*, Wittgenstein wrote

The Christian religion is only for the man who needs infinite help, solely, that is, for the man who experiences infinite torment.

The whole planet can suffer no greater torment than a *single* soul.

The Christian faith — as I see it— is the refuge in this *ultimate* torment (Wittgenstein 1980, p. 46e).

The last phrase in the original German reads “ist die Zuflucht in dieser *höchsten* Not” (Wittgenstein 1981, p. 46). Here the definite article in “the refuge” rather than “a refuge” implies that Wittgenstein sees Christianity as the sole refuge from a torment by a need that he took himself to experience along with at least some others. Wittgenstein’s favorite among Tolstoy’s *Twenty-Three Tales* has as its last line of spoken dialogue, “Pray for us sinners” (Tolstoy 1906, p. 201). (Philip R. Shields usefully discusses Wittgenstein’s interest in this Tolstoy story ([Shields 1993, pp. 58-59]). Embracing Christianity means abandoning pride and accepting the whole of the world as God’s work and all of the objects and beings in it as valuable as they stand, not as either comparatively valuable (as opposed to what is comparatively worthless or useless) or as things produced by human actions.

If the good or bad exercise of the will does alter the world, it can alter only the limits of the world, not the facts—not what can be expressed by means of language.

In short the effect must be that it becomes an altogether different world. It must, so to speak, wax and wane as a whole.

The world of the happy man is a different one from that of the unhappy man (Wittgenstein [1921] 1961b, 6.43, p. 147).

What Christianity offers, according to this view, is not knowledge of any facts and not the production of any material states of affairs, but instead acceptance of the whole, including oneself, the overcoming of false pride, and the achievement of honesty towards oneself, others, and the world.

Anyone in [ultimate] torment who has the gift of opening his heart, rather than contracting it, accepts the means of salvation in his heart.

Someone who in this way penitently opens his heart to God in confession lays it open for other men too. In doing this he loses the dignity that goes with his personal prestige and becomes like a child. That means without official position, dignity or disparity from others. A man can bare himself before others only out of a particular kind of love. A love which acknowledges, as it were, that we are all wicked children (Wittgenstein 1980, p. 46e).

This may make it look as if it is impossible to be a Christian, since there is nothing one must believe in particular about the way the world is and nothing one can do either to make the world better or to help oneself and others, other than to honor the value that is omnipresently there by opening oneself to it (however one is to do that). As Genia Schönbaumsfeld aptly puts it, Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard share an “emphasis on the inner [that] is the result of a common moral absolutism that is to guard, as it were, the sanctity of the ethical, as well as ... a shared sense of powerlessness in

the face of the contingency of the world which can, at any moment, reduce my ethical striving to nothing." (Schönbaumsfeld 2007, p. 142). Becoming or being Christian neither reposes on any particular facts nor necessarily achieves any particular outcomes; it is pervasively a matter of a comprehensive stance or of the reorientation of the will as a whole. In his sense of Christian religious commitment as a radical orientation of one's inner will that then colors one's entire life and world, but has no specific epistemic foundation or specific outcomes as effects, Wittgenstein rejects what Schönbaumsfeld calls that "target view of religion," according to which

God is the name of super-empirical entity or being.

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.

The proposition 'God exists' is a hypothesis to be investigated empirically and/or by a priori argument (Schönbaumsfeld 2007, pp 158-59).

Instead of involving knowledge of any facts, being religious is a matter of *commitment*. "Christianity is not a doctrine, not, I mean, a theory about what has happened and will happen to the human soul. ... It strikes me that a religious belief could only be something like a passionate commitment to a system of reference. Hence, although it's a *belief*, it's really a way of living, or a way of assessing life. It's passionately seizing hold of *this* interpretation." (Wittgenstein 1980, pp. 28e, 64e.)

Being or becoming a Christian is then essentially a matter of commitment that is unsupported by any particular facts in the world. This implies that any religious language that *prima facie* describes states of affairs in the world is essentially figurative. In the "Lecture on Ethics," Wittgenstein distinguishes sharply between comparative-relational value expressions that are indexed to specific aims and uses ("good for," "better than ____ for") and absolute value expressions ("valuable" or "good" full stop, indexed to nothing), arguing that these latter expressions are essentially figurative.

