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WITTGENSTEIN'S "WONDERFUL LIFE"

BY PETER C. JOHN

... Theodorus was not wrong in his estimate of your nature. This sense of wonder is the mark of the philosopher. Philosophy indeed has no other origin, and he was a good genealogist who made Iris the daughter of Thauomas. Socrates to Thaletus¹

For it is owing to their wonder that men both now begin and at first began to philosophize. Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 982b²

In *The Illusion of Technique*³ William Barrett asserts that the experience referred to in the well-known passage at 6.44 in the *Tractatus*, "Not how the world is, but that it is is the Mystical," was of life-long significance for Wittgenstein. Its importance for him at the time it was composed is clearly seen in his letter to the publisher Ludwig von Ficker.⁴ Barrett claims, however, that the experience to which the words at 6.44 refer is potentially present and influential throughout his life. "It circulates from beginning to end through his later *Philosophical Investigations*, present but not announced—not even by way of a thunderous declaration of silence, as in the earlier work."⁵ While Barrett correctly, albeit intuitively, appreciates the importance of this experience for Wittgenstein's life and work, he nevertheless insists that this sense of wonder at the fact that anything at all exists, "is acknowledged explicitly, or almost explicitly, only once . . ." and "after . . . momentary contact (in the *Tractatus*) seems to drop out of view for Wittgenstein." I have cited Barrett's opinion because, regardless of how bold it may appear, the actual evidence compels us to an even broader interpretation of the importance this experience held for Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein mentioned his experience, which he most often described with the words, "I wonder at the existence of the world," to friends and colleagues and in many places throughout his written work. Whenever he spoke or wrote about it, he did so invariably with the greatest emphasis and passion. Despite his numerous attempts to say something about this experience, Wittgenstein was conscious that such attempts were futile and could at best convey only metaphorically what he felt. Nevertheless, he continued throughout his life to make reference to this experience, a habit which he did not condemn

¹ Plato, "Thaletus," *The Collected Dialogues*, tr. F. M. Cornford (Princeton, 1973) 860.

² Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, tr. W. D. Ross (Oxford, 1966), book A, sec. 982, l. 12.

³ William Barrett, *The Illusion of Technique* (New York, 1978).

⁴ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Briefe an Ludwig von Ficker* (Salzburg, 1969), 35-36.

⁵ William Barrett, *The Illusion of Technique*, 160.

in himself or in others. His persistence we may take as evidence of the importance of this experience in the unfolding of his life and in the development of his work.

My emphasis upon this particular experience as a means of understanding Wittgenstein's philosophical accomplishments allies me with the revision in Wittgenstein scholarship begun by Janik and Toulmin,⁶ who were the first to argue that the *Tractatus*, to be properly understood, had to be viewed in its Viennese cultural context and, more particularly, in its personal ethical context. As a work which invited others to consider more carefully the connection between this philosopher's values and his thought, *Wittgenstein's Vienna* was invaluable. At about the same time William Bartley offered quite a different sort of analysis of Wittgenstein.⁷ His primary task was to understand how Wittgenstein's name and thought have managed to captivate us. Bartley relies heavily, in his first and later work, on Wittgenstein's alleged homosexuality for explaining the apparent mythological status that this individual has achieved. More in the tradition of Janik and Toulmin, Peter Munz has recently sought to understand Wittgenstein's thought by linking his strict bifurcation of the subjective and objective to the cultural and political conditions of *fin-de-siècle* Vienna.⁸ Munz illustrates through Klimt, and with a quick glance at Hofmannsthal and Musil, the failure of that culture to reconcile the subjective and objective. The implication is, of course, that Viennese culture is unique not in its failure but in being among the first moderns to struggle for such a reconciliation; and Wittgenstein is an early response to its failure. At best, Munz claims, life and art, life and poetry, objectivity and subjectivity "could be reconciled only in terms of . . . unclarity . . ." (*Verschwommenheit*).⁹ He concludes, "If subjectivity and objectivity could only be linked in *Verschwommenheit*, Wittgenstein's austere puritanism and his passion for clarity forced him to sever the *verschwommene* link between the two." He sums up Wittgenstein's inevitable course of action by echoing Englemann's conviction that "he could not deny to himself the passionate truth of subjective feeling, of 'what really mattered in life. . . .'" This very interesting, though somewhat hasty explanation of the genesis of Wittgenstein's philosophy ignores, however, the very issue of "what really mattered" to Wittgenstein and what it was he was trying to enshrine and protect in his act of bifurcation. It is this issue that I wish to discuss.

The *Notebooks, 1914-1916* offer one of the first written mentions of

⁶ Allan Janik and Stephen Toulmin, *Wittgenstein's Vienna* (New York, 1973).

⁷ William Bartley, *Wittgenstein* (Philadelphia, 1973) and "Wittgenstein and Homosexuality," *Salmagundi*, No. 58-59 (1983), 166-96. The new edition of Bartley's *Wittgenstein* (LaSalle, 1985) combines these two works.

