The Point outside the world: Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein on Nonsense, Paradox and Religion

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Much has been made of the Kierkegaardian flavour of Wittgenstein's thought on religion, both with respect to its explicit allusions to Kierkegaard and its implicit appeals. Even when significant disparities between the two are noted, there remains an important core of d e f a c t o methodological agreement between them, addressing the limits of theory and the dispelling of illusion. The categories of 'nonsense' and 'paradox' are central to Wittgenstein's therapeutic enterprise, while the categories of 'paradox' and the 'absurd' are central to much of Kierkegaard's attempt (pseudonymous and non-pseudonymous) to dispel religious illusion. Writing of how the 'urge to thrust against the limits of language' yields 'nonsense', Wittgenstein explicitly appealed to Kierkegaard: 'Kierkegaard, too, recognized this thrust and even described it in much the same way (as a thrust against paradox)'.*1* I want to consider whether Kierkegaard's category of paradox or the absurd is assimilable to Wittgenstein's view of nonsense and paradox. I shall argue that a consideration of Wittgenstein's view of paradox can highlight contrasting strands in Kierkegaard's writings on religious faith, strands which take paradox more or less strictly - in particular, it can clarify, several different opinions concerning the status of religious claims. My exploration will bring to the fore some implications of the attempt to make room, in the religious employment of language, for a 'higher understanding' of truths which we are said to be able to grasp but cannot express.

I. THE POINT OUTSIDE THE WORLD

It is Wittgenstein's comments in the 'Tractatus' on 'the mystical' and 'the ethical' which most readily suggest at least a prima facie similarity with that dimension of Kierkegaard's thought which emphasizes the limits of objectivity, of the theoretical, and of 'direct communication'. Wittgenstein's preface suggests that, 'the whole sense of the book' can be summed up as follows: 'what can be said at all can be said clearly, and what we cannot talk about we must pass over in silence' . He wrote of the book that its 'point' was 'ethical'; what was said in the book 'defined' the ethical 'by remaining silent about it', and what was not, and could not be, 'said' was more 'important' than what can.*2*

Because the ethical concerns the 'non-accidental', ethics cannot be put into words - because what lies 'whithin the world' is accidental, 'the sense of the world must lie outside the world' (6.41, 6.421). The ethical and the mystical are treated interchangeably, and both are connected to religious utterance when he writes: 'H o w things are in the world is a matter of complete indifference for what is higher. God does not reveal

himself i n the world' (6.432). Viewing or feeling the world 'as a limited whole' is what it means to 'view the world sub specie aeterni' (6. 45). The ethical, the mystical, the religous, the 'sense of the world' - it all lies 'outside the world' and is 'the higher' which cannot be expressed by propositions (6.42). Attempts to express 'the higher' will 'simply be nonsense': the 'aim of the book', the preface affirms, 'is to draw a limit ... to the expression of thoughts'; 'what lies on the other side of the limit will simply be nonsense (einfach Unsinn)'.

Wittgensteins phrasing - that the ethical, the mystical, the religious lie 'outside' the world' - calls to mind a passage in Kierkegaards journals:

"Faith is quite correctly 'the point the world' which therefore also moves the whole world. It is easy to perceive that what bursts forth through a negation of all points in the world is the point outside the world ... . Consider the absurd. The negating of all concepts forces one outside the world, to the absurd - and here is faith."*3*

The 'point outside the world' is, for Kierkegaard, 'the absurd'; for Wittgenstein such a perspective 'will simply be nonsense'. Kierkegaard commends faith, while locating it at the point of negation 'of all concepts': Wittgenstein admits that what is most valuable can only be expressed in terms which are devoid of sense, in words best understood as attemps to express what he calls 'paradox'.*4*

Wittgenstein's attitude to nonsense is thus both appreciative and cautious, and that attitude continues into the later writing. Both aspects are reaffirmed in a remark from 1946 in which he warns:'Don't f o r h e a v e n's s a k e, be afraid of talking nonsense! But you must pay attention to your nonsense'.*5* Sensivity to the ways in which one can talk nonsense is expressed in Wittgenstein's well-known closing to the 'Tractatus': 'My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually recognizes them as nonsensical, when he has used them - as steps - to climb up beyond them. (He must , so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climed it.)' Cora Diamond and James Conant have written suggestively and persuasively concerning Wittgenstein's view of 'nonsense', arguing that his proposal at the end of the 'Tractatus' - that we throw away the ladder - be taken more strictly and more courageously than has hitherto been done by commmentators. Seriously throwing away the nonsensical ladder - adopting what Diamond calls an 'austere' view of nonsense - has challenging implications for Wittgenstein's view of the ethical and the religious. I am concerned here to explore these implications with respect to Kierkegaardian accounts of religious faith. In the process I shall be considering the warrant for an appreciative yet austere view of paradox as well as how such an austere view sits with other elements in Kierkegaard's writings on religious truth. I will explore these questions by building on the work of both Diamond and Conant. Let me begin by re-presenting some of the most significant of Wittgenstein's

Tractarian statements of the relation between saying, showing and nonsense.

