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Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein on the Inner Life

William James wrote in the opening pages of *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, “There are...experience[s]...that carry an enormous sense of inner authority and illumination with them when they come. But they come seldom, and they do not come to everyone...”¹ Historically, such experiences have been central to discussions of what I will refer to as the ‘inner life’ of the human being.² In the *Varieties*, James sought to provide a scientific typology of the subjective experiences that serve as the foundation for the inner life; however, he arguably failed to develop a clear nonreligious interpretation of them. Nearly a century later, we still struggle to make sense of the inner life and its somehow authoritative insights without reference to the promissory notes of religion. In what follows, I explore selected works of Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein in an attempt to outline a case for a nonreligious, philosophical understanding of the inner life that respects our sense of there being experiences that possess “inner authority and illumination”.

It is well known that Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein were both antifoundationalists skeptical of the powers of philosophy to yield deep truths. Apart from this, if they have anything in common, it is their view of the peculiar character of life itself, which they both seem to have found rather odd and unsettling, if not downright distressing. However, while Kierkegaard was essentially a religious thinker obsessed with soteriology, Wittgenstein concentrated primarily on solving traditional philosophical problems, even if only by unasking the questions which inspired them.³ These disparate concerns led them to harbor divergent attitudes towards the peculiar character of human existence. The focal point of this discussion is those places where these apparently divergent attitudes in fact converge. Accordingly, we will analyze the poles of this Kierkegaard-Wittgenstein dialectic in terms of the experiences that grounded their distinctive expressions of the nature and meaning of human existence. The aim is by no means to be exhaustive—nor is it to endorse one or both of these poles; rather, the purpose of this paper is to explore the common features of the former’s “religious” and the latter’s “mystical” senses of life in an attempt to understand the source of the epistemic credibility of certain subjective experiences. The difficulty, as we shall see, is succeeding in this task without recourse to theology.

The Sickness Unto Death

As the question of the inner life lies at the heart of a wide range of traditional philosophical and theological discourses, we begin with some remarks meant to fix precisely, with the help of Kierkegaard, the theme with which we aim to engage. In *The Present Age*, and while considering—with a mixture of contempt and compassion—the “indolent mass” that is “the public”,⁴ Kierkegaard is presented with the “terrible...thought of all the lives that are or easily may be wasted.” He continues,

I will not even mention those who are lost, or at any rate completely led astray: those who play the part of the dog for money, but the many who are thoughtless, helpless and sensual, who live superior lazy lives and never receive any *deeper impression of existence* than this meaningless grin...⁵

Kierkegaard’s reference to a “deeper impression of existence” offers a point of departure for exploring the notion of the inner life. In this polemic against “the public”, Kierkegaard claims that there is an impression that gets at something “deeper” than a life lived on the surface of existence. By juxtaposing such an impression with a “*meaningless grin*”, Kierkegaard is calling attention to an experience that presents what can be called a ‘fundamental sense of life’, a sense of what human life means—that is, what human life is about or amounts to.

Of course, for Kierkegaard, a “deeper impression” is essentially a *religious* impression. Indeed, it is a theological framework that motivates Kierkegaard to make a distinction between a “deeper” impression of existence and a “meaningless grin”. While the former is basic to Kierkegaard’s conception of the inner life insofar as it discloses the fact that human life, including one’s own, is at bottom “the dread that is despair”,⁶ the latter is best understood in terms of what Kierkegaard often refers to as ‘immediacy’, which he describes as a “thoughtless, helpless, and sensual” life of immersion in the vanities of the world.⁷

Juxtaposed with the life of immediacy is, for Kierkegaard, religiousness. Here we encounter his notion of the passion that is the “leap of faith”. Kierkegaardian passion, though not simply a feeling or aesthetic emotion, is also not strictly intellectual, but a movement through which one freely commits oneself to a power that transcends objective knowledge and rational comprehension. Kierkegaard calls faith the “paradox...that interiority is higher than exteriority,” for it is in the inner life, or what

Kierkegaard sometimes calls “inwardness”, that the passion required for the movement of faith is found.⁸ Only the “knight of faith” has achieved this movement, for he and he alone overcomes immediacy to achieve, as a singular individual, an unmediated relationship with God. But one cannot become a knight of faith until one has traveled through the darkest depths of despair; according to Kierkegaard, despair is the fundamental sense of life, and thus a necessary stepping stone to faith. It is only through the cultivation of an inner life, which is constituted by the fundamental sense of life disclosed in the experience of despair, that one generates the passion necessary for the leap of faith. Hence, the source of the significance of a deeper impression of existence is, for Kierkegaard, the fact that it enables one to achieve religious faith, which is the sole cure for the “sickness unto death” that is despair. For, according to Kierkegaard, “man’s only salvation lies in the reality of religion.”⁹

Although the problem of pseudonymy makes Kierkegaard difficult to interpret, one cannot help but notice his almost invariable tendency to fulfill philosophical analyses with theological conclusions. Is it that his preoccupation with soteriology blinded him from a nonreligious account of the inner life?¹⁰ Perhaps. In any case, it is interesting to note the consistency with which Kierkegaard’s theology enters into the picture at the end of a *prima facie* purely philosophical analysis of human existence and subjectivity, and only then to “save” the individual from what he viewed as a vertiginous reality.

To be sure, Kierkegaard’s focus on the nature and meaning of human existence seen from the point of view of the inner dimension of human life lends itself to elucidation in religious terms. For many, Kierkegaard included, religion has seemed the only interpretative structure capable of making sense of the significance of a deeper impression of existence. For when we subtract God or transcendence from the picture, it seems we are left without the foundation necessary to sustain various impressions in anything resembling a hierarchical relationship, in which one impression is more significant than the others. If a deeper impression is deep because it is in an important respect a kind of religious experience, and we reject the framework which makes religion possible, it follows that we are forced to say that there is no such thing as a deeper impression of existence. It appears that without a transcendent power to lean on,

the structure collapses and all impressions descend to the same level—all impressions become immediate impressions.