⁸ Peter Munz, "Bloor's Wittgenstein or The Fly in the Bottle," *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, 17 (1987), 67-96.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 89-90.

his experience. Dated October 20, 1916, the passage reads, "Das künstlerische Wunder ist, dass es die Welt gibt, dass es das gibt, was es gibt."¹⁰ Rendered in English this reads, "The aesthetic miracle is that the world exists, that what exists does exist."

We find an analogous remark in the *Tractatus*, which he completed during the war, just after the period embraced by the *Notebooks*. At proposition 6.44 we read, "Nicht wie die Welt ist, ist das Mystische, sondern dass sie ist." "Not how the world is, is the mystical, but that it is." Although the obvious point here is Wittgenstein's astonishment that anything at all exists, he uses, in these passages, two different terms in an effort to convey his meaning. "Wunder" and "Mystische," miracle and mystical, are apparently being used in an effort to point to something. We are given some clue as to what is being pointed to when we look at 6.432. Here "das Mystische" points to what is "higher" (*das Höhere*); perhaps this is even meant as a synonym for God. It moves counter to the function of these words to try to articulate precisely what they point to. For Wittgenstein these terms were significant to the degree that they pointed not to but away from the "hows" and "whys" of our existence. Miracle and mystical are markers for that which cannot be explained; both words serve their function in directing the reader away from the explicable toward the inexplicable and ineffable.

It may be objected that although this experience is mentioned in the *Tractatus*, it apparently holds no special status among all the other numbered propositions, except perhaps for the fact that it is near the end, which Wittgenstein recognized as significant in itself, in that it was the only portion of the work likely to be understood. But the accessibility of this passage does not by itself argue for its importance. What does, however, argue for the primacy of this proposition in our understanding of the work and its author is Wittgenstein's self-confessed purpose in composing the *Tractatus*.

As is now widely recognized, Wittgenstein's letter to his friend and prospective publisher, Ludwig von Ficker, states in unequivocal terms the meaning the *Tractatus* held for its author. Explaining his intent in composing his work Wittgenstein states:

The book's point is an ethical one. I once meant to include in the preface a sentence which is not in fact there now but which I will write out for you here, because it will perhaps be a key to the work for you. What I meant to write, then, was this: My work consists of two parts: the one presented here plus all that I have not written. And it is precisely this second part that is the important one. My book draws limits to the sphere of the ethical from the inside as it were, and I am convinced that this is the ONLY *rigorous* way of drawing those limits. In short, I believe that where *many* others today are just *gassing*, I have

¹⁰ *Notebooks, 1916-1918* (Oxford, 1969), 86.

managed in my book to put everything firmly into place by being silent about it.¹¹

Although Wittgenstein purports to explain in this passage his purpose in writing the *Tractatus*, it tells at best only half the story. To say that the point of any work is an “ethical one” without more specific qualification does not illuminate the matter. What, we must ask, does Wittgenstein intend by the “ethical”? In his *Lectures on Ethics*, delivered at Cambridge in late 1929 or early 1930, Wittgenstein explains what he means when he employs expressions such as “absolute good” and “ethical value.” “In my case,” he says, “it always happens that the idea of one particular experience presents itself to me. . . .” “I believe the best way of describing it is to say that when I have it *I wonder at the existence of the world* [italicized in the original]. And I am inclined to use such phrases as ‘how extraordinary that anything should exist’ or ‘how extraordinary that the world should exist.’ ”¹²

Ethical value for Wittgenstein, it appears, was singularly informed by the experience referred to in his *Notebooks*, in his Cambridge lecture, and most notably in the passage at 6.44 in the *Tractatus*. As his *Lecture on Ethics* makes abundantly clear, if the notion of ethics had significant meaning for Wittgenstein, his sense of wonder that anything should exist was an essential component of that meaning. We may sensibly conclude upon the basis of his remarks to von Ficker, therefore, that the “book’s point” is inextricably linked to Wittgenstein’s sense of wonder.

This is, however, but a preview of the role that this experience played in shaping Wittgenstein’s life and work. In 1929, we see Wittgenstein making reference to his particular experience, this time in the company of the Vienna Circle. In a rare conversation on the subject of religion, Wittgenstein endeavors to clarify his thoughts on the matter by saying, “The facts of the matter are of no importance for me. But what men mean when they say that ‘*the world is there*’ is something I have at heart.”¹³ In another discussion recorded by Waismann, this time between Wittgenstein and Schlick on the subject of Heidegger, Wittgenstein suggests something very important about the connection between this experience and his work as a philosopher. He is recorded by Waismann to have said,

Man feels the urge to run up against the limits of language. Think for example of the astonishment that anything at all exists. This astonishment cannot be expressed in the form of a question, and there is also no answer whatsoever. Anything we might say is *a priori* bound to be mere nonsense. Nevertheless we

¹¹ *Briefe an Ludwig von Ficker* (Salzburg, 1969), 35-36. Translation quoted from William Bartley’s *Wittgenstein* (New York, 1973), 56-57.

¹² “Lecture on Ethics,” *Philosophical Review*, 74 (1965), 3-12.