II. 'NONSENSE' AND THE ETHICAL-MYSTICAL

The central methodological claim in the 'Tractatus' that philosophy does not offer theses or doctrines is imformed by the view that much simply cannot be said. Not only is it the case that 'What c a n be shown, c a n n o t be said' (4.1212), it is also the case that at least some things which cannot be said can be or are shown: 'There are, indeed, things that cannot be put into words', but 'they m a k e t h e m s e l v e s m a n i f e s t. They are what is mystical' (6.522). Like the logical and the mystical, 'ethics cannot be put into words' (6.421). What cannot be put into words, 'what lies on the other side of the limit will simply be nonsense'.

The conclusion that 'what we cannot think we cannot s a y either' highlights his preceding insistence that we cannot 'go beyond the limits of the world'; in much the same way he had earlier claimed that in order to represent logical form (what enables propositions to represent reality), 'we should have to be able to station ourselves with propositions outside logic, that is to say outside the world' (4.12). Such a stance 'outside the world' seems implied in the claim that the 'mystical' is viewing the world 'as a whole', or 'as a limited whole'. Moreover, the possibility of such a stance seems implied in the conjunction of the claim that 'the sense of the world must lie outside the world' (6.41) with the claim that we are meant to 'see the world aright' (6.54); Wittgenstein also allows that someone , the solipsist in this case, can 'mean' something which 'cannot be said, but makes itself manifets' (5.62).

Commentators have put to use some of the Tractarian material in the service of the putatively Wittgensteinian notion that we can mean or grasp some ineffable truths. In a set of interdependent essays, Cora Diamond and James Conant present a detailed rejection of this view that both the 'Tractatus' claim that 'what we cannot talk about we must pass over in silence' and the 'Tractatus' distinction between saying and showing support a contrast between plain nonsense and cognitively significant or 'deep' nonsense. *6* Diamond's target is the claim that for some nonsense sentences 'the unsayability of what they attempt to say precludes its being said, but we can nevertheless grasp what they attempt to say' (TAL, 69).

Conant focuses on 'the doctrine that nonsense can make ineffable truths manifest' and the concomitant notion that we can gain 'a battery of ineffable truths - truths about the nature of ethics, the meaning of life, and the like' (TATL, 337).

Diamond attacks the distinction between simple nonsense and nonsense which significantly reveals 'features of reality' or gestures at ineffable truths, arguing that it is as much an illusion to think that we can say 'what "what cannot be said", shows', as to think that we can say 'what cannot be said'. Her

proposal is that Wittgenstein's view is not

"that there are features of reality that cannot be put into words but show themselves. What i s his view is that the way of talking may be useful or even for a time essential, but it is in the end to be let go of and honestly taken to be real nonsense, plain nonsense, which we are not in the end to think of as corresponding to an ineffable truth." (TAL, 7-8)

If 'in the totality of what can be said, nothing is ethical' (EIM, 60), it is a mistake to suppose that we can extract Wittgenstein's view of ethics; when we propose a content we surreptitiously smuggle in an 'it' which cannot be said - but the attempt to say an 'it' which is unsayable, to say that things are X only we cannot say so, is incoherent (TAL, 4). The consistent Wittgensteinian, she argues, does not dilute the starkness of Wittgensteins's contrast between the sayable and nonsense, but knows that 'really to grasp that what you were trying to say shows itself in language is to cease to think of it as an inexpressible c o n t e n t: t h a t w h i c h you were trying to say' (TAL, 24). The suggestion that the ethical involves grasping something determinately true of reality even though we cannot say it, that the ethical involves a perspective from which we can see 'something' we cannot put into words - this suggestions suffers the same fate as the philosopher's hope to station ourselves outside our normal practices to determine what 'in reality' justifies them (TAL, 11). What is particularly interesting in Diamond's account is that she is trying to make sense of how Wittgenstein can avoid a distinction between plain nonsense and cognitively significant nonsense without succumbing to the positivist's denigration of what cannot be said. He does this, she proposes, by maintaining the possibility of understabnding t h e p e r s o n who utters the nonsense; although we cannot understand w h a t someone s a y s who attempts to say what 'what cannot be said' shows, we can, Wittgenstein allows, understand s o m e o n e who attemps to say what 'what cannot be said' shows. Highlighting the 'slight oddness' in the way Wittgenstein's conclusion is phrased (anyone who understands m e eventually recognizes them (my propositions) as nonsensical, when he has used them - as steps - to climb up beyond them'), Diamond argues that such an understanding of h i m is just what he hopes we will have on reading the 'Tractatus' (EIM, 57, 64-5).

We understand s o m e o n e, as opposed to what he or she says, when we engage in 'a kind of imaginative activity, an exercise of the capacity to enter into the taking of nonsense for sense, of the capacity to share imaginatively the inclination to think that one is thinking something in it' (EIM, 68). 'If I could not as it were see your nonsense as sense, imaginatively letting myself feel its attractiveness, I could not understand you', she concludes, and this 'is a very particular use of imagination'.