When we say 'This man's life was valuable' we do not mean it in the same sense in which we would speak of some valuable jewellery but there seems to be some sort of analogy. Now all religious terms seem in this sense to be used as similes, or allegorically. For when we speak of God and that he sees everything and when we kneel and pray to him all our terms and actions seem to be parts of a great and elaborate allegory which represents him as a human being of great power whose grace we try to win etc. etc. ... Now in our case as soon as we try to drop the simile and simply to state the facts which stand behind it, we find that there are no such facts (Wittgenstein [1929] 2014, pp. 48, 49).

That religious language is essentially figurative, not factual, does not imply, however, that it simply false. As Schönbaumsfeld argues, we should reject the "false dichotomy" that all language is either factual-metaphysical or symbolic-metaphorical. Among other things, language can be passionately expressive in the manner of lyric poetry, where readers are invited to enter into the sequence of modulating thoughts and feelings as experienced by a first-person speaker. Like lyric poetry, religious language has a foothold in ordinary life; it is not simply true or false in relation to matters of material fact; it is meaningful, because accurately paraphrasable and translatable, but where paraphrases and translations are not full substitutes for the original (Schönbaumsfeld 2007, pp. 190, 192-93).

What religious language can express and gesture towards, then, are not matters of fact, but matters of stance, commitment, or a fundamental reorientation of the will that colors one entire world, as opposed to a choice to do this or that in particular.

Faith is faith in what is needed by my *heart*, my *soul*, not my speculative intelligence. ... Perhaps we can say: Only *love* an believe the Resurrection. What combats doubt is, as it were, *redemption*. Holding fast to *this* must be holding fast to that belief. So what that means is: first you must be redeemed and hold on to your redemption (keep hold of your redemption) — then you will see that you are holding fast to this belief. So this can come about only if you no longer rest your weight on the earth but suspend yourself from heaven.

Then *everything* will be different and it will be ‘no wonder’ if you can do things that you cannot do now (Wittgenstein 1980, p. 33e).

Everything will look exactly the same, just as “a man who is suspended looks the same as one who is standing,” but it will nonetheless be entirely different, just as “the interplay of forces within [a suspended man] is ... quite different, so that he can act quite differently than can a standing man” (Wittgenstein 1980, p. 33e).

Here there is at the very least substantial unclarity about what one is to believe in particular and what one is in particular to do (as in Kierkegaard). Nonetheless, adopting a Christian religious stance is possible, and doing so can save one from abysses of despair. “An honest religious thinker is like a tightrope walker. He almost looks as though he were walking on nothing but air. His support is the slenderest imaginable. And yet it really is possible to walk on it” (Wittgenstein 1980, p. 73e).

Despite, however, the promise of relief from torment, especially from the torments of self-castigation, that he saw in religious commitment, Wittgenstein was himself consistently unable to embrace Christianity and to count himself a Christian. In a letter to Paul Engelmann, dated January 16, 1918, written while he was serving on the Russian Front, Wittgenstein wrote

If you tell me now that I have no faith, you are *perfectly right*, only I did not have it before either. It is plain, isn’t it, that when a man wants, as it were, to invent a machine for becoming decent [*anständig*] person, such a man has no faith. But what am I to do? *I am clear about one thing*: I am far too bad to be able to theorize about myself; in fact I shall either remain a swine or else I shall improve, and that’s that! Only let’s cut out the transcendental twaddle when the whole thing is as plain as a sock on the jaw (Engelmann 1967, pp. 11 [10]).

Here Wittgenstein remains stuck, as it were, in his sense of his own indecency [*Unanständigkeit*: lack of uprightness], evidently unable to carry out the re-orientation of will, unsupported by facts or reasons, that he saw as necessary for a genuinely religious life. In 1933, he wrote in his notebooks

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 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 (Wittgenstein 1980, p. 33e, citing I *Corinthians* 12).