¹³ Friedrich Waismann, *Wittgenstein and the Vienna Circle* (Oxford, 1967), 118.

do run up against the limits of language. Kierkegaard too saw that there is this running up against something and he referred to it in a fairly similar way (as running up against paradox). This running up against the limits of language is *ethics*. I think it is definitely important to put an end to all the claptrap about ethics—whether intuitive knowledge exists, whether values exist, whether the good is definable. In ethics we are always making the attempt to say something that cannot be said, something that does not and never will touch the essence of the matter. It is *a priori* certain that whatever definition of the good may be given—it will always be merely a misunderstanding to say that the essential thing, that what is really meant, corresponds to what is expressed. . . . But the inclination, the running up against something, *indicates something*.¹⁴

In this passage, while offering yet another reference to his experience, Wittgenstein suggests where his work as a philosopher stands in relation to such matters of value. A task he feels is "definitely important" we may view as his task as a philosopher, that is "to put an end to all the claptrap," to undermine "attempt[s] to say something that cannot be said. . . ." What is achieved as a result is an avoidance of the "misunderstanding" that "the essential thing" (for Wittgenstein, what he attempts to convey with words describing a sense of wonder) somehow "corresponds to what is expressed."

We can begin to see the inextricable relation of Wittgenstein's "one particular experience" and his activities as a philosopher as we look closer at his work. Take, for example, his brief reflections on a work by Ernst Renan. After objecting in numerous ways to the presuppositions inherent in Renan's investigations, Wittgenstein announces emphatically, "Man has to awaken to wonder. . . ." He proceeds to broaden his criticism of Renan into a general critique of science. "Man has to awaken to wonder," he insists, and objects that "Science is a way of sending him to sleep again."¹⁵

Wittgenstein's values, implied in his hostility toward the prejudices displayed in the work of Renan, are echoed in his observations on James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*. Frazer, for example, explains that ancient man found the resemblance between fire and the sun impressive because it was for him mysteriously inexplicable. Wittgenstein exclaims in response, "how could fire or fire's resemblance to the sun have failed to make an impression on the awakening mind of man? But not 'because he can't explain it' (the stupid superstition of our time)—for does an 'explanation' make it less impressive?"¹⁶ Here Wittgenstein attacks Frazer's anthropological approach but, more importantly, attacks a tendency that for him Frazer only exemplifies. Wittgenstein is hostile to the notion that explanation should be thought to dispel mystery. That it can and

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 68-69.

¹⁵ *Culture and Value* (Oxford, 1973), 5e.

¹⁶ *Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough* (Retford, 1979), 6e.

does dispel wonder at the mystery of things occurs in significant degree because individuals like Frazer believe it can. Wittgenstein intimates that fire's resemblance to the sun should in fact be impressive to us still. The fact that we have theories and formulas which endeavor to explain this resemblance should not, in his view, make the resemblance less impressive or wonderful. Certainly, he was quite aware that explanations do indeed seem to undermine an individual's capacity for wonder, thus his unflagging hostility toward theories and other forms of explanation.

This can be brought into sharper focus if we return to some further comments he made on Renan. Renan offers an explanation of a primitive response to natural phenomena analogous to that offered by Frazer. Wittgenstein quotes the *History of the People of Israel*: "Birth, sickness, death, madness, catalepsy, sleep, dreams, all made an immense impression and, even nowadays, only a few have the gift of seeing clearly that these phenomena have causes within our constitution."¹⁷ Again, Wittgenstein reacts sternly to the idea that explanation, causal or otherwise, should imply that one cannot be impressed or filled with wonder. He goes on to insist that there is nothing necessarily "primitive" about the capacity to wonder. Wittgenstein states that for people to "suddenly start to wonder at" natural phenomena such as those mentioned above "has nothing to do with their being primitive. Unless it is called primitive not to wonder at things, in which case the people of today are really the primitive ones, and Renan himself too if he supposes that scientific explanations could intensify wonderment."¹⁸ Returning to his remarks on Frazer, Wittgenstein believes that it is "the stupid superstition of our time" that we endeavor always to explain and thereby convince ourselves, perhaps unwittingly, that the mystery of things is somehow no longer there. Wittgenstein objects to Frazer and Renan on the same grounds that he criticizes the use of dogmatic or rigid concepts in science or mathematics. As soon as one adopts a matter-of-fact, explanatory posture toward the phenomena under investigation, whether in the form of a law or an inviolable theory, one often sacrifices the capacity to be in awe of those phenomena.

Such criticisms are part of a consistent and discernible appraisal, developed by Wittgenstein, of a form of human inquiry that best epitomizes our age, that is, science. His remarks in the *Tractatus* on the proper place of facts, laws, and theories were only the beginning of a life-long denigration of the means man employs to undermine his own capacity to wonder. He speaks of science as a source of "impoverishment" because "one particular method elbows all others aside." As a consequence, "They all seem paltry by comparison, preliminary stages at best."¹⁹

¹⁷ *Culture and Value*, 5e.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 60e.

Wittgenstein believed that one should endeavor to go "right down to the original sources so as to see them all side by side, both the neglected and the preferred." The result, he believed, would be "enrichment" through the multiplication of "fertile new points of view."