But Wittgenstein, Diamond says, aims at a self-consciousness about such utterances: 'if we understand ourselves, ourselves the utterers of ethical nonsense, we shall not come out with ethical sentences under the illusion that we are talking sense' (EIM, 74)

. Such understanding of oneself is revealed in the self-consciousness about the illusion one is under, but ethical utterances are nonethless valuable in 'their capacity to make us feel that they express the sense we want to make.' Though she does not make us feel that they express the sense we want to make'. Though she does not refer to it, the comment noted earlier from 'Culture and Value' supports her claim concerning Wittgenstein's qualified or cautions appreciation: 'Don't f o r h e a v e n's s a k e, be afraid of talking nonsense! But you must pay attention to your nonsense.' Both philosophical and ethical nonsense 'reflect the attractiveness of the idea of a point of view on the world as a whole, whatever may happen in it', and in both cases understanding the utterer of nonsense involves 'imaginatively entering into the tendency to be attracted by such sentences' (EIM, 74). But in the case of ethical utterances, their attractiveness will not disappear with the self-consciousness Wittgenstein aims at; on the contrary, our self-consciousness is compatible with our continuing desire to use such utterances as long as we frame our utterances so as to distance ourselves from the illusion of sense, frame them with phrases like 'I'm inclined to say ...'. Diamond points to Wittgenstein's 'Lecture on Ethics' as a illustration of just this procedure of framing our ethical utterances; in so doing Wittgenstein makes clear that awareness of the nonsensicality of ethical utterances does not require us to abandon them. Conant makes a similar point about Wittgenstein's tolerance and use of such ufference by reminding us of Wittgenstein's contrast between his own method and the 'strict method' he characterizes: the practitioner of the strict method' does not wish to soil himself by speaking nonsense', while Wittgenstein speaks it in order to elucidate or further our self-understanding (TATL, 362-3). The lecture on ethics to which Diamond refers makes a connection between nonsense and paradox for Wittgenstein. In the face of certain experiences with which some (including Wittgenstein) are acquaintend, we are inclined to want to attribute to them a quality of absoluteness; however, he insists, the 'verbal expression which we give to these experiences is nonsense!': We are, in using such expressions 'misusing language', and this 'characteristic misuse ... runs through a l l ethical and religious expressions'. Wittgenstein makes his point - that 'it is nonsense to say that they [facts] have absolute value' - more 'acute' by formulating it as follows : 'It is a paradox that an experience, a fact, should seem to have supernatural value'. In the end, 'we cannot express what we want to express'.

The lecture is paticularly interesting because while it affirms that 'nonsensicality' is the 'very essence' of ethical expressions, it reveals throughout, and ends with, an explicit avowal of respect for those activities in which we do utter such nonsense. Wittgenstein admits to 'respecting deeply' that 'tendency of the human mind' (indeed, his own tendency) to want 't o g o b e y o n d the world','beyond significant language', in the 'desire to say something about the ultimate meaning of life, the absolute good, the absolute valuable'. His respect implies that we need not abandon such utterance; what those inclinations and tendencies reveal, however, are not ineffable truths about the world 'as a whole', but some truths about what

we humans do. Diamond proposes, then, that we read Wittgenstein as follows. The suggestion that the ethical is a perspective on the world 'as a whole' does not provide content - it must be read framed this the phrase 'I'm inclined to say ...'. Neither in the 'Tractatus' nor the 'Lecture on ethics' is Wittgenstein offering a substantive account of the content of his ethical views, or even of the content of the 'nature of ethics'. He is offering us a discription of the form of ethical utterance and suggesting that the way in which such utterance is significant is not by revealing features of reality which we can grasp but cannot express, but rather by allowing us to understand the person who utters it. That latter possibility is only accessible to imagination:

"if I understand a person who utters nonsense, I enter imaginatively into the seeing of it as sense. I as were become the person who thinks he thinks it. I treat that person's nonsense in imagination as if I took it to be an intelligible sentence of a language I understand, s o m e t h i n g I f i n d i n m y s e l f t h e p o s s i b i l i t y o f m e a n i n g. (EIM, 81)

James Conant makes a similar case against the practice of reading into Wittgenstein's discussion of nonsense the 'possibility of intelligent nonsense', for Wittgenstein helps us to see that 'the idea that nonsensical sentences can embody a content comes apart'; throwing away the ladder means 'completely relinquishing the idea of an "it" that cannot be put into words but can still show itself' (TATL, 339-41). The ultimate temptation on the part of commentators is to find in the 'Tractatus'a doctrine after all - only it is one that cannot be directly communicated' (TATL, 343). The etical point of the book, Conant concludes, is not a doctrine about the nature of ethics or the mystical; rather, the book is an exercise of the ethical activity of helping someone to achieve clarity (TATL, 352-3). The view which Conant rejects here is the view that 'showing' is a form of non-direct communication of truths. This will be crucial as we look later at the various positions espoused by Kierkegaard concerning 'indirect communication' and doctrine. For now, however, it is important to note that Conant implies that the view there is 'a doctrine after all - only it is one that cannot be directly communicated' falls prey to the problem of talking about an 'incontastable truth' which is inexpressible. This is, by the way, the same problem Hume noted when he ridiculed the emptiness of a religious claim that something could be 'perfect but incomprehensible' or an 'adorable mysteriousness'. Attention to this theme of 'empty saying' pervades Wittgenstein's writings, including the later ones. The emphasis on 'use' and special circumstances implies that sometimes 'what looked like a paradox no longer seems one',*8* but it also implies the emptiness of particular attempts to mean something in the absence of appropriate connections or 'applications' or the ability to 'work' from them.*9*