There are a number of personal-biographical reasons why Wittgenstein might have found himself unable to reorient his will, live differently, and embrace Christianity. It is possible that a lingering sense of his Jewish background blocked any wholehearted identification with Christianity. Wittgenstein’s paternal great-grandfather Moses Maier adopted the name Wittgenstein from his employer in 1808 and converted to Protestantism some time afterwards. Ray Monk claims that “the Wittgensteins (unlike, say, the Freuds) were in no way part of a Jewish community—except in the elusive sense in which the whole of Vienna could be so described; nor did Judaism play any part in their upbringing” (Monk 1990, pp. 4-5). In contrast, Brian McGuinness argues that

Jewish the family certainly was: ‘*pur sang*’, as Moses Meier’s grandson Louis said to his sister Milly. ...They were proud, not of being, but of having been Jewish. ... [The Wittgensteins of Ludwig’s generation] preferred to base their claim to special treatment on the nineteenth-century achievements of their family and especially on the character of their grandfather about whose ways and life there was nothing specifically Jewish. This ambivalence to their Jewish origins was a feature determined by time and place” (McGuinness 1988, pp. 1-2).

Sexual attraction to and arousal by predominantly male objects seems to have been experienced by Wittgenstein as a loss of control and a torment, though less in virtue of its objects than in virtue of its uncontrollable nature (as in the early years of the Augustine of *The Confessions*). Interpreting the coded remarks in Wittgenstein’s diaries, Monk argues that “Wittgenstein was uneasy, not about homosexuality, but about sexuality itself. ... Sexual arousal, both homo- and heterosexual, troubled

him enormously. He seemed to regard it as incompatible with the sort of person he wanted to be (Monk 1990, p. 584). Brian McGuinness argues somewhat similarly that “some concern with sexuality is inseparable from adolescence. ... It seems that for him that dangers of an erotic relationship did not lie in its mere existence but as for most human beings in the risk that it might be conducted without straightforwardness or courage or with meanness and jealousy towards the other or towards some third person” (McGuinness 1988, p. 43).

His experience during WWI seems to have been horrific, in involving facing frequent bombardments, deaths, difficult relations with fellow soldiers, internment in an Italian prisoner of war camp, thoughts of suicide, and anxieties about his own ability to bear up under fire (see Monk 1990, Ch. 7 and McGuinness 1988, Ch. 7). Perhaps more important is Wittgenstein’s experience of his father’s pressure both to take up a place in the family iron and steel business and to distinguish himself artistically. The young Ludwig seems to have identified the experience of music with his emotionally more supportive and musical mother and to have felt that experience simultaneously to be an escape from the demands of the father and a locus of his father’s demands for excellence (see Monk 1990, pp.11-16). This may have left him with a persistent, unresolved conflict between the demands of an internalized, paternal superego-ideal and the attractions of absorption in a more maternal-libidinal sensuousness. (Significantly, this may be on Wittgenstein’s part a pronounced instance of a conflict that is also widely shared.) This unresolved conflict may in turn motivate Wittgenstein’s personal sense of an undischarged and undischARGEABLE duty to be always a genius. Monk suggests as much in the subtitle of his biography, “The Duty of Genius.”)

Wittgenstein’s personal and biographical circumstances are, however, not merely personal. They are everywhere inflected by broader cultural and shared psychic conditions. Wittgenstein had ability and training in mathematics and engineering, and in his early work he accepted something *like* a picture of the world as wholly materially given through the existence of simple objects, analogous to extensionless Leibnizian monads as the substance of the world: “The world is all that is the case. ... Objects are simple. Objects make up the substance of the world. That is why they cannot be composite” (Wittgenstein 1961b, 1, 2.02, 2.021, pp. 7, 11). This picture is arguably incoherent—what is an extensionless or absolutely minimal material substance?—and Wittgenstein later abandoned it. At the time of the *Tractatus*, however, he seems to have regarded direct contact between simple names (in mind) and simple objects as the only possible way of understanding how there could be thoughts (pictorial arrangements of simple names) that are determinately (and sometimes knowably) true or false, without relying occult mental powers of grasping materially obscure abstracta (such as, for example, Fregean functions or Platonic forms): “The requirement that simple signs—non-decomposable, purely designative names for simple objects—be possible is the requirement that sense be determinate” (Wittgenstein 1961b, 3.23, p. 23).