Wittgenstein's remarks on science accord remarkably with his devotion to his sense of wonder. "Enrichment" in science is not the outcome of an endless refinement of technologies or the constant displacement of unsuitable theories by superior ones; Wittgenstein's criticism of modern science is indicative of his criticism of a wide range of matters and implies that enrichment or progress arises out of an openness to a multiplicity of points of view. Wittgenstein's quotation from Nestroy, at the beginning of the *Investigations*,²⁰ intends to suggest just this, that progress is not the product of transcending the old but grows from the appreciation of perspectives, new and old.

As should be expected, Wittgenstein's thoughts on the philosophy of mathematics show a marked similarity to his thoughts about science. In 1947, by which time he had recorded the ideas that now constitute his *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*, Wittgenstein exclaimed that a mathematician "too can wonder at the miracle . . . of nature. . . ." "But," Wittgenstein wonders, "can he do so once a problem has arisen about what it actually is he is contemplating? Is it really possible as long as the object that he finds astonishing and gazes at with awe is shrouded [*verschleiert*] in a philosophical fog?"²¹ We may immediately note two very revealing features of this passage. Wittgenstein, first of all, assumes in this passage that "wonder" is something naturally to be desired, and second, he implies that the path to it necessarily requires the dissipation of "philosophical fog."

What causes this "fog" and what, in Wittgenstein's view, could dissipate it? The answer to the first part of the question is implied in the passage itself. The "fog" arises "once a problem has arisen about what it actually is [one] is contemplating." Wittgenstein argues elsewhere that mathematicians, like other investigators, become confused and forsake their capacity for wonder when they concern themselves with the *actual* foundation of their discipline. "What a mathematician is inclined to say about objectivity and reality of mathematical facts, is not a philosophy of mathematics, but something for philosophical *treatment*."²² What needs to be avoided, for the sake of evoking a sense of wonder, is an

²⁰ Wittgenstein's quotation from Nestroy at the beginning of the *Investigations* reads: "Überhaupt hat der Fortschritt das an sich, dass er viel grösser ausschaut, als er wirklich ist." Malcolm, in his *Memoir* (Oxford, 1984), 51, renders this, "It is the nature of every advance, that it appears much greater than it actually is." If we translate "Fortschritt" simply as "progress," this passage bears comparison to Wittgenstein's opening remarks to his *Philosophische Bemerkungen* (*Philosophical Remarks*) (Oxford, 1975).

²¹ *Culture and Values*, 57e.

²² *Philosophical Investigations* (New York, 1953), #254.

inquiry into what knowledge, in any of its forms, actually consists of. One expression of this tendency is the conviction that mathematical technique must necessarily conform to certain rules.

We say: "If you really follow the rule in multiplying, you *must* all get the same result." Now if this is only the somewhat hysterical way of putting things that you get in university talk, it need not interest us overmuch.

It is however the expression, which comes out everywhere in our life. The emphasis of the *must* corresponds only to the inexorableness of this attitude both to the technique of calculating and to a host of related techniques.

The mathematical Must is only another expression of the fact that mathematics forms concepts.

And concepts help us to comprehend things. They correspond to a particular way of dealing with situations.

Mathematics forms a network of norms.²³

For Wittgenstein the mathematical "must" seems to have been of the same species as the scientific "explanation." Both harbor the pretense of not obeying the limits of a form of knowledge; thus both are antagonistic to the mystery which persists beyond the forms of knowledge.

What can dissipate the philosophical fog? For Wittgenstein what seemed to be required was the awareness that mathematics, like other areas of knowledge, was a human technique, formed of "concepts [that] help us comprehend things." They are formal and limited "way[s] of dealing with situations." To achieve this, he seems to indicate, requires battling against the supposition of the "objectivity and reality" of our forms of knowledge. What he battled against was the desire for an absolute or "god's eye" view, which he appears to have felt still captivates our scientific and philosophical investigations of the world.

What harm is done . . . by saying that God knows *all* irrational numbers? Or: that they are already all there, even though we only know certain of them? Why are these pictures not harmless? For one thing, they hide certain problems.

Suppose that people go on and on calculating the expansion of π . So God, who knows everything, knows whether they will have reached "777" by the end of the world. But can his *omniscience* decide whether they *would* have reached it after the end of the world? It cannot. I want to say: even God can determine something mathematical only by mathematics. Even for him the mere rule of expansion cannot decide anything that it does not decide for us.²⁴

More than just concealing certain "problems" though, such an assumption, Wittgenstein intimates, divorces one from the sense of wonder which is evoked with the realization that complete knowledge or a complete explanation does not reside anywhere, not even with God.

Wittgenstein's views on mathematics embody in encapsulated form

²³ *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics* (Oxford, 1956), V, #46.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, V, #34.

many of the assumptions and techniques of his entire later philosophy. A fundamental assumption for him, as I have indicated, was that wonder is valuable in its own right and something to be desired. In addition it was his conviction that there is something in the way we look at things, in our "picture" of things, that inhibits our capacity to wonder. His technique as a philosopher was specifically designed for the removal of what stood between him and the capacity of wonder. To see how this worked in his later philosophy in particular and his philosophical work in general, we must briefly return to some propositions of the *Tractatus*.