The later writings continue to stress the problematical character of utterance which, however much we might want to mean something cognitively significant by them, 'only seem to make sense'.*10*

III. 'NONSENSE' AND RELIGION

The attempt to make room for 'deep' (cognitively significant or revelatory) nonsense, which has informed many readings of the 'Tractatus', has also been part of the agenda of some who try to save religious belief from the positivist challange to its cognitive status. Wittgenstein's repeated coupling of the ethical, the mystical and the religous suggests that the 'austere' view of nonsense and paradox can plausibly be brought to bear on accounts of religous utterance (including his own account). Given Kierkegaard's repeated references to distinctions within the category of the absurd (which can account for the putportedly 'widespread consensus of the scholarly community that Kierkegaard is the apologist par exellence for the possibility of some category of higher nonsense' - MSW, 261), it will be useful to reconsider Kierkegaard's account (s) of the religious in the light of the austere view of nonsense and showing. Trying to see if Wittgenstein was right in attributing to Kierkegaard a position like his own, we will discover three different opinions in Kierkegaard's writings on the 'communication of the religious' and the status of doctrine, options which shed light on the religious employment of language.

One way of trying to make sense of distinctions within the absurd is through a concept of 'indirect communication', and some commentators have suggested that there is an affinity or congeniality between Kierkegaard's concept of 'indirect communication' and Wittgenstein's concept of 'showing'. That parallel can, however (as we say), be read austerely as well as non austerely. Diamond and Conant argue that Wittgenstein's notion of 'showing' does not mean that doctrines or truths are indirectly communicated , so it is appropriate to ask what Kierkegaardian concepts of 'indirect comminication' and 'communication of the religious' involve; what does one learn indirectly?

(a) T h r e e O p t i o n s

Assuming the austere Tractarian view of nonsense and showing, the question can be approached from either of two directions. We can ask (A) whether the prima facie similarity between the respective accounts of showing and indirect communication alerts us to textual warrant for seeing Kierkegaard's account of paradox and indirect communication more austerely, or we can ask (B) wheter there is warrant for saying that Kierkegaard's concept of indirect communication is different from, less austere than, the Tractarian view of showing. Consider (B) first. As we look for differences between Kierkegaard's position and the austere Tractarian view, two separate positions emerge on the communication of truths. The first position (1) is that doctrine or religious truth can be communicated unproblematically; the second (2) is that such communication is problematical. The suggestion that doctrines are unproblematically communicable (position 1) is found in the following sort of comment:

"The difficulty of my task is that I do indeed say: On the whole, the doctrine as it is taught is entirely sound. Consequently, that is not what I am contending for. My contention is that something should be done with it."*11*

These emphases on the soundness of the doctrine and the consequent practice imply that religious language is cognitively meaningful. When this and other such passages,*12* which give no hint of any difficulty concerning the cognitive significance or direct communication of religious truths, are ignored, the label 'non-cognitive' is applied to Kierkegaard too easily and, at the very least, too early. The limits or problematical character of such direct communication is suggested, however, in much else that we find in Kierkegaard's writings.

His retrospective 'Point of View for my Work as an Author' is a paradigm (although not unambiguous) example of the suggestion: 'communication of the religious', he writes, must be done 'indirectly', 'by indirect means', to one who, while living in 'categories foreign to Christianity', is under the illusion that he or she is Christian.*13* The authorial task involves 'duplicity' or 'deceit'; one must 'deceive a person for the truth's sake ... deceive a person into the truth' (39). 'Direct communication', he writes, 'means to communicate the truth directly', but this is not possible to one who is under the 'monstrous illusion' that she understands a given category without living in it or who thinks he means something by using religious terms but has no place in his life for the connections which give those terms meaning; in contrast, 'communication in terms of reflection means to beguile a person into the truth' (144).

