The Existential Grammar of the Good News: 
Truth, Epistemology and Encounter

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Abstract

When a Christian notion of truth is understood as *a life*, rather than a fact, idea, or tenet of doctrine, the tools for delineation, or the grammar, must be revised. Existential philosophy assists in the development of a revised grammar by restoring to the concept of truth, the fact of existing. Drawing upon the writings of Ludwig Wittgenstein, Gabriel Marcel, and Søren Kierkegaard, an epistemological framework is developed that responds and reveals the fundamentally *incarnate* character of a Christian notion of truth.
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I dedicate this work to the greater glory of God.
Preface

The need for emphasizing the personal, experiential reality of Christian faith within a culture variably described as Christian, Secular, Post-Modern and Post-Christian is clearly evident. Given the popular distrust of institutional authority and the enshrinement of individual freedom, the relevance of the Good News will be heard most persuasively when it is heard personally, experientially, existentially. This movement is taking a variety of forms, including a renewed interest in Christian meditation and the wisdom of the Desert Fathers, a focus upon Christian spirituality and, within the Catholic tradition, an ongoing debate over the primacy of conscience. The hunger to engage with the realm beyond the facts, to that which exceeds the descriptive scope of doctrine and teaching, invites a revision of the scope and expectations of theological inquiry. Where previously the authority of Church Teaching could serve to provide the definitive or sufficient structure for a Christian way of life, post-institutional Western culture requires that the experiential realm of faith become a necessary feature of theological discourse. However, if theology is to be of service in the personal and experiential realm of Christian faith, that is to say, if theology can speak meaningfully of this domain, questions of theological method must be asked. To this end, an existential approach will prove most fruitful, for it generates the possibility that intellectual rigor and philosophical reflection can be meaningfully brought to bear on fundamental aspects of individual, subjective existence.

In terms of formal academic disciplines, this thesis draws from both philosophy and theology, though its ultimate concern is theological. If it must be located, this thesis belongs within the stream of Philosophical Theology. While the claims are fundamentally Christian and explicitly theological, the discussion draws from writers of philosophy, two of whom are explicitly Christian and one ambivalently religious. Wittgenstein, though in no way a theologian, famously remarked, “I am not a religious man: but I cannot help seeing every problem from a religious point of view”.\(^1\) While I have drawn from an existential mode of philosophy that is often superficially assumed to be atheistic, the

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philosophical problems underlying existential philosophy are shown to possess an acute relevance to questions of christology and contemporary Christian discipleship. Though distinctive from popularised forms of twentieth-century French existentialism, the conjoining of existential philosophy and Christology is in perfect harmony with the thought of the so-called ‘Grandfather of Existentialism’, Søren Kierkegaard.
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Introduction

This thesis seeks to elaborate upon the central conviction of Christian faith – that God became human – and to consider the epistemological implications that follow when this claim is understood as defining a Christian notion of ‘truth’. To this end the discussion draws upon the writings of Ludwig Wittgenstein and Gabriel Marcel, while anchoring the exploration in the key works of Søren Kierkegaard, who was deeply concerned with the condition of individual existence and the demands of Christian faith. Drawing from these sources, I have attempted to develop a suitable methodology for speaking intelligently, critically and authentically of a Christian notion of truth.

The theological necessity of speaking through analogy brings into discussion a reflection upon the function of criticism in aesthetic judgments. This provides the essential framework for discussing the epistemological issues that arise when speaking of a christologically grounded notion of truth. Consistent with the application of ‘existentialism’ within this discussion, the meaning of *epistemology* is taken in its most basic or etymological sense: as the study of the nature and grounds of knowledge, especially regarding its validity and limits. Similarly, the use of the term *ontology* in this discussion does not refer to any particular theory of ontology but simply to the dimension of being or essence. With some unavoidable awkwardness, ‘a christologically grounded notion of truth’, and ‘a Christian notion of truth’ both refer to the scriptural claim that Jesus is ‘the truth’, which is consistent with the understanding adopted by Kierkegaard in his major works. These various modes of reference thus refer to a notion of truth that can be located in, and defined by, the Incarnation of God in the person of Jesus Christ.