At 6.44 Wittgenstein states what for him is mystical and what, we later discover, is a fundamental criterion for what he feels is absolutely good and valuable, that is, his sense of wonder. At 6.45, however, he indicates what technique is required in order to evoke his mystical sense of wonder. To see and feel the world as a "limited whole—it is this that is mystical." To evoke his sense of wonder Wittgenstein sought a view of things as a "limited whole." On the basis of these propositions and the evidence showing his devotion to his sense of wonder, it appears that interpreting Wittgenstein's philosophical corpus as an "ethical deed" (to use Janik and Toulmin's phrase) or as a "*single work* of thinking" (to use James Edwards's) means interpreting it as a protracted endeavor to view things as a "limited whole."

We may clarify this a bit more by considering some remarks from his *Notebooks*. Seeing the world as a "limited whole," Wittgenstein equated with viewing the world *sub specie aeternitatis*. At 6.45 we read, "To view the world *sub specie aeternitatis* is to view it as a whole—a limited whole." In a remark dated 7/10/16, which comes after a month of passages recounting Wittgenstein's struggle to identify something he could classify as *good* in an ethical sense, he writes, "the good life is the world seen *sub specie aeternitatis*." I find this an uncommonly significant statement for anyone wishing to understand Wittgenstein's philosophical and personal objective for the simple reason that ethical declarations of this kind are so rare in his corpus and in the record of his spoken words; and what it indicates is that Wittgenstein consciously equated his capacity for wonder, that is, for achieving the "good," with his capacity for seeing things as a "limited whole."

We discover with what deliberate intent Wittgenstein sought a view of the "limited whole" in his later philosophy as well when we look at the proposed preface to his *Philosophical Remarks*, which, more than the *Brown Book*, signals the beginning of his later philosophical investigations. He writes,

Our civilization is occupied with building an ever more complicated structure . . . even clarity is sought only as a means to this end, not as an end in itself. For me on the contrary clarity, perspicuity are valuable in themselves. I am not interested in constructing a building, so much as in having a perspicuous view

of the foundations of possible buildings. So I am not aiming at the same target as the scientists and my way of thinking is different from theirs.²⁵

This interesting confession from a one-time architect provides us with one of Wittgenstein's few explicit declarations of what he was actually trying to achieve in his later work, particularly in the *Investigations*. This passage suggests that the later work is a protracted exercise in which he traces, to borrow Engelmann's metaphor, the island of objective fact, so as to clearly distinguish it from the ocean of boundless mystery. But as Engelmann has observed, "When he nevertheless takes immense pains to delimit the unimportant, it is not the coastline of that island which he is bent on surveying with such meticulous accuracy, but the boundary of the ocean."²⁶

It is at that boundary, I believe, that Wittgenstein encountered a sense of wonder. The important thing was for Wittgenstein clearly and repeatedly to witness that our knowledge, as he later suggests, is located within a particular form of life, and that beyond our forms of knowledge all is mystery. Wittgenstein's ambition in the *Tractatus*, for a view of the facts of the world as a "limited whole" and through a description of how all facts are represented, is transformed in his later work into a description of how particular facts achieve significance within particular language-games. In his early work he desired to view the world of facts *sub specie aeternitatis*; beginning with the *Remarks*, he begins to grope after the same, but now usually termed *Übersichtlichkeit*, a clear, perspicuous, and "synoptic" view of the facts. He complains that it is the "chief trouble with our grammar" that it does not give us such a point of view. In an uncommonly poetic description of his own activity as a philosopher, Wittgenstein announces the relation of his sense of wonder to his philosophical effort to see a limited whole.

But it seems to me too that there is a way of capturing the world *sub specie aeterni* other than through the work of the artist. Thought has such a way—so I believe—it is as though it flies above the world and leaves it as it is—observing it from above, in flight.²⁷

This passage tells us several things, one of which is indicated by the metaphor that is employed. This remark, which was made near the

²⁵ *Culture and Value*, 7e. Peter French has recently written an essay which asserts that the notion of limits "more than anything else characterizes Wittgensteinian philosophy." (Peter A. French, "Wittgenstein's Limits of the World," *Ludwig Wittgenstein, Critical Assessments*, 1 [London, 1986]). His focus is upon proposition 5.6 ("The limits of my language mean the limits of my world") and in the later work upon the concept of "form of life"; beginning with these he proffers an integrated interpretation of Wittgenstein's philosophy.

²⁶ Paul Engelmann, *Letters from Wittgenstein*, (Oxford, 1967), 97.

²⁷ *Culture and Value*, 5e.

beginning of Wittgenstein's later philosophical endeavors, eschews the limitations imposed by his earlier metaphor, the ladder. What he is here setting out to achieve is not to be achieved only once, but repeatedly; he wishes continually to recapture the world as a limited whole. Moreover, his choice of metaphors, early and late, tells us that he can only do this from "above" by acquiring a synoptic overview. Most importantly, this passage indicates not only the end but also the means with which to achieve it, which is to say, *thought*.