Wittgenstein’s attitude toward causality in his early work is somewhat unclear. Compare *Tractatus* 6.36: “If there were a law of causality, it might be put in the following way: There are laws of nature. But of course that cannot be said: it makes itself manifest.” (Wittgenstein 1961b, p. 141) with *Tractatus* 5.1361: “We cannot infer the events of the future from those of the present. Superstition is nothing but belief in the causal nexus” (Wittgenstein 1961b, p. 79) and *Tractatus* 6.375: “the only necessity that exists is *logical* necessity” (Wittgenstein 1961b, p. 145). But the underlying thought remains that the world as a whole of objects-in-arrangement is given in a way that is unalterable by a thinking, knowing, desiring subject who stands ‘outside’ it: “The world is independent of my will,” and “the subject does not belong to the world: rather, it is a limit of the world” (Wittgenstein 1961b, 6.373, p. 143; 5.632, p. 117).

This stance at least echoes a Cartesian sense of the thoroughgoing determination of the material world (under God’s superintendence, according to Descartes), with reflectiveness and agency located outside that world rather than at home within it. There are no purposes or final causes within the world—nothing that makes it a fit arena for the exercise of human powers that are bound up with its purposive unfolding. We may be able intellectually to grasp some of the material world’s unfolding

self-determination under scientific laws, but there is nothing in that world to which we and our doings might resonate. As Weber famously put it in “Science as a Vocation,”

Our age is characterized by rationalization and intellectualization, and above all, by the disenchantment of the world. Its resulting fate is that precisely the ultimate and most sublime values have withdrawn from public life. They have retreated either into the abstract realm of mystical life or into the fraternal feelings of personal relations between individuals (Weber [1919] 2004, p. 30).

In Wittgenstein’s later work, the conception of the given as the sum of simple objects is replaced by the conception of the given as forms of life. “What has to be accepted, the given, is —one might say — forms of life” (Wittgenstein [1953] 2009, §345, p. 238e). This new idea of forms of life allows some room for at-homeness and fluency within ‘what is to be done’ within a particular form of life. Yet the idea of forms of life is unclear: no determinate boundaries or identity conditions are marked out for them. It is precisely this that leads to the unending debates about fideism and the possibility of religion, especially Christian religion, as a potentially self-contained and autonomous form of life. Moreover, the idea that forms of life that are ‘one’s own’ are simply to be accepted will not be of any help to one who remains in the grip of any version of a scientific image of the world, which, as Weber saw, leaves little room for a traditional religious image. As Schönbaumsfeld insightfully argues

There appears to be an unavoidable tension in Wittgenstein’s position: on the one hand, in an almost Spinozistic vein, he identifies God with the world and on the other he claims that God does not manifest himself *in* the world (in the *TLP*). Both views ... appear to leave God, as it were, with no room to manoeuvre at all (Schönbaumsfeld 2007, p. 147).

While Schönbaumsfeld restricts the ascription of this tension to the more Spinozistic early work, it also remains true that Wittgenstein consistently rejects the idea of religious facts about the world, as in, again, his 1947 remark that “a religious belief could only be something like a passionate commitment to a system of reference” (Wittgenstein 1980, p. 64e), not a matter of doctrine, theory, or fact. This rejection of religious facts makes sense only against a background conception of genuine facts as somehow material or practical or artistic or social, as may be, but not religious. And if God is not able to act or appear in the world, if there are no religious facts, there is then nothing in the world to which we might resonate.

A felt sense of being unable to act in a fully affirmative and meaningful way within the world is fed not only by the dominance in the cultural imaginary of the scientific image of the world, but also by the radically pluralized character of modern life. Since at least the 17th century and beginning as early as the 14th century, when long distance travels and written records of them became more common, it is difficult to avoid awareness of the manifold different customs and mores—religious, culinary, political, sexual, and economic, among others—scattered tribally, as it were, across the world. When these ways of life are opaque to each other, as they frequently are, it can seem that none of them bears distinctively affirmative value in contrast with its competitors. Add to this the spectacularly ramifying division of labor, resulting in mutual opacity within individual societies from the 17th century onwards, and it can seem that there is everywhere just difference, with no way of life anchored by anything like the Platonic Good or the will of God. One might find what Wordsworth found in the London St. Bartholomew Fair:

A work completed to our hands, that lays,
If any spectacle on earth can do,
The whole creative powers of man asleep!---
... What a shock
For eyes and ears! what anarchy and din,
Barbarian and infernal,---a phantasma,
Monstrous in colour, motion, shape, sight, sound!
... Oh, blank confusion! true epitome

Of what the mighty City is herself,
 To thousands upon thousands of her sons,
 Living amid the same perpetual whirl
 Of trivial objects, melted and reduced
 To one identity, by differences
 That have no law, no meaning, and no end
 (Wordsworth [1850] 1965, lines 679-81, 685-88, 722-28, pp. 287-88).