But it is not necessarily so. This is not to suggest that Kierkegaard's theology be interpreted metaphorically or *sans* the Judeo-Christian God. Rather, it is to acknowledge the potential for and philosophical importance of a nonreligious, yet nonreductive, view of the inner life that respects Kierkegaard's insight into its existential significance. Kierkegaard himself perhaps thought this impossible.¹¹ Indeed, creating a space for a philosophical understanding of the inner life is problematic. It appears to be an open question whether the inner life can be understood without theological augmentation. Hence, one might reasonably ask, is it possible to extract Kierkegaard's theology from the notion of inwardness to arrive at a religious-less interpretation of the inner life? In other words, can we make sense of the idea that there exist deeper impressions of existence without invoking a theological buttress?

Ontological Autobiography

To answer this question in the affirmative, it is necessary to uncover an alternative way to understand the significance of Kierkegaard's deeper impression. This might be accomplished through reflection upon what William Earle¹² has called "ontological autobiography," which he describes as the narration of a personal understanding of the character of human existence. Basically, Earle is calling attention to the fact that an existential work, rather than an explication of ontological necessity, is a concentrated autobiographical study, and it is a mistake to generalize its content by taking its contingent description of the nature and meaning of an individual's existence to apply necessarily beyond that of its author. Despite these limitations, Earle suggests that we can learn from such works insofar as they are *ontological* autobiographies: each is an exploration of their author's inner life—"an excavation in depth of the singular lives which they express."¹³

It is useful to understand Kierkegaard as expressing his own distinctive fundamental sense of life in the form of an ontological autobiography. Although Kierkegaard's analysis of his fundamental sense of

life may shed light on an important aspect of the human condition, we should not be seduced into following Kierkegaard in thinking that despair actually *is* the natural condition of all human beings, nor should we accept the rather grand conclusion he draws from this, namely, that religiousness, in the form of his peculiar form of faith, is in fact the goal or natural end of human existence.¹⁴ Viewing Kierkegaard as an ontological autobiographer—as the narrator of personal experience and not the medium of ontological necessity—allows us to understand him as giving an insightful and often profound analysis of his own distinctive fundamental sense of life. And we can do this without at the same time feeling compelled to reject his analysis because it lacks sufficient universality. Accordingly, we can begin to locate the significance of Kierkegaard’s deeper impression of existence despite his own interpretation of it in terms of the dialect he happened to find most poignant—the categories and teachings of the Christian religion.

With this in mind, let us return to Kierkegaard’s notion of immediacy in order to pinpoint the significance of a deeper impression. For Kierkegaard, immediacy is the common experience of life as, to borrow Pascal’s definition of the human condition, “inconstancy, boredom, anxiety.”¹⁵ Although Pascal did not use the term, he would agree with Kierkegaard that immediacy manifests itself in individuals as a pronounced exteriority, or other-directedness, which the latter describes as a “turn to others and to things outside [oneself]”¹⁶ such as novelty, amusement, sensual pleasure and other diversions.¹⁷ Kierkegaard calls such phenomena diversions because, roughly speaking, they distract from what is going on within oneself to what is going on out in the world. This is the crux of the matter, for it points to an essential difference between the interiority, or, again, the inwardness, of Kierkegaard’s deeper impression of existence on the one hand, and the exteriority of immediacy on the other.

But what exactly is inwardness? According to Kierkegaard, inwardness is not a sort of Cartesian introspection (i.e., the “inner observation” of the “contents” of one’s consciousness), nor is it a phenomenological reduction, to borrow Husserl’s term for the method which garners intuitive insights into essences.¹⁸ Rather, inwardness is an ethical cum existential relation. It is an intimacy with oneself, an internal relation that brings about an impassioned sensitivity to who or what one is. According to

Kierkegaard, while immediacy concerns immersion in vain diversions, inwardness is an intimacy that manifests itself in the development of an inner life, a space through which one encounters the fundamental character of his or her existence and overcomes, even if only for a moment, what he labels the “emptiness” of the “deceptive consolation” that is the life of immediacy.¹⁹ We need not accept the value-judgment informing this polemic in order to observe that for Kierkegaard, whereas through immediacy one avoids confronting oneself by focusing on and subsequently becoming absorbed by things outside of oneself in the world, through a deeper impression of existence one achieves a heightened degree of self-consciousness, that is, a consciousness that is turned inward upon the self.

Hence, the experience about which Kierkegaard writes in *The Present Age* is “deeper” because it deepens one’s sense of one’s own existence, of what it is to be who or what one is.²⁰ For it is in virtue of an increased consciousness of oneself as a self that the fundamental character of one’s existence shows its face. Consequently, Kierkegaard writes of immediacy: it “really has no self.”²¹

Feeling the World as a Limited Whole

Rather than examine in detail Kierkegaard’s conception of the self and the heightened self-consciousness that grounds his deeper impression of existence, we can develop the brief outline of the inner life suggested thus far by comparing Wittgenstein’s discussion of the ethical in his 1929 “Lecture on Ethics” (henceforth *Lecture*). There, after some linguistic remarks on the nature of ethical statements, during which he recapitulates the Tractarian doctrine that “it is impossible for there to be propositions of ethics,”²² Wittgenstein attempts to relate his point via a different route. To this end, he determines to fix his mind on what he means by absolute or ethical value by attending to what he personally considers the paradigmatic experience of it, what he calls the ethical “experience *par excellence*”. He tells his audience,