What is the truth into which the one in illusion is brought? What does indirect communication consist in ? Although in principle direct communication is possible if the receiver is an 'empty vessel' or 'pure receptivity', Kierkegaard insists om 'the fact that the situation is Christendom (146n. 42) - that is, we are not empty vessels because we have at all at least heard about religion and assume we know what it means whether we accept it or not. Direct communication would seem, therefore, always to be out of place - yet after contrasting direct communication with communication which beguiles someone into the truth, he writes that since the aim is to attain 'siplicity', 'the communication must, sooner or later, end in direct communication'(144). He claims that the works that bear his name are 'direct religious communication', rather than his hints of such which had appeared in the pseudonymous writings (145-6). Moreover, the 'essentially religious author' affirms that 'he is right and it is the truth he utters' (59) and wants to present Christianity 'in its true form' (77); although he does not say he is an Christian, he does say 'I know what Christianity is' (153). All of this suggests that the indirection might be merely transitional or instrumental, rather than something true in principle about communication of the religious.

This same suggestion is also present when we are told the

following sorts of things: that to 'deceive' 'means that one does not begin d i r e c t l y with the matter one wants to communicate, but begins by ...' (40); that the deceit is a 'teleological suspension in relation to the communication of truth' in which we 'suppress something f o r t h e t i m e b e i n g' (91, emphasis mine); that dispelling illusion is like 'bringing to light by the application of a caustic fluid a text which is hidden under another text' (40).

Such phrases suggest that indirect communication is the indirect conveyal of truths which can be put - in the end - directly; they suggest that we end up with the same 'product', so to speak, even if we get there in differnt ways. Such a view of indirect communication as equal to an i n d i r e c t s a y i n g in one way of understanding the contrast between the 'what' and the 'how'. (The first option separated the What and the How, so that one follows the other, as practice follows doctrine; this one separates them by making the How seem to be a way of imparting the What which is still extrinsic to it.) It is implied in his avowal: 'My thesis is not that the substance of what is proclaimed in Christendom as Christianity is not Christianity. No, my thesis is that the p r o c l a m a t i o n is not Christianity. I am fighting about a h o w ... . '*14* The second possibility which emerges, then, is (2) that of indirect communication s indirect saying - the doctrines is 'sound' but must be communicated indirectly; however paradoxical the truths of Christianity are, they can ultimately or in principle be communicated directly. This view, moreover, fits well with the claim that the understanding is not 'annihilated' and that it can distinguish the Christian absurd, a higher absurdity - as in the claim that 'not every absurdity is the absurd or the paradox'.*15* Conant charges that however much notice commentators may take of the qualification 'indirect', they nevertheless almost invariably end up treating what is put forth as indirect communication as if it were put forth as direct. The combination of the above elements of Kierkegaard's writing might account for this, since they do give some support to a view of indirect communication which amounts to a s a y i n g which is achieved indirectly. As such, this view of indirect communication is distinguished from an austere Wittgensteinian view of showing. Conant suggests that position (2) is unstable (MWS, 262). He argues that when indirect communications are treated as if they were direct communications achieved indirectly, we need to ask what positive truth is grasped, through indirect means. W h a t is shown? If a determinate truth is shown, the position ultimately reduces to the first position - the indirection would be a mode of achieving what could in principle be achieved in another more direct way. If not, what can be made manifest through language which is admittedly not saying anything - certainly not an 'it' with any content. We either fall back into holding (1) or are pressed toward a third view, an austere view of indirect communication. The earlier discussion of Wittgenstein showed the tendency of writers to collapse showing into a kind of indirect saying - namely, the showing of a determinate 'it'. The same problem arises with respect to the contrast between direct and indirect communication - namely, the difficulty of distinguishing a kind of indirect communication

which differs from the indirect communication of a determinate 'it'. Conant offers the following contrast as the only one which sufficiently sets off indirect communication, precluding its collapse into direct communication.: 'A direct communication says something. A noncommunication says nothing.

An indirect communication wishes to show that something that appears to be a communication is actually a noncommunication' (MWS, 272). The category of indirect communication, on his account, is properly understood not as a mode (i.e. indirect) of achieving a determinate result, but rather as a radical qualification of communication. The suggestion that indirect communication is actually a kind of non-communication might seem implausible, reducing it simly to the category of non-communication and eliminating what should be a distinct third category. But Conant makes it plausible by reference to the notion of 'revocation': an indirect communication can be, for Climacus at least, a revoked communication, a special sort of non-communication which differs from a simple noncommunication in much the same way as he says a book written and revoked differs from a book not written at all.*16*

Is there warrant for claiming that Kierkegaard's view of paradox implies an austere account of indirect communication which parallels an austere account of showing. The contrast between direct and indirect communication (what can be said and what cannot be said) would appear in such a case as the contrast between saying and nonsense. Direct communication would imply meaningful language in the form of propositional truths or doctrine. Indirect communication, however, would not be the indirect-communication of such a doctrine or truths. It would not be an indirect saying, but rather, a special sort of non-communication - a revoked communication, a communication which says nothing through attempting to say something; this constitutes the third possibility reconstructible in Kierkegaard's writings concerning the status of doctrine and communication.