Wittgenstein, late in life, wrote a letter to his long-time friend Arvid Sjögren in which he discussed in unusually frank terms the value he placed upon thinking.²⁸ Ostensibly the letter is a discussion about religion, which stemmed from a disagreement between Wittgenstein and Arvid's wife over a passage from Wilhelm Kügelgen's *Lebenerrin eines Alten Mannes*. At the beginning of the letter Wittgenstein outlines two possible paths to religion, as he views it. One of them leads through a concept or a particular understanding ("durch eine Art von Philosophie"). Another leads through actions and deeds to the point where religious words begin to actually mean something but not to a point which brings one within the vicinity of a philosophy ("der Andere auf einem Weg, der ihn nicht einmal in der Nahe einer Philosophie"). Wittgenstein does not attempt to argue for the superiority of one or the other path but merely wishes to equate himself with the latter path. His identification with this path, the path of deeds, is achieved, however, in a very peculiar manner. In explaining this identification to Arvid, his emphasis is upon thought, not what we commonly regard as deeds; as a result, Wittgenstein's assumed devotion to the belief that *Am Anfang war die Tat* appears diminished, and his stated preference for action, as in his letter to Arvid, may seem insincere. But it is clear from what has been observed that Wittgenstein never considered philosophical thought to be an end in itself or a deed. Thought was an activity he was engaged in for getting past "a concept or a particular understanding" or form of knowledge which would otherwise stand between him and the performance of a deed. Thought was not his goal; it was his path. He writes to his friend, "I am myself, like you, a *thinker*. The natural way for me, which, at first, had likewise led me astray, leads *through* [my emphasis] thinking." Again, Wittgenstein immediately disclaims that his is a better way and instead refers to it simply as a "roundabout way" ("den Weg von aussenherum").

Thinking which brought with it fresh, innocent points of view, perceptions of things as if seen for the first time, totally original ways of tackling problems, the capacity to undermine stultifying theories and to wonder anew at the things of this world without regard to skeptical doubt

²⁸ *Sein Leben in Bildern und Texten*, ed. M. Nedo and M. Ranchetti (Frankfurt am Main, 1983), 245.

or matter-of-fact explanations—these were some of Wittgenstein's paths to a meaningful and valuable existence. His golden path, however, was the ability to capture through thought a vision of things as a "limited whole."

This use of thought as the means of achieving what for him was most valuable, gives substance to a remark he once made to his friend Drury. Wittgenstein stated, "I am not a religious man," but, he added, "I cannot help seeing every problem from a religious point of view."²⁹ I take this to imply that the foundation of Wittgenstein's religion was a profound sense of mystery about the existence of the world and of oneself and of God's relation to these things. As I have endeavored to argue, Wittgenstein's work as a philosopher was singularly oriented toward resurrecting in himself a sense of wonder and mystery, particularly by isolating by means of thought the "limited whole" of what is known. In practicing his philosophy, he was performing a religious deed in his effort to direct his attention and the attention of others to the profound mystery of life.

For one who practiced this form of religion, nothing was more crippling than the cessation of thought. Such a cessation occurred for a prolonged period only once in his life, and it was in this period that he was most desperately suicidal; I refer to the period after the completion of the *Tractatus*, to which, I surmise, Wittgenstein also refers in his letter to Arvid with the statement that his "way" had "at first . . . led astray." In a myriad of ways Wittgenstein announced his fear, often mortal, of whatever might bring thought to an end. Late in life his letters and words to Malcolm express in all seriousness his preference for death should he no longer be able to think productively. To Moore he praised fertility and derided conclusions. To members of the Vienna Circle he insisted that theory gave him nothing, that for him it was "without value." To Russell he praised the science of logic because it was, to him, a science that was infinitely strange; and later on, when he was expounding new thoughts about language, he again confronted Russell with a vision of language that was protean and infinitely strange. For Renan, Frazer, Eddington, Jeans, and their likes, who, in his view, endeavored to explain mysteries or simplify complexities, he offered nothing but the harshest criticism.

In revealing the importance of Wittgenstein's "particular experience" for his work and the simultaneous function of his work in the evocation of his sense of wonder, I have thus far ignored the significance his sense of wonder had for his everyday life. Norman Malcolm, one of Wittgenstein's closest friends from about 1938 through 1951, notes in his *Memoir* the significance of Wittgenstein's experience. "I believe," Malcolm says, "that a certain feeling of amazement that *anything should exist at all* [Malcolm's emphasis], was sometimes experienced by Wittgenstein, not

²⁹ Norman Malcolm, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: A Memoir* (Oxford, 1984), 83.