...the best way of describing [this experience] is to say that when I have it *I wonder at the existence of the world*. And I am then inclined to use such phrases as ‘how extraordinary that anything should exist’ or ‘how extraordinary that the world should exist’.²³

Wittgenstein’s aim is in part to call attention to this experience so that he can analyze the phrases it prompts as nonsense (*Unsinn*). But this analysis, which depends on the semantic strictures of the young

Wittgenstein's logical atomism, should not stop us from looking beyond the nonsense of these phrases to observe the connection to be drawn here with what, in the *Tractatus*, he calls the "mystical", that is, "the inexpressible, [which] *shows* itself."²⁴ Reference to the sense of the extraordinariness of the existence of the world hearkens back to certain passages in the *Tractatus* where Wittgenstein, using several nonsensical pseudo-propositions, stated that contemplating the world *sub specie aeterni* is the mystical experience.²⁵ In the *Lecture*, Wittgenstein redescribes the experience of wondering at the existence of the world as the "experience of seeing the world as a miracle," an expression that parallels a passage in the *Tractatus* in which he says that it is "not *how* the world is [that] is mystical, but *that* it is."²⁶ So, insofar as Wittgenstein's notion of the mystical picks out the extraordinariness that what is, *is*, it is linked to what in the *Lecture* he describes as "the miracle of the existence of the world."²⁷

Russell wrote in his preface to the *Tractatus* that its fundamental thesis is that "it is impossible to say anything about the world as a whole."²⁸ Although this may be true, Wittgenstein appears also to have thought that calling a proposition "nonsense" is not the end of an analysis; in fact, he thought nonsense very much worth investigating. Some have claimed that Wittgenstein's use of "nonsense" in the *Tractatus* is meant to pick out that which is ineffable. Others, following the logical positivists, have insisted that calling something "nonsense" implies that it has no semantic value, which is to say that the nonsensical sentence lacks cognitive content. Still others have claimed that although a sentence may be appropriately labeled *logical* nonsense, it does not follow that that sentence therefore lacks *psychological* sense; as Alice Crary (summarizing James Conant and Cora Diamond) has written, such sentences, although logically nonsensical, "nevertheless somehow succeed in gesturing at what they fail to say."²⁹ For our purposes, it does not matter which of the above interpretations is correct; we only need to assume—safely, I believe—that Wittgenstein speaks sincerely when he writes elsewhere, "Don't *for heaven's sake*, be afraid of talking nonsense! But you must pay attention to your nonsense."³⁰ Let us attempt to "pay attention" to a few instances of Wittgenstein's own nonsense.

As we saw above, Wittgenstein describes the mystical as that which is inexpressible. This suggests that it is that which cannot be made fully intelligible.³¹ Wondering at the existence of the world

is standing at the edge of what can be said, at the edge of silence. Because Wittgenstein believed that what cannot be meaningfully said cannot be meaningfully thought either, it is an experience that traces the outline of the limits of intelligibility. To illustrate the impossibility of grasping that which lies beyond significant language, Wittgenstein employs the metaphor of the cage: “This running against the walls of our cage is perfectly, absolutely hopeless.”³² However, the experience itself, though it lies beyond the province of propositional thought and hence resists meaningful articulation in universal or rational terms, is not insignificant. Nor is it unachievable. Wittgenstein writes, “there is a way of capturing the world *sub specie aeterni*.... Thought has such a way...it is as though it flies above the world and leaves it as it is—observing it from above, in flight.”³³ Leaving the world as it is and observing it from above is seeing the world as a totality, and this is a perspective which puts its very existence into stark relief. For when one is engaged in “feeling...the world as a limited whole”, one becomes intensely aware that the world *is* rather than not. Of course the world is not always perceived as such, *viz.*, as extraordinary. But when it is, the world takes on a quality of strangeness, a quality that, precisely because it pushes us to thrust ourselves against the limits of intelligibility, invites the somehow mystical experience that Wittgenstein describes as wonder.

I propose that in the *Lecture* Wittgenstein is attempting to elucidate what I have been calling a fundamental sense of life. This becomes evident when we look at his description of the content of ethics, which appears to have very little to do with what is traditionally meant by the term. Indeed, Wittgenstein’s discussion of ethics in the *Lecture* appears more closely linked with what Heidegger called “fundamental ontology” than issues of the good, the just, or the right.³⁴ As Wittgenstein points out in his introductory remarks, his subject matter—the notion of “absolute value”³⁵—lies at the heart of “Ethics”, which he broadly interprets as not only the “general enquiry into what is good”, as Moore had done in *Principia Ethica*, but as an investigation into “the meaning of life”, “what makes life worth living”, “what is the right way of living”, and so on.³⁶ Wittgenstein, then, is not concerned with deontological ethics, the ethics of duty, or to a narrowly teleological or even eudaemonic ethic where the end is a supreme good one must attain in order to achieve happiness. On the contrary, for Wittgenstein, ethics involves a whole

way of living; more precisely, it concerns how one is in the world, or one's fundamental ethical cum existential relationship to the world. Hence, unsurprisingly, Wittgenstein is at pains to note that he intends a subject matter that includes the whole of both morality and aesthetics³⁷—in fact, his tone suggests that he considers his discussion to be inclusive of religion as well. Evidently, then, Wittgenstein means by “Ethics” something Big, something that by all lights concerns the sense of what life, particularly human life, is about or amounts to. And this is precisely what the notion of the fundamental sense of life is meant to pick out.

The Deeper Impression of Existence

Given these considerations, it appears that by attending to the paradigmatic experience of absolute value, Wittgenstein has fixed his mind on an experience that can be included in the category of what I have been calling, following Kierkegaard, a “deeper impression of existence”. For, as we have seen, both Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein are concerned in the passages we have looked at to articulate the revelation of a fundamental sense of life.