This third position (3) pushes the notion of indirect communication and paradox to its limit; it suggests that religious language is ultimately and radically paradoxial. It takes seriously Kierkegaard's claim that attempts to speak of what lies 'outside the world' are expressions of the absurd - takes seriously, that is, our inability to take a perspective from 'outside the world'. On this austere view Kierkegaard is not putting forth d o c t r i n e indirectly - he is not putting forth doctrine at all; or more precisely, he is seeming to put forth but revokes it. With consistency, he qualifies everything he has written: 'Without this little book ['My Activity as a Writer'] the whole authorship would be turned into new doctrine'.*17* His task, he had insisted in the 'Point of View' was 'to oppose a given factor wrongly promulgated - so it is not to promulgate something on my own account' (137). What holds for metalevel doctrines about what religion is holds for theological doctrine. Religious faith, in parallel fashion, does not involve cognitively significant d o c t r i n e which is communicated, or communicates, indirectly - what is communicated indirectly is

that there is no such doctrine which can be communicated (even indirectly). Dispelling illusion would not be the correction of misinformation, replacing incorrect propositional claims with correct ones; it would not be a case of getting 'it' right rather than wrong. It would be, rather, a removal of misunderstanding which isists on the absurd, the paradoxical, as nonsense; it would communicate that there is no 'it' to communicate.

Position (2) is an ingredient in claims that the understanding can distinguish between kinds of absurdity, but I suggest that if they are reexamined in context they push us toward position (3). Kierkegaard writes that 'not every absurdity is the absurd or the paradox', but he immediately continues, 'The activity of reason is to distinguish the paradox negatively - but no more'. He says 'it is nothing but superficiality to think ... that all sorts of absurdities are equally at home in the absurd', but he immediately continues, 'No, the concept of the absurd is precisely to grasp the fact that it cannot and must not be grasped'. When he then writes that the absurd or the paradox is not 'nonsense', he is either appreciatively allowing that it should not be abandoned or distinguishing it from logical contradiction, but this does not mitigate the fact that it simply 'cannot be understood'. What do we learn positively when we learn that we cannot comprehend the paradox-nothing positive, for it is a 'negative concept', a concept found at all 'boundaries' of reason.*18* The comprehension gained is achieved, after all, when the understanding 'tie[s] knots' which had seemed to be untied or able to be untied: this is only fitting, since 'the absurd is the expression of despair':*19* The apparent positive potential of the paradox given with the one hand is undermined by the other.

Even the phrase, 'When the believer has faith, the absurd is not the absurd', is followed by the contrasting conclusion that 'thrue faith breathes healthily and blessedly in the absurd'.*20* This enterprise in the 'Journals' parallels what Conant and others claim is going on in the 'Postscript'. Henry E. Allison suggested twenty-five years ago that insofar as Climacus presents t h e o r e t i c a l proposals and c o n c e p t u a l i z a t i o n s of doctrines or thesis about subjectivity, his position undermines itself and so should be seen as an attempt to 'prevent [the reader] from theorizing, even in an "existential" sense about Christianity'.*21* The thesis that we can use the understanding to distinguish the Absolute Paradox from 'garden variety nonsense' fails when taken a s a t h e s i s. Conant echoes this reading, arguing that 'The humor of Climacus doctrine is that it gradually subverts any possible hope for a ground upon which the integrity of a distinction between the absurdity of the paradox and mere nonsense could be drawn' (MWS, 261).

One strategy in this subversive activity is Climacus's polemic against a 'higher understanding'. This polemic is addressed to those who want to accept the religious paradox with ist 'martyrdom' and crucifixion of the understanding', who 'modestly' forego understanding. yet want 'something far higher - a higher understanding'.*22* He notes that

> "the same thing happens with faith's crucifixion of the

understanding as with many ethical qualifications. A person renounces vanity - but he wants to be admired because he does it. A person relinquishes, as he says, the understanding in order to believe - but then he asquires a higher understanding."

'But', he continues, 'a higher understanding, is still, of course, also an understanding.'*23* The tactic of 'defend[ing] oneself against every charge with the observation that it is a higher understanding',*24* which he ridicules, is precisely the tactic of pointing defensively to what one can grasp but cannot express. Position (2) breaks down when one realizes how this polemic negates the attempt to distinguish between varieties of the absurd.

Another subversion strategy is found in the way Climacus's polemic against 'direct communication' is a polemic against 'results'.*25* Position (2) breaks down when one recognizes that what is inadequate about 'results' remains even if they are imparted directly.

There is a result - but of another kind. Introducing his 'new conception of communication' - namely, 'indirect communication' or the 'communication of capability' - Kierkegaard insists that 'Its end result is to be able. But it is not knowledge which is communicated'.*26* It is neither knowledge nor claims to knowledge nor doctrinal formulations of any kind. The communication is that there is no 'doctrine' to be communicated.

The repeated contrast between 'communication of knowledge' and 'communication of capability' subverts the apparent proposal of thesis or doctrines - and this applies to philosophical and religious doctrines equally. The turn away from theory, found in both Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein, radically qualifies the possibility of speaking about the reality of religious address.