only during the *Tractatus* period, but also when I knew him."³⁰ In the new edition of his *Memoirs* Malcolm confesses that he tended in his original memoir to overlook or not to have given due emphasis to Wittgenstein's preoccupation with such matters. This is an important confession from someone who emphasized, in the first place, the apparent significance a "feeling of amazement" had for Wittgenstein. Malcolm amends his original characterization of Wittgenstein as "fiercely unhappy." He notes Wittgenstein's numerous friendships that "were surely a source of richness in his life." In his consideration of the potential "richness" of Wittgenstein's life Malcolm's emphasis is not on friendships however. He emphasizes rather the good emotional effects arising from "prolonged and intensive intellectual work." Through philosophical work, Malcolm argues, Wittgenstein was "continually arriving at fresh insights, seeing connections between one region of thought and another, spotting false analogies, trying out new ways of tackling the problems that have kept philosophy in turmoil for many centuries."³¹ Malcolm is convinced that this "activity of creation and discovery" gave Wittgenstein delight; I would go further and say that this activity produced in Wittgenstein the sense of things that he valued most highly. Malcolm's latest thoughts point out that it was in large measure because of philosophical work that Wittgenstein could experience "joy and much that was 'wonderful.'"

Wittgenstein's ethical value was, if anything, more conspicuously displayed in his behavior than in this work. Engelmann describes Wittgenstein reading passages from Möricke with "a shudder of awe" and tells how, upon hearing the sounds of a quartet, he was "carried away by passion."³² Drury recalls attending a sermon with Wittgenstein during which Wittgenstein "leant over and whispered . . . , 'I am not listening to a word he is saying. But think about the text, that is wonderful, that is really wonderful.'"³³ Fania Pascal noted that "To watch him in a state of hushed, silent awe, as though looking far beyond what oneself could see, was an experience next only to hearing him talk."³⁴ She continued, "that there was nobody else who could . . . make you feel that your mind was stretched, thrown of its course, forced to look at matters it had never considered before."³⁵ What he appeared to seek was the "newly created piece of art or a divine revelation."³⁶

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 58-59.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 84 (Appendix, #4).

³² P. Engelmann, *Letters from Wittgenstein*, 86 and 90.

³³ M' O. C. Drury, in *Ludwig Wittgenstein, Personal Recollections*, ed. Rush Rhees (Oxford, 1981), 146.

³⁴ Fania Pascal, in *Ludwig Wittgenstein, Personal Recollections*, 33-34.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 42.

³⁶ Rudolf Carnap, in *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Man and His Philosophy*, ed. K. T. Fann (New York, 1967), 34-35.

This desire is displayed in his attitude to the work of others. Russell recalls that Wittgenstein “spoke with intense feeling about the *beauty* of the [*Principia*]”; “he found it like music.”³⁷ Pascal recalls him “picking up [a] volume of Grimm’s tales and reading out with awe in his voice ‘Ach, wie gut ist dass niemand weiss dass ich Rumpelstilzchen heiss.’” “Profound, profound,” he exclaimed. She notes, “I liked *Rumpelstiltskin*, understood that the strength of the dwarf lay in his name being unknown to humans; but was unable to share Wittgenstein’s vision.”³⁸ About Tolstoy’s *Hadji Murat* Wittgenstein wrote to Russell, “Have you read it? If not, you ought to for it is *wonderful* [Wittgenstein’s emphasis].”³⁹ In another letter he commends Russell for having read the lives of Mozart and Beethoven because, he exclaims, “These are the actual sons of God.”⁴⁰ Pascal even notes the expression of Wittgenstein’s values in the manner of his gaze. He “showed me around the Fellow’s Garden,” she writes, “stood in awe before some plant saying ‘You can almost see it grow hourly. . . .’”⁴¹ And as is to be expected, Wittgenstein’s ethical criterion expressed itself as he taught, a fact conveyed in the observations of Rudolf Carnap. Carnap observed that Wittgenstein’s “point of view and his attitude toward people and problems, even theoretical problems, were much more similar to those of a creative artist than to those of a scientist; one might almost say, similar to those of a religious prophet or a seer.”⁴² Carnap also noted Wittgenstein’s “internal struggle” when engaged in philosophical thought, a struggle “visible on his most expressive face.” He continues: “When finally, sometimes after a prolonged arduous effort, his answer came forth, his statement stood before us like a newly created piece of art or a divine revelation. . . . [T]he impression he made on us was as if insight came to him as through a divine inspiration, so that we could not help feeling that any sober rational comment or analysis of it would be a profanation.” A student expressed much of this in the succinct observation that “We have never *seen* a man thinking before.”⁴³ Carnap’s description is also captured in what C. van Peursen called Wittgenstein’s style of “thinking aloud.”⁴⁴

The profoundly serious, which Carnap practically views as the “*revelatory*,” nature of Wittgenstein’s thought and speech conveyed itself to others. Frank Ramsey, who travelled from Cambridge to Austria during the early 1920s to engage Wittgenstein in discussion about the *Tractatus*, came to appreciate his seriousness. In 1924 he wrote to Keynes in an

³⁷ *Sein Leben in Bilden und Texten*, 74.

³⁸ F. Pascal, 33-34.

³⁹ *Letters to Russell, Keynes and Moore* (Cornell, 1974), 16.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁴¹ F. Pascal, 42.

⁴² R. Carnap, 34-35.