Of course, this is not to suggest that Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein were mono-dimensional, and that they were limited to the experiences examined herein. Surely the former enjoyed ontological astonishment and the latter suffered moments of intense despair.³⁸ To be sure, both drew on a rich diversity of personal experiences in their philosophical reflections. But in order to focus our discussion, which is primarily intended to shed light on the notion of the inner life and not the details of the personalities of these two men, it is necessary to concentrate on those single experiences that appear to have served as a primary motivation for much of their writing.

One problem we face is that as a result of this focusing, there arises the difficulty that while Kierkegaard's deeper impression of existence is that which awakens one to despair, Wittgenstein's is an experience through which one awakens to wonder. In short, drawing more than a tenuous connection between Wittgenstein's and Kierkegaard's experiences appears to be problematic. For although each has located an experience which generates a fundamental sense of life, the details of their respective accounts

of the deeper impression appear to be in radical conflict. For the experience of wonder that Wittgenstein considers to provide a deeper impression is deeply at odds with Kierkegaard's elucidation of it as an awareness of oneself as suffering from the sickness unto death.

We can begin to mediate this conflict by recognizing that when describing his experience, Wittgenstein, like Kierkegaard, is engaged in ontological autobiography. When Wittgenstein describes the experience of wondering at the existence of the world as the paradigmatic ethical experience, he explicitly states that this example is entirely his own and may be unique to himself.³⁹ He calls the experience of wondering at the existence of the world “*my experience par excellence*” and adds as an aside, in order to further impress the personal nature of his example, “As I have said before, this is an entirely personal matter and others would find other examples more striking.”⁴⁰ Insofar as he takes the time to inform his audience that the experience he recounts is purely his own, and may differ from person to person, Wittgenstein is self-consciously expressing an experience central to his own personal understanding of the character of existence; he is articulating his own fundamental sense of life.⁴¹

Yet, Wittgenstein's comments suggest that he is doing more than simply giving an ontological autobiography. Despite the fact that he is self-consciously describing an experience somehow unique to himself, Wittgenstein is not blind to the capacity of his description to inspire in others *something*. In fact, his discussion of his experience of wonder in the *Lecture* suggests that he believes that in virtue of reflecting upon his personal example, others will locate for themselves some related experience; given the proper prompt, others will unearth an experience that possesses the same character as his ethical “*experience par excellence*”. And whatever experience another might recall to fix his or her mind on the notion of absolute value, it is that experience that Wittgenstein wishes to explore. Wittgenstein's intention, then, is to evoke the listener's own deeper impression of existence so that the *character* of such an experience can serve as the object of his analysis. This is to say that it is actually the *character* of his experience of wondering at the existence of the world, and not the idiosyncrasies of this particular experience itself, that interests Wittgenstein.⁴²

That the description of one's own intensely personal experiences may invoke in another what, on the face of it, seems to be a fundamentally different experience suggests that we can search beyond the apparent differences between various individuals' deeper impressions of existence for the overlap in the common character of those experiences. The importance of the presence of such an overlap is that it allows us to explore what it is that the fundamental senses of life of Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein have in common, and thus enables us to search for the fundamental link connecting the experience of despair and the experience of wonder.

However, this strategy encounters an immediate difficulty: even if we can ignore idiosyncratic personal differences and focus on the character of their deeper impressions, we are still faced with the problem of explaining the *prima facie* incongruent directedness of Kierkegaard's and Wittgenstein's experiences. For whereas the former's impression is directed inward insofar as self-consciousness "is the decisive factor",⁴³ the latter relates an experience that is by all lights directed outward to the existence of the whole of the world, which surely does not lie within.

It is tempting to respond by pointing out that Wittgenstein has focused his attention on the extraordinariness of the existence of the world only to get at the experience of wonder that comes with contemplation of the world's strangeness, and the experience of wonder itself is inner. But although Wittgenstein's wonder is inner, it is not *directed* inward—on the contrary, it is outwardly oriented (it is, after all, directed at the world), so this response will not do. A more appropriate response is to recognize that there is more to Wittgenstein's experience of wonder than this obvious exteriority. As we saw above, Kierkegaard's deeper impression is essentially a deepening of one's sense of being who or what one is. I suggest that the same is true in the case of Wittgenstein, and that his account of this deepening differs from Kierkegaard's simply because each is filtered through a unique individual, and thus through the unique experiences of that individual. The common directedness of their experiences can be discerned if we recognize that Wittgenstein's deeper impression of existence begins outward only to circle back upon itself as a consciousness turned inward upon the self. In other words, the experience is parabolic. In going out and meeting the limits of the world—the "walls of one's cage"—one is thrown back upon one's own

existence, upon oneself. Hence, just as we saw in the case of Kierkegaard's impression of despair, Wittgenstein's fundamental sense of life as a miracle is grounded in an experience of heightened self-consciousness that deepens one's sense of one's own existence.

This is not to say that Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein had the same experience when the one found himself flooded with despair and the other found himself in the grip of wonder.⁴⁴ Far to the contrary, these experiences are distinct in many important ways. What makes Wittgenstein's experience unique is that in his case, an acute self-consciousness reveals a sense of mystery, not, as in the case of Kierkegaard, intense existential *angst*. But the point is that despite this variation, the essential *character* of both of these experiences as acute impressions of oneself remains intact.