(b) THE CONSEQUENCES

What is the status of religious language if we take an austere view of what is shown, if we give up the attempt to make a distinction between kinds of absurdity. In Wittgenstein's case the early conclusion that 'nothing turns on whether the words are true, false, or nonsensical'*27' is carried on in his later fascination with the pecularity of many of our utterances, including religious ones. His later conclusion is, however, as we saw earlier, equally radical: many utterances 'only seem to make sense, because they are arranged on the analogy of significant expressions'.

In Kierkegaard's case the doctrines are simply paradoxical - revelation is a mystery. Let me make two - admittedly sketchy - suggestions about what such a view leaves us.

At the very least, the austere view need not involve the positivist denigration of what cannot be 'said'. Wittgenstein reveals the possibility of understanding the utterer of nonsense - what Diamond calls recognizing 'something I find in myself the

possebility of meaning' (EIM, 81) and what Conant calls making the 'impulse' behind it 'intelligible to oneself' (KWN, 25). Wittgenstein's 'Remarks on Frazer's G o l d e n B o u g h' develop this in detail. Kierkegaard too reveals an awareness of the importance of this distinction between the speaker and what he says when Vigilius Haufniensis writes that 'to understand a speech is one thing, and to understand what it refers to, namely the person, is something else'.*28* The first rationale for indirection (counter-acting illusion) introduces a new concept of 'reflection'*29* which contributes to this view by suggesting a way in which paradox can be taken austerely yet 'mean' something. 'Reflection' is a practical not a theoretical activity: we need to reflect ourselves - or, better, be reflected - out of a particular stance. Reflection here is a kind of reflexiveness; the imagery suggests a case of bouncing back or off of illusion in the way one is reflected off aluminium foil. Along these lines an utterance can be said to mean something, though it is admitted to lack determinate cognitive sense, if it reflects one back to oneself in an illuminating or elucidatory way.

The second rationale for the indirection of communication of the religious is also antitheoretical and a practical re-orientation (to acquire new skills, 'to be able') rather than the reception of information.

This appreciative understanding of the speaker distinguishes the austere view from that which rejects religious language, but the austere view also reveals an understanding of religious utterances as grammatical remarks, meaningful as rules of linguistic usage. Wittgenstein points to 'Theology as grammar' when he writes that 'Grammar tells us what kind of object anything is' and that 'The way you use the word "God" dos not show w h o m you mean - but rather what you mean'.*30* He illustrates: 'God's essence is supposed to guarantee his existence - but what this really means is that what is here at issue is not the existence of something'.*31*

Grammatical remarks are rules for use; they are neither empirical conclusions nor attemps to offer a perspective from 'outside the world'.

Some of Kierkegaard's claims - e.g. about 'revelation' - have been interpreted this way. His repeated appeal to 'category' seems to fit this reading. Moreover, certain of his remarks about God seem very like grammatical remarks, e.g. 'God himself is this: h o w one involves oneself with Him ... . In respect to God, the h o w i s w h a t'.*32* Anti-Climacus offers another: 'God is this - that everything is possible'; the being of God maens that everything is possible, or everything is possible means the being of God'.*33* This latter remark could also be said to parallel some of the examples Wittgenstein uses in the 'Lectures on Ethics'. There the austere view plays itself out in the contrast between what we want to express and what can be expressed: just as we want to speak about 'absolute' safety or 'absolute' wonder, so too we want to speak about 'absolute' possibility - that everything is possible'. Such claims seem to

take a perspective on the world from 'a point outside the world' - but since that point is 'the absurd', such language either elucidates ourselves or serves as a rule for speaking about a religious reality.

To those familiar with the common charge that Kierkegaaard is an irrationalist, my reading may appear naive. The charge of irrationalism, however, is most often seen as coexistensive with the charge that Kierkegaard is a 'foe of reason'; like others, I deny that Kierkegaard is a 'foe on reason', while allowing, as they do, that when we try to understand the experience, the reality 'ties us in a conceptual knot' and 'we find ourselves saying self-contractory things'.*34* Where I differ is in drawing the conclusion that, if this is so, religious language is irreducibly paradoxial; I draw out the way in which such a view is of a piece with Wittgenstein's view of ethical and religious paardox without being either a crude positivism or irrationalism.

Both Wittgenstein and Kierkegaad sensitize us to the error of imposing an alien grammar on religion, but they also sensitize us to the limits of the religious doctrinal language. When we say that God's essence equals existence, that 'means', Wittgenstein tells us, that we are not talking about 'the existence of something'. It is uncontroversial for religious believers that God cannot be spoken of as one thing among many, or in the way anything else is spoken of - but the implications of this 'qualitative difference' for Kierkegaard are not always drawn. We want to speak of what is not 'some thing', not 'a being' - but the impulse to do so can no more be successful than it can be silenced. The need to provide criteria for use undermines the kind of 'a' being, or into saying things like 'God himself is this: h o w one involves oneself with Him'. For Kierkegaard, the 'Christian language' is different from all human language', even though it 'uses the same words we men use';*35* the peculiarity of religious language intrigues him as much as it does Wittgenstein.