Feeling oneself to be caught up within both an unregulated play of sociocultural differences and a meaninglessly self-developing material world results in a sense of what Georg Lukács called “transcendental homelessness” (Lukács 1971, p. 61), or what Wordsworth called the sense that “The world is too much with us; late and soon, /Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers: /Little we see in Nature that is ours.” (Wordsworth 1965, lines 1-3, p. 182). Wittgenstein’s persistent sense of being himself unable to embrace Christianity and to lead a religious life—the primary cultural possibility for him of redemption from meaningless and torment—because of the ways of the natural and social worlds as he understood them, namely, as indifferent or hostile to generally endorsable action and meaning-making, is far from unique to him. Uncertainty and unclarity about “how to go on” as an active, meaning-making being within an indifferent natural world and a fragmented and contested social world is all but endemic, at least for many at some moments in modern life.

In his remarkable essay “On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry,” Friedrich Schiller memorably describes the divided and anxious character of both modern life and its psychic effects and causes. This divided and anxious character is due to human beings’ having fallen out of naturalness, understood as immediately sensuous, instinctively animal, world-responsiveness, and into culture as an arena, set within material nature as other to it, of variable and conflicting demands as well as various and conflicting approvals and disapprovals of others. The now-acculturated human animal finds itself cast socially and psychically into reflectiveness, disagreement, and dis-unity.

Once the human being has entered into the condition characteristic of culture, ... that *sensuous* harmony within him is overcome and he can only express himself as a *moral* unity, that is to say, as someone striving for unity. The agreement between his feeling and thinking, something that *actually* took place in the original condition, now exists only *ideally*. It is no longer in him but rather outside him, as a thought that must first be realized, and no longer as a fact of his life (Schiller [1795-96], 1993, p. 201).

This divided and unhappy condition results in a kind of envy for some things that we take to be more sensuous, natural, and innocently at home in their world-responsiveness than we are: for Schiller, children, the Greeks, and Greek art, which are all felt to be somehow maternal.

Dissatisfaction with our own poor use of our moral freedom and with the lack of ethical harmony in our actions easily induces the sort of mood in which we address what is devoid of reason as a person, applauding its endless uniformity and envying its calm composure as though it had actually to struggle with a temptation to be otherwise. ... With painful urgency we long to be back where we began as soon as we experience the misery of culture and hear our mother’s tender voice in the distant, foreign country of art. As long as we were mere children of nature we were happy and complete; we became free and lost both happiness and completeness (Schiller [1795-96], 1993, p. 192).

This passage bears comparison with Glaucon’s famous rejection of the first, pastoral “city of pigs” in the *Republic* as unfit for what we have become as acculturated beings, committed to distinctive accomplishments and pride within divided, contested cultural life [Plato 1992, Book II, 372d, p. 47]. Schiller’s identification of children and the Greeks as instances of naïve, happy at-homeness in the world may well be—more a fantasy about longed-for condition that was never actualized than a plausible claim—but that does not undermine the force of either the fantasy or the longing.

For Schiller, however, there is no happy route of return to the maternal-natural and to fully satisfied needs, as opposed to polymorphous, conflicting, and frequently unsatisfied desires. One might, with “the vulgar empiricist,” “submit [oneself] to nature as a power ... in a blind surrender,” but the result of this is that one’s “selfhood is suppressed, and as a human being [one] has absolutely no worth and no dignity” (Schiller [1795-96], 1993, p. 259). Our commitment to distinctive pride and accomplishment as self-conscious agents, set within conflicting practices and expectations, is too strong to accept such a surrender. Alternatively, one might attempt to envision, actualize, and act according to an ideal, under which conflicts are resolved and all are at home. Alas,

the effects of true idealism are ... uncertain and often dangerous, those of false idealism are terrifying. ... Out of sheer arbitrariness the visionary takes leave of nature in order to be able to indulge his self-absorption in desires and the whims of his imagination all the more wantonly. ... Thus the visionary ... denies all character, he is utterly lawless, hence he is nothing and is also good for nothing (Schiller [1795-96], 1993, p. 259).