The Unshakeable Core

Locating the essential character of the experience which grants a fundamental sense of life allows us to return once again to the theme of the inner life. The link between a deeper impression of existence and the inner life is revealed when we observe that Kierkegaard's "religious" and Wittgenstein's "mystical" are both intensely personal categories. They concern the individual, the self. M.C. Escher, whose work is, generally speaking, an exploration of self-reference, once wrote about his drawing "Hand With Reflecting Sphere (Self-portrait in Spherical Mirror)"—in which he depicts his right hand supporting a sphere that contains at the center the reflection of his own face—something which promises to shed light on the relationship between the individual and the significance of a deeper impression:

The whole room, four walls, the floor, and the ceiling, everything, albeit distorted, is compressed into that one small circle. Your own head, or more exactly the point between your eyes, is in the absolute center. No matter how you turn or twist yourself, you can't get out of that central point. You are immovably the focus, the unshakable core, of your world.⁴⁵

Escher's remarks points to the importance of the self for an understanding of the deeper impression of existence that presents a fundamental sense of life and thus effects the formation of the inner life of the human being. For both Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein, a deeper impression is deeper because it is the impression that what is, *is, including oneself*. Insofar as this experience discloses the fact that one *is*, it is the heightened consciousness of one's own existence. Whether it be in a moment of

intense despair or concentrated wonder, a deeper impression of existence is essentially the experience of a lucid awareness that one exists. To put it in the first person, it is the distinct impression that *I am*, and that this is who or what I essentially am—an existent. Of course, Kierkegaardian despair and Wittgensteinian wonder do not exhaust the range of possible experiences of this I. But whatever the particular experience may be, when faced with this fact, the fact that one is in the world, a singular individual whose existence is deeply contingent, and thus thoroughly in question, one cannot escape the effect of, for example, either its terrible weight, as Kierkegaard could not, or mysterious stare, as Wittgenstein could not. Hence, Wittgenstein writes in one of his many notebooks, “The I, the I is what is deeply mysterious.”⁴⁶ Herein lies the key, I think, to the inner life.

The power of the Janus head in Roman mythology was its force in capturing the simultaneity of seeing the nothing we are from and the nothing we are toward while in the interim being a something among somethings.⁴⁷ In that moment of supreme self-consciousness, where one is consumed by the despair that forces the self to partake in the inward struggle of being itself, or where the horizon of the world opens to reveal the self that now encounters its own existence, the distinction between thought and feeling breaks down. And what is thereby exposed—in these and other personal experiences with a similar character—is the “unshakeable core” linking the nothingness that was and the nothingness that will be. This is what drove Kierkegaard to forge a new category for the passion that he saw could not be reduced to either emotion or intellect alone and pushed Wittgenstein to locate ethics beyond the realm of propositional thought. A deeper impression of existence is the medium for a fundamental sense of life, and thus it strikes both emotionally and cognitively at the core of who or what one is, of one’s relation to oneself and to one’s own existence—in short, of one’s inner life.

This would suggest that although Wittgenstein was right in that the mystical is by its very nature not fully expressible, he was wrong to infer from this that it is therefore supernatural. For him, this conclusion followed logically from the assumption that the world is simply that which can be said through logic. Tractarian semantics barred the young Wittgenstein from seeing that the mystical does not only “show itself” in a deeper impression, but can be expressed in part through gestures, elucidations, and

other non-logical, yet entirely legitimate, forms of communication. This is why shortly after the *Lecture* Wittgenstein denied that language is a cage.⁴⁸ Propositions do not constitute the boundaries of the world, and thus what cannot be expressed in propositions is not necessarily “transcendent” or “mystical” in a religious sense.⁴⁹ From the fact that the experience that I am cannot be the content of a meaningful Tractarian proposition it does not follow that existence is an “absolute miracle”.⁵⁰ The experience that grounds Wittgenstein’s fundamental sense of life is the deepening of one’s sense of one’s own existence and not the encounter with a supernatural miracle, and thus the need for a theological understanding of his experience of wonder and notion of the mystical disappears.

Can the same be said about Kierkegaard’s impression of despair? I believe so. We have seen that the self-consciousness that is a deeper impression of existence is for Kierkegaard the awareness of one’s despair. I hope to have shown with the notion of an ontological autobiography that we can look past Kierkegaard’s complex interpretation of his deeper impression of existence, influenced as it is by the Christian teaching of sin, to the experience of heightened self-consciousness that is the source of his fundamental sense of life. This is to say that Kierkegaardian despair, like Wittgensteinian wonder, need not be understood as pointing to a transcendent power, but only to the fact that one is an individual something caught between two inscrutable nothings. To be sure, intense personal experiences often compel one to religious belief; for this reason, Kierkegaard’s tendency to give a religious interpretation of his despair is not difficult to understand. It is as Wittgenstein lucidly observed:

Life can educate one to a belief in God. And *experiences* too are what bring this about; but I don’t mean visions and other forms of sense experience which show us the ‘existence of this being’, but, e.g., sufferings of various sorts. These neither show us God in the way a sense impression shows us an object, nor do they give rise to *conjectures* about him. Experiences, thoughts, —life can force this concept on us.⁵¹

However, though tempting, this concept (God) is superfluous, for it is in fact the experience itself that contains the force to move us to a deeper understanding of ourselves and our world. Wittgenstein once said, “man has the urge to thrust against the limits of language. This thrust...is *ethics*. In ethics one constantly tries to say something that does not concern and can never concern the essence of the matter...But the tendency, the thrust, *points to something*.”⁵² Does it point to religion? Almost in direct

response to this question, Wittgenstein writes, “What do I know about God and the purpose of life? I know that this world exists.”⁵³

Conclusion

In the *Varieties*, James sympathetically considered many examples of what I have been calling “deeper impressions of existence”. We noted at the outset that he arguably failed to develop a clear nonreligious interpretation of these personal experiences. Nevertheless, it remains possible that despite the fact they are often interpreted as showing “more”, deeper impressions of existence can be understood as subjective experiences of a presence taken to be an external power.⁵⁴ I have suggested that this presence is in fact oneself, and its power lies in the simple inexplicability of its own contingent existence. Impressions are usually taken to be pure seemings, appearances that mask reality. But certain seemings are ends unto themselves, for they contain within them the force and profundity of a reality that is found in and through the impression itself. And thus these rare experiences, constitutive of the inner life, retain their epistemic credibility apart from a theological context; though inexpressible, they need not find their significance in or through an external source: they possess in themselves “inner authority and illumination”, as James wrote.