When it does not appear naive or obvious (i.e. to those who see him as defending a 'higher understanding'), the claim that for Kierkegaard such language is irreducibly paradoxial, precluding a 'higher understanding', may appear irreligiously radical (or radically irreligious), but it is perhaps in the end not much different from the way Aquinas, after much detailing of the possibilities of analogy, ended up affirming that we cannot know h o w our words apply to God : 'we do not know of God what he is' and revelation 'joins us to God as to an unknown'.*36*

NOTES

1 Friedrich Waismann , 'Notes on Talks with Wittgenstein', The Philosophical Review (1965), pp. 12-13.

2 Letter to von Ficker (undated), 'Letters to Ludwig von Ficker', Wittgenstein: Sources and Perspectives, ed. C. G. Luckhardt (Hassocks, Sussex, 1979), pp. 94-5.

3 Soren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers, Vol. 3, eds. Howard & Edna H. Hong (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1975), X2 A 529, n.d., 1850, p. 236 (hereafter Journals).

4 'A lecture on Ethics', Philosophical Review, 1965.

5 Culture and Value, ed. G.H.von Wright, tr. Peter Winch (Oxford 1980), p. 56.

6 Diamond, 'Throwing Away the Ladder', Philosophy, LXIII (1988), pp. 5-27 [hereafter TAL], and 'Ethics, Imagination and the Method of Wittgenstein's Tractatus', in Wiener Reihe: Themen der Philosophie, Band 5, eds. Richard Heinrich & Helmuth Vetter (Vienna: R. Oldenburg Verlag; 1990), pp.55-90 [hereafter EIM]; Conant, 'Throwing Away the Top of the Ladder', The Yale Review, LXXIX (1990), pp. 328-64 [hereafter TATL], 'Must We Show What We Cannot Say', in The Senses of Stanley Cavell, ed. Richard Fleming & Michael Payne (Lewisburg, 1989) [hereafter MWS], 'Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein and Nonsense', forthcoming in Pursuits of Reason, eds. Cohen, Guyer & Putnam [hereafter KWN].

7 Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion, ed. Richard H. Popkin (Indianapolis, 1980), p. 26, p.17.

8 Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics, sect. VI-43.

9 Zettel, eds. G.E.M. Anscombe & G.H. von Wright, tr. G.E.M.Anscombe (Berkeley, CA, 1976), nos. 274, 275.

10 Zettel, no. 260.

11 Journals, Vol.6, X3 A 635,n.d. 1850, p. 362.

12 Journals, X3 A 19, n.d., 1849, Vol. 1,p.315; XI2 A 51 n.d., 1854, Vol. 3,p.414.

13 The Point of View for My Work as an Author: A Report to History, tr. Walter Lowrie, ed. Benjamin Nelson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962); pp. 22, 25,32,37,41;33,24.

14 Jornals, Vol.3, X3 A 431, n.d., 1850.

15 Philosophical Fragments, Kierkegaard's Writings, VII, eds. and trs. Howard V. Hong & Edna H. Hong (Princeton: 1985), p. 48; Journals, Vol. I, X2 A 354, n.d. 1850, p. 4)

16 Concluding Unscientific Postscript, Kierkegaard's Writings, XII, eds. and trs. Howard V. Hong & Edna H. Hong ([Princeton, 1992], pp. 619, 621); Conant refers to this in KWN, pp. 3-8.

17 Journals, Vol.6, X4 A 383, n.d. 1851, p. 427.

18 Journals, Vol. 1, X2 A 364, n.d. 1850, pp. 4-5.

19 Journals, Vol.3, IX A 248, pp. 715-16; Vol. 1, X6 B 78, n.d. 1850, p. 6.

20 Journals, Vol. 1, X6 B 79, n.d. 1850, p. 7.

21 'Christianity and Nonsense', The Review of Metaphysics, XX (March 1967), p. 433.

22 Concluding Unscientific Postscript, pp. 564, 567, 561-2.

23 Ibid. pp. 564-5

24 Ibid. p. 568.

26 Journals, Vol. 1, VIII2 B 81, n.d. 1847, p. 272; VIII2 B 85, n.d. 1847, p. 284.

27 Waismann, 'Notes on Talks with Wittgenstein', p. 16.

28 The Concept of Anxiety, ed. and tr. Raidar Thomte (Princeton, 1980), p. 142.

29 Point of View, esp. pp. 38-43.

30 Philosophical Investigations, no. 373; Culture and Value, p. 50.

31 Culture and Value, p. 82.

32 Journals, Vol. 2, X2 A 644, n.d. 1850, p. 123.

33 The Sickness Unto Death, Kierkegaard's Writings, XIX, ed. and tr. Howard V. Hong & Edna V. Hong (Princeton, 1980), p. 40.

34 C. Stephan Evans, 'Is Kierkegaard An Irrationalist?', Religious Studies, XV (1989), 353.

35 Journals, Vol. 3, XI2 A 37, n.d. 1854, p. 11.

36 Summa Theologiae, 1a, Qu. 12, a. 8 and a. 13.