Since neither the suppression of selfhood as a locus of agency, choice, desire, and pride nor the overcoming of all restlessness, anxiety, and dissatisfaction through the rule of pure reason uncontaminated with conflicts and with contending egoisms is possible, human beings as such remain locked within

a rather remarkable psychological antagonism between people in a century in the process of civilizing itself. Because this antagonism is radical and is based on the internal form of the mind, it establishes a breach among people much worse than the occasional conflict of interests could ever produce. It is an antagonism that robs the artist and poet of any hope of pleasing and touching people generally, which remains, after all, his task; an antagonism that makes it impossible for the philosopher, even if he has done everything he should, to convince people generally, something the concept of a philosophy still entails; an antagonism, finally, that will never allow someone in practical life to see his manner of acting approved universally. In short, it is an antagonism responsible for the fact that no work of the mind and no action of the heart can make one class decidedly happy without drawing precisely for that reason, a condemnation down upon itself from the other class. This conflict is without doubt as old as the beginning of culture and before culture comes to an end it will hardly be resolved other than in a few, rare individuals, who hopefully there always have been and always will be (Schiller [1795-96], 1993, p. 249).

Echoing both Schiller and Wittgenstein, Northrop Frye observes that originally and persistently “Man lives, not directly or nakedly in nature like the animals,” but practically, agentively, culturally, and “within a mythological universe, a body of assumptions and beliefs developed from his existential concerns” (Frye 1981, p. xvii). In its pagan and polytheistic forms, this body of assumptions and beliefs represents and describes continuing, unresolvable conflicts among elemental forces in which human beings are caught up. In the modern world mythological frameworks for understanding human life in nature and both poetic-metaphorical (talk of sun-god, sea-gods, war-gods, and so on) and hieratic-allegorical-metonymic language (talk of the Platonic Good or of the will of God, grasped and administered by elites) are significantly overlain and dominated by demotic-descriptive language: the language of ordinary people and, by extension, of scientific observation, that describes things as they putatively are. According to this demotic-descriptive language “the subject exposes itself, in sense experience, to the impact of an objective world. The objective world is the order of nature; thinking or reflection follows the suggestions of sense experience” (Frye 1981, p. 13). That objective world is largely taken to go *its* own way, as opposed to being subject to the control of conflicting, elemental-divine agencies or occult higher powers. It impinges on us through our senses, but it does not develop in a way that resonates with human purposes, projects, and satisfactions. (*Tractatus* 6.373: “The world is independent of my will” [Wittgenstein 1961b, p. 143]). Underneath the domination of demotic-descriptive language, however, a sense of being unable to live together with other subjects in full satisfaction within an indifferent natural world persists, as we

find ourselves caught up in unresolved conflicts with nature and with one another, with our projects frequently frustrated, blocked, and with our values and aims unrecognized and unachieved. Human lives remain marked, as Frye puts it, by “a curious restiveness ..., [by] some feeling of what Blake calls ‘the same dull round even of a universe’” (Frye 1981, p.21, citing William Blake, *There is No Natural Religion*). (*Tractatus* 6.52: “We feel that even when all *possible* scientific questions have been answered, the problems of life remain completely untouched” (Wittgenstein 1961b, p. 149). Fundamental conflicts remain unresolved, and nature remains indifferent to the human.

Worse yet, under the sway of demotic-descriptive language and its rejection of objective purposes within nature and for human beings, human life becomes a competitive acquisitiveness game, with egoist individualism trumping any sense of common projects and directions of life. We lose what Frye calls “the social relevance and the inner integrity of all the elements of human culture” (Frye 1981, p. 52).

Without the integrity, we go around the cycle again, back to a subordination of everything creative and scholarly to the expediencies and superstitions of authority. Without the sense of relevance, we fly apart into a chaos of mutually unintelligible elites, of which those nearest the center of society would soon take control (Frye 1981, p. 52).