Though not an exhaustive analysis of the inner life and its authoritative insights, this discussion of Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein’s fundamental senses of life has offered a way to relocate the essential character of deeper impressions of existence from a religious to a nonreligious framework, a framework that recognizes that an understanding of those personal experiences fundamental to the inner life is not achieved through theological reflection, but through an examination of the self and the heightened self-consciousness that provides one with an acute impression of the fact that one *is*.⁵⁵ This relocation is far from trivial. For, as Bryan Magee has pointed out, “We may none of us know where we are, but there is a world of difference between being lost in daylight and being lost in the dark.”⁵⁶

Notes

¹ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*, NY: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1902, p. 16. (Henceforth *Varieties*.) Here James refers to both “sentimental and mystical” experiences. Following James, I intend the following discussion to be inclusive of both mystical and nonmystical experiences, i.e., any and all of those subjective experiences that “carry an enormous sense of inner authority and illumination with them when they come.”

² I hope to avoid confusing this with the more popular notion of ‘privacy’. The present investigation is not concerned with ‘inner events’ (e.g., the sensation of pain) or the related question of so-called ‘privileged access’. As Paul Johnston has pointed out (*Rethinking the Inner*, London: Routledge, 1993), Wittgenstein mounted a sustained attack on this Cartesian conception of ‘the Inner’. I remain silent on these issues, for although one’s inner life is in an important sense private, the notion of the inner life—in the sense I am using it here—is concerned more specifically with the *personal*. This background distinction will become clearer as the paper progresses.

³ As an aside, it is interesting to note the parallels between some of Wittgenstein’s philosophical techniques and those of the Buddha. See A.D.P. Kalansuriya’s “The Buddha and Wittgenstein: A Brief Philosophical Exegesis” (1993, *Asian Philosophy*, 3[2]: pp. 103-112) for an insightful discussion of relevant connections between the methods of Wittgenstein and the Buddha. However, the technique of “unasking the question” goes unmentioned.

⁴ Søren Kierkegaard, *The Present Age*, trans. Alexander Dru, NY: Harper and Row, 1962, p. 65.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 67 (emphases added).

⁶ Søren Kierkegaard (as Anti-Climacus), *The Sickness Unto Death: A Christian Psychological Exposition for Edification and Awakening*, trans. Alastair Hannay, London: Penguin Books, 1989, p. 55. Kierkegaard says that although it is always present (at least to some degree), despair, which Kierkegaard links to the awareness of sin, does not always *reveal* its presence. He writes, “. . .there is not a single human being who does not despair at least a little, in whose innermost being there does not dwell an uneasiness, an unquiet, a discordance, an anxiety in the face of an unknown something, or a something he doesn’t even dare strike up acquaintance with, an anxiety about a possibility in life or an anxiety about himself, so that as a physician speaks of one’s going about with an illness in the body, he goes about with a sickness, goes about weighed down with a sickness of the spirit, which only now and then reveals its presence within, in glimpses, and with what is for him an inexplicable anxiety.” Note in addition that Kierkegaard titles this section “The Generality of this Sickness (Despair)” (*ibid.*, p. 52, emphasis added).

⁷ See, e.g., *The Sickness Unto Death*, pp. 52 ff., 80 ff., & 94 ff. Kierkegaard sometimes refers to immediacy as the “aesthetic”. Because the goal of this paper is to explore Kierkegaard’s articulation of an insight into the significance of the deeper impression that lies at the heart of the inner life, and not to provide an exposition of his thought, we will ignore what he calls the “ethical. The ethical is an important component of what is in fact a three-part model of kinds of impressions of existence. However, in *The Present Age* (e.g., pp. 59-72) and the passages in *The Sickness Unto Death* mentioned at the beginning of this note, Kierkegaard appears to adopt the simplified (two-component) distinction presently being drawn.

⁸ Søren Kierkegaard (as Johannes *de Silentio*), *Fear and Trembling*, trans. Alastair Hannay, London: Penguin Books, 1985, p. 97.

⁹ *The Present Age*, p. 56.

¹⁰ At this point, let me say something about my use of the terms ‘religion’, ‘religious’, and ‘nonreligious’. By a ‘nonreligious’ view, I generally mean one that makes no reference to a transcendent being(s) or spiritual power(s) (e.g. God or Brahman), spiritual entities (e.g., souls), or transcendence (i.e., otherworldliness). Hence, what I have in mind when I say a ‘religious’ view are most forms of spirituality, broadly construed to include, e.g., both traditional theistic and New Age spiritualistic worldviews. One could use the positive term ‘naturalistic’ to characterize what I am calling a ‘nonreligious’ view. But naturalism is oftentimes tied to the somewhat ambiguous metaphysical thesis referred to as ‘physicalism’, which fails to clearly specify the meaning of its central concept, the ‘physical’. Moreover, some philosophers (e.g., Searle and Blackburn) have rejected the demand that one understand naturalism in terms of physicalism; instead, they propose that naturalism is the generic epistemic hypothesis that that which is subject to investigation via the natural sciences is natural, or the metaphysical thesis that the natural order is the causal order, and so on. For these reasons, I prefer the somewhat less ambiguous term ‘nonreligious’ (though I admit even this term retains some ambiguity).