⁴³ Karl Britton, in *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Man and His Philosophy*, 61.

⁴⁴ *Ludwig Wittgenstein: An Introduction to his Philosophy* (London, 1969), 11.

attempt to explain Wittgenstein's apparent reluctance to visit England: "To come to Cambridge and just to go out to tea and see people, is, he thinks, not merely not worthwhile, but positively bad because such intercourse would merely distract him from his contemplation without offering any alternative good."⁴⁵ Precisely the same sentiment was expressed by Wittgenstein to Norman Malcolm when Wittgenstein decided to visit the United States and was faced with the prospect of having to travel by car for several hours with someone whom he suspected would have attempted to engage him in chit-chat.⁴⁶

It would be very easy to interpret Wittgenstein's behavior in this regard as sheer rudeness; but this would ignore entirely his persistent struggle to think, speak, and behave in a manner which was true to what he recognized as valuable. Wittgenstein sought to appreciate the world in a way that was not simply given but had to be striven for. Pascal recognized that he "was driven to distraction by the manner in which people spoke."⁴⁷ It was in an attempt to minimize the distractions of his world that Wittgenstein would often behave abruptly. We can see the same motivation in his choice of places to live and work. He has been characterized as arrogant, callous, and even mad; but when he is considered within the pattern of his entire life, his behavior appears no longer as aberrant but as deliberate attempts to achieve a certain goal.

What Wittgenstein sought upon successfully avoiding the perils of banality and matter-of-factness, was the "stretch[ing]," the "throw[ing] of course," that "forced [one] to look at matters it had never considered before." Wittgenstein sought in his own work and in the work of others, including the work of nature, the "newly created piece of art or a divine revelation." As Engelmann noted, what above all else had intellectual value for Wittgenstein was the "spontaneous idea." Ideas and understanding which came in a flash obliterating in an instant confusion and incoherence are what he esteemed.

Accordingly, he denigrated the tendency to mouth the teachings of others. He especially abhorred the thought that he himself should have followers, and so he never actually taught but merely thought and, if someone were willing, discussed. H. D. P. Lee recalls Wittgenstein's "insisting that (he) should think any problem out for himself."⁴⁸ Wittgenstein expressed surprise to Lee that one could be very interested in "other people's thoughts." He sternly berated G. E. Moore for lecturing upon Ward's views on psychology instead of Moore's own. Wittgenstein is paraphrased as having once said, "if we took a book seriously it ought to puzzle us so much that we would throw it across the room and think

⁴⁵ *Sein Leben in Bildern und Texten*, 191.

⁴⁶ N. Malcolm, Letters of 14/6/49 and 7/7/49.

⁴⁷ F. Pascal, 43.

⁴⁸ H. D. P. Lee, "Wittgenstein, 1929-1931," *Philosophia* (1979), 219.

about the problem for ourselves.”⁴⁹ For his own part, Wittgenstein successfully avoided any formal training in philosophy; to the end of his days he managed never to have read Aristotle. But this was not done out of pride; he simply viewed one’s own creation of a thought as much more valuable than one merely imbibed. He said of the *Tractatus* that its value would be if someone were to come along some day and create the entire work anew by their own efforts.⁵⁰

Friedrich Waismann, noting in conversation with fellow member Moritz Schlick that Wittgenstein appeared to have the marvelous ability to look at things as if seeing them for the very first time,⁵¹ describes this as if it were some innate talent. What he did not seem to realize is that this way of seeing was a skill Wittgenstein had struggled for and was to struggle for all of his life. Trying to see things as though for the first time was his deliberate means of struggling to resurrect in himself a sense of wonderment about that which exists.

Finally, what has long been a mystery to Malcolm and others who knew and cared about Wittgenstein, are the words he spoke just before his death in the house of a friend. Mrs. Bevan, the wife of the physician at whose house he was then living, records that shortly before he passed away Wittgenstein asked her, with supposed reference to his friends, to “tell them I’ve had a wonderful life.”⁵² These words struck Norman Malcolm, as “mysterious and strangely moving.” The fundamental importance of wonder in Wittgenstein’s life, however, should give us every reason to take his final words quite literally. That Wittgenstein should refer to his life as “wonderful” should be seen neither as pun nor as glib appraisal of his own life. On the basis of what we know of the man, his last words must be read as a profoundly sincere declaration of what he cherished above all else during his life.

What Wittgenstein sought in his life is identical to what he sought in his work. For a time, in his early years, these were at odds; but for the greater portion of his life Wittgenstein lived to wonder, and for this reason he lived to trace the limits of the known and thereby free himself to wonder at the mystery of what lay beyond.

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⁴⁹ K. T. Fann, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Man and His Philosophy*, 58.

⁵⁰ See Ramsey’s letter to his mother in Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Letters to C. K. Ogden* (Oxford, 1973), 78. Ramsey writes: “His idea of his book is not that anyone by reading it will understand his ideas, but that some day someone will think them out again for himself, and will derive great pleasure from finding in this book their exact expression.”

⁵¹ F. Waismann, 26.

⁵² N. Malcolm, 81.