Against such unattractive actualities, “choose life,” Deuteronomy tells us, “that you and your descendants will live” (RSV 1973, Deuteronomy 30:19, p. 255). But how is one to do that from within where we are?

If there is any glimmer of a way out of chaotic individualism, unfounded cultural authoritarianism, or, more likely, uneasy amalgams of them, it must involve imaginatively finding possibilities, or at least shards, of jointly meaningful human life somehow latent within current cultural repertoires. “A serious human life ... can hardly begin,” as Frye puts it, “until we see an element of illusion in what is really there, and something real in fantasies about what might be there instead” (Frye 1981, p. 50). But how are to do that, if our only alternatives are emptily abstract, fantastic, potentially tyrannical visions, outworn mythologies and causal theologies, and submission to the demotic? —Here Frye proposes that the Christian Bible offers a fourth possibility. Its mode of representation

is not metaphorical like poetry, though it is full of metaphor. ... It does not use the transcendental language of abstraction and analogy, and its use of objective and descriptive language is incidental throughout. It is really a fourth form of expression, *kerygma* or proclamation. ... *Kerygma* is a mode of rhetoric, though it is rhetoric of a special kind, a mixture of the metaphorical and the ‘existential’ or concerned but, unlike practically all other forms of rhetoric, it is not an argument disguised by figuration. It is the vehicle of what is traditionally called revelation (Frye 1981, p. 29).

What the Bible’s *kerygma* gives us “is not so much a cosmology as a vision of upward metamorphosis, of the alienated relation of man to nature transformed into a spontaneous and effortless life—not effortless in the sense of being lazy or passive, but in the sense of being energy without alienation. ... [The] kingdom of God is an idealized world ... of youth and spring and all the vigor of life, [as well as] of creative or productive human work” (Frye 1981, pp. 76, 72). (*Tractatus* 6.4311: “If we take eternity to mean not infinite temporal duration but timelessness, then eternal life belongs to those who live in the present” (Wittgenstein 1961b, p. 147)—in a transformed relation to nature, others, and oneself.

It is this distinctive *kerygmatic* mode of presentation, Frye argues, that made the Bible important for major English poets, especially Milton, Blake, and Wordsworth. The appropriate mode of response to it *metanoia*: existential-spiritual conversion and a change of heart. A glimpse of the possibility of such a change of heart is surely what Wittgenstein found in his readings of the Gospels, Tolstoy, and Kierkegaard. (Again, *Culture and Value*: “a religious belief could only be something like a passionate commitment to a system of reference” [Wittgenstein 1980, p. 64e]). Yet he could not himself achieve this change of heart, this passionate commitment. Perhaps this was due, as suggested,

to a lingering sense of the force and value of the scientific image of the world, to awareness of cultural diversities and antagonisms, and to pieces of personal vanity and pride. Not everyone will feel the appeal of metanoic conversion out of chaos and into meaningfulness, let alone feel it in the terms provided by the Christian Bible—terms that have often enough been appropriated by the forms of fanaticism issuing from empty idealism against which Schiller warned. Not everyone will find the scientific image of the world, cultural diversity and antagonism, and personal vanity and pride unavoidable—though it is hard to see how to manage these avoidances without delusion and escapist. To the extent that significant numbers of people do feel that appeal and find material science, cultural antagonism, and personal vanity unavoidable, Wittgenstein's own statement of the aims of his work in relation to the ways of the world may be as compelling a formulation of a significantly shared existential situation as there could be.

This book is written for such men as are in sympathy with its spirit. This spirit is different from the one which informs the vast stream of European and American civilization in which all of us stand. That spirit expresses itself in an onwards movement, in building ever larger and more complicated structures; the other in striving after clarity and perspicuity in no matter what structure. The first tries to grasp the world by way of its periphery—in its variety; the second at its centre—in its essence. And so the first adds one construction to another, moving on and up, as it were, from one stage to the next, while the other remains where it is and what it tries to grasp is always the same.

I would like to say 'This book is written to the glory of God', but nowadays that would be chicanery, that is, it would not be rightly understood. It means the book is written in good will, and in so far as it is not so written, but out of vanity, etc., the author would wish to see it condemned. He cannot free it of these impurities further than he himself is free of them.

November 1930

L. W.

(Wittgenstein 1975, p. 7).

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