¹¹ Kierkegaard makes something akin to this claim in many places. For instance, he writes in *Fear and Trembling*, “Even if one were able to render the whole of the content of faith into conceptual form, it would not follow that one had grasped faith, grasped how one came to it, or how it came to one” (p. 43). And again: “Philosophy cannot and should not give an account of faith, but should understand itself and know just what it has indeed to offer, without

taking anything away, least of all cheating people out of something by making them think it is nothing” (*Ibid.*, p. 63). These passages articulate an important warning against an a priori methodological allegiance to reductionism. Consistent with this cautionary note, the present inquiry seeks to explore, not to take away from or explain away, its subject matter; precisely what I reject in this investigation is the suggestion that the inner life and the questions which surround it are “nothing” (i.e., a phenomenon akin to phlogiston, for example). However, it will become clear as the paper progresses that Kierkegaard and I differ in regards to the question of whether a nonreductive account of the inner life must be a *religious* account, for in contrast to Kierkegaard, it is the possibility of a negative answer to this question that we are presently exploring.

¹² William Earle, “Ontological Autobiography”, in ed. James Edie, *Phenomenology in America: Studies in the Philosophy of Experience*, Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1967.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

¹⁴ The same may be said for the claims of other so-called “existentialists”, who, as Earle points out, have rightly taken as their starting point reflection upon their own experiences but, in many cases, have wrongly thought the fruits of these reflections to be universal conclusions concerning the nature of human being *as such*.

¹⁵ Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. A.J. Krailsheimer, London: Penguin Books, 1995, §24, p. 6.

¹⁶ *The Present Age*, p. 69.

¹⁷ This is a subject on which Pascal also had much to say. See his *Pensées*, §132 ff., pp. 37 ff.

¹⁸ See “Ontological Autobiography”.

¹⁹ The quoted phrases are from *The Present Age*, p. 61.

²⁰ That Kierkegaard intends to say that the depth of a deeper impression is found in a heightened consciousness of one’s self becomes even more evident when he writes with respect to the awareness that one’s condition is that of despair that “what is the same [as an awareness of despair] and also the crux [is] a raising of the level of consciousness of the self” (*The Sickness Unto Death*, p. 79). In fact, he writes, “the more consciousness the more intense the despair” (*ibid.*, p. 72). Kierkegaard begins his analysis of the various stages of despair in *The Sickness Unto Death* with a discussion of the self, which he defines as “a relation which relates to itself, or that in the relation which is its relating to itself. The self is not the relation but the relation’s relating to itself” (p. 43). Kierkegaard writes in the same work that when it comes to despair, “consciousness is the decisive factor” (p. 59). These and other passages call attention to a tight but somewhat obscure connection between the self and self-consciousness, the details of which fall outside the scope of this paper.

Before moving on, let me briefly mention that the term “consciousness” has taken on a fairly specific set of meanings in contemporary philosophy of mind. Many of these senses of consciousness, such as “monitoring” or “introspective”, “phenomenal”, and “access” do not appear to be appropriate here. The sort of consciousness that Kierkegaard has in mind is that of self-consciousness, which he understands as more than the mere ability to employ the concept of the self in reasoning and/or action; rather, it is the actual consciousness or awareness of oneself as a self. Despite these difficulties of terminology, I will, following Kierkegaard, continue to use the term “consciousness” to denote this curiously self-referential activity.

²¹ *The Sickness Unto Death*, p. 83.

²² Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. D.F. Pears and B.F. McGuinness, London: Routledge and Kegan, 1961, 6.42. Henceforth *Tractatus*.

²³ Ludwig Wittgenstein, “Lecture on Ethics”, in ed. and trans. Anthony Kenney, *The Wittgenstein Reader*, Blackwell Publishers, 1994, p. 292. In the *Lecture*, Wittgenstein recounts another such experience, “the experience of feeling absolutely safe”, which I will not address here.

²⁴ *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 6.522.

²⁵ *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 6.45.

²⁶ *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 6.44.

²⁷ “Lecture on Ethics”, p. 295. This connects to the point made above about the inexpressibility of the mystical. In the *Lecture*, Wittgenstein writes: “we cannot express what we want to express and...all we can say about the absolute miraculous remains nonsense” (p. 295).

²⁸ *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, p. xvii.

²⁹ Alice Crary, “Introduction”, in *The New Wittgenstein*, London: Routledge, 2000, p. 12.

³⁰ *The Wittgenstein Reader*, p. 301.

³¹ Wittgenstein claims that “wondering at the existence of the world” is nonsensical, for, according to him, the existence of the world is not a fact—which is by its very nature contingent—but a tautology, and one cannot sensically wonder at a tautology since it could not be otherwise. The importance of the contingency is made clear below.

³² “Lecture on Ethics”, p. 296. It is often suggested that Wittgenstein is a Moorian nonnaturalist about ethical properties and that it is because of this nonnaturalism that he removes ethics from our purview, so to speak. However, I suggest that he would say that Moorian nonnaturalism is untenable because it tries to say something significant about the existence of that concerning which nothing significant can be said, *viz.*, so-called “ethical properties”. Hence, it does not appear that Wittgenstein takes the position that he does in the *Lecture* because he is a nonnaturalist about ethical properties, but because of his views on the very subject matter of ethics, discussed below.

³³ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, ed. G.H. Von Wright, trans. Peter Winch, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984, p. 5e. If at the time of writing this Wittgenstein accepted the Tractarian claim that one can meaningfully think only that which one can meaningfully say, here “thought” is used in a special sense, namely, to mean *nonpropositional* or *nonsensical* thought. I will discuss Wittgenstein’s later view of sensicality below.

³⁴ Wittgenstein’s paradigmatic experience of ethical value appears to be aligned with what Heidegger thought was the fundamental question of philosophy: “Why is there something and not rather nothing?”. In addition, Wittgenstein’s mystical might be seen in terms of what Heidegger calls the “mystery of being”. See, e.g., Martin Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. Ralph Manheim, London: Yale University Press, 1974. Wittgenstein himself linked his ideas with those of both Heidegger and Kierkegaard in a private discussion recorded by Waismann (in ed. Brian McGuinness, trans. Joachim Schulte, *Ludwig Wittgenstein and the Vienna Circle: Conversations Recorded by Friedrich Waismann*, Littlefield, 1979) around the time of the *Lecture*: “I can well understand what Heidegger means by *Dasein* and *Angst*. Human beings have a drive to run up against the boundaries of language. Think for example of the astonishment that anything exists. This astonishment cannot be expressed in the form of a question and also there is no answer at all. All we can say can *a priori* be only nonsensical. Nevertheless we dash ourselves against the boundaries of language. Kierkegaard also had seen this throwing of oneself and even described it in a very similar way (as throwing oneself against a paradox)” (p. 68).

³⁵ Because it does not directly concern us here, we will ignore Wittgenstein’s notion of “relative value”, which denotes judgments that can be rephrased as statements of facts in conditional form insofar as they contain an implicit or explicit reference to a particular goal. Wittgenstein contrasts relative value with absolute, or ethical, value, since the latter but not the former are irreducible to facts and hence “transcendental” or “supernatural”. See *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 6.421 and “Lecture on Ethics”, p. 289-291.

³⁶ “Lecture on Ethics”, p. 289.

³⁷ See also *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 6.421, where Wittgenstein claims that they are one and the same.

³⁸ For instance, see Wittgenstein’s remark about *Angst* in the Waismann quote in note 34 above.

³⁹ “Lecture on Ethics”, p. 292.

⁴⁰ “Lecture on Ethics”, p. 292. I have emphasized “my” in the first quotation.

⁴¹ That the *Lecture* is an ontological autobiography is supported by Wittgenstein’s remarks in a private discussion recorded by Waismann: “At the end of my lecture on ethics I spoke in the first person. I think that this is something very essential. Here there is nothing to be stated any more; all I can do is to step forth as an individual and speak in the first person” (*Ludwig Wittgenstein and the Vienna Circle*, p. 117).

⁴² This is where Wittgenstein’s *Lecture* goes beyond the account of the mystical given in the *Tractatus*. I believe that Wittgenstein has taken up the question of ethics in the *Lecture* precisely because he wishes to pursue an analysis of the character of the experience that is, for him, the source of a fundamental sense of life. Perhaps more importantly, it appears that he aims to give an analysis that “explains” what it is about the nature of the experience itself, rather than what it is about the nature of language, that makes any and all expressions of it nonsensical.

⁴³ See note 20 above.

⁴⁴ Again, nor is this to say that Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein were limited to the experiences addressed in this paper.

⁴⁵ M.C. Escher, *M.C. Escher*, NY: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1983, p. 16.

⁴⁶ *Culture and Value*, p. 81e.

⁴⁷ For this sentence, I owe a debt to Dr. Ray Hart. Here I am borrowing from his informal talk “Nothing in Particular, or Is Nothing Sacred?” at Boston University in the spring of 2000. I discovered this striking line, here modified only slightly, while browsing through notes from that talk.

⁴⁸ *Ludwig Wittgenstein and the Vienna Circle*, p. 117.

⁴⁹ Of course, this is not to suggest there is only *one* “religious sense”. The point is just that Wittgenstein’s concept of the mystical need not be interpreted as denoting something otherworldly (see note 10 above).

⁵⁰ The point that I am making here is relevant to an ongoing debate in contemporary philosophy of mind over the metaphysical status of the raw feels of conscious experience (i.e., so-called ‘qualia’). Thomas Nagel (1974, “What is it like to be a bat?”, *Philosophical Review* 83[4]: 435-450 and “Subjective and Objective” in *Mortal Questions*,

1979) has argued that the subjective character of experience cannot be captured in an objective (scientific) picture of the world. Many (e.g., dualists) have inferred from this that subjective experience is therefore “beyond” the world. The present discussion effectively argues against this conclusion by pointing out that what is not fully expressible in objective (scientific) language does not on that account reside outside the natural world.

⁵¹ *Culture and Value*, p. 86e.

⁵² *Ludwig Wittgenstein and the Vienna Circle*, p. 68-69.

⁵³ *Culture and Value*, p. 72e. It is worth mentioning here that in his discussion of “mystic speech”, Michel de Certeau (*Heterologies: Discourse on the Other*, trans. B. Massumi, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1988, Chapter 6) references a passage from the *Tractatus* on the mystical—6.44 (see note 26 above)—while discussing what he takes to be the common feature of “mystic texts”: he writes, “all [mystical] writings display a passion for what *is*, for the world as it ‘exists’...in other words, a passion for what is its own authority and depends on no outside guarantee” (p. 81, underscore added).

⁵⁴ Cf. Ann Taves, 2003, “Religious Experience and the Divisible Self: William James (and Frederic Myers) as Theorist(s) of Religion”, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 71[2]: 303-327.

⁵⁵ Given this, let me note in passing that although it cannot be adequately addressed here, I believe that the general line of thought pursued in this paper could possibly bring us some distance towards a nonreligious, though thoroughly nonreductive, understanding of the religious impulse as well.

⁵⁶ Bryan Magee, 2002, “What I Believe”, *Philosophy: The Journal of the Royal Institute of Philosophy* 77[301]: 407-419, p. 416.