A chapter overview reveals this thesis as consisting of three parts. Part One consists of three chapters, the first of which seeks to develop a provisional and coherent notion of existential philosophy. Through a brief survey of the existential mode of philosophy, within and beyond so-called schools of existentialism, from the pre-Socratics to Kierkegaard, a variety of related themes emerge. Here it is argued that within existential thought the primary significance of the existing individual and the philosophical validity
of subjective and experiential knowledge must be affirmed. Chapter Two investigates the scope of philosophy to respond adequately to the experiential aspects of human existence and experience, by way of Ludwig Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. While Wittgenstein (in his early period) rejects philosophy as a suitable discourse for reflecting upon and responding to questions of existential significance, he does suggest that ‘the mystical’ domain of existence can find expression, and to a degree be delineated, through the practices of aesthetics, ethics and religious commitment.

The expression of individual subjective experience within an outward structure (i.e. aesthetics, ethics and religious belief) is further explored through reference to Gabriel Marcel’s notion of inter-subjective truth in Chapter Three. Part One concludes by arguing that the notion of truth is not compromised, but rather revealed most fully in its existential context, and that this mode of expression may be described as *incarnate*.

Part Two, which comprises two chapters, explores the notion of subjective truth in the context of Christian philosophy, drawing upon Kierkegaard’s major works. Chapter Four proposes a christological notion of truth in which its supreme expression is found in the Incarnation of God in the person of Jesus Christ. This claim represents a notion of truth that exceeds the limits of rational analysis and objective designation, and yet cannot be reduced to mere subjectivism. While a christological notion of truth upholds the importance of subjective apprehension, it cannot be reduced to this. This concept of truth challenges rationalistic assumptions that ‘truth’ is synonymous with the verifiable truth of the natural sciences. In this refusal to be reduced to the category of psychosocial feeling and private emotion on the one hand, or raised into abstraction and objectivity on the other, the utter uniqueness of the Incarnation is revealed. Chapter Five introduces Kierkegaard’s dual notion of *Christ as Absolute Paradox* and *Contemporaneity with Christ*, to reveal the fundamental importance and intellectual legitimacy of authentic subjective experience in any critical and rational discussion of Christian truth. It is argued that a christological notion of truth requires a fundamentally different epistemology from that of the natural sciences. Such an epistemology will not reject the tools of argument, evidence, criteria and persuasion; will not, in other words, propose an apophatic theology.
Rather, this existentially grounded epistemology will utilise the tools of rational analysis to the end of facilitating and clarifying subjective experience, and will generate a style of argument that must rely for its ultimate persuasive force on each individual’s experiential encounter. However, the epistemological implications of this are far-reaching, for if the application of criticism is to this end – personal encounter – the scope, expectations, and very meaning of terms such as ‘evidence’, ‘analysis’ and ‘criteria’ must be revised. In this sense, the grammar of the natural sciences, for example, is inappropriate and what is required is a different kind of epistemological grammar altogether.

Part Three begins by proposing an epistemology of encounter which draws upon the language and style of argument applied to form aesthetic judgments. Chapter Six argues that aesthetic criticism offers the most suitable model for revealing the full existential character of a christologically grounded notion of truth. For the purposes of this discussion, the most significant aspect of aesthetic criticism is that it is applied to enable the individual to encounter the work for him or herself. Similarly, if the fundamentally existential character of christological truth is to be maintained, the arguments of theology must be understood as servants of subjective encounter.

Chapter Seven draws together a cluster of ideas that arise from emphasizing the incarnate character of Christian truth. The imperative to encounter entailed by a Christian notion of truth consists also in a demand for the existing individual to appropriate this truth into the concrete existential circumstances of his or her life. Wittgenstein’s idea that in order for the meaning of a linguistic term to be properly revealed it must be accompanied by a relevant form of life is drawn upon to help establish the importance of existential appropriation in a Christian notion of truth. Appropriation, as proposed here, entails that ‘understanding’ Christian truth is always provisional upon embodying Him who is truth in the individual circumstances of one’s life. In other words, the ultimate expression of comprehension is the practice of discipleship.

The thesis concludes that a christological notion of truth requires an epistemology that is neither neglectful of outward criteria nor able to be reduced to such criteria. Within an
epistemology of encounter, where authentic subjective experience provides the framework for understanding, the notion of discipleship becomes the primary category, or condition, for comprehending and explaining Christian truth. This demand arises not from any social, political or ecclesiastical reason, but out of the very meaning of the Incarnation itself.
Part I

Chapter I - A Philosophical Background to Existential Inquiry

“Maybe there ain’t no sin and there ain’t no virtue. There’s just stuff people do. It’s all part of the same thing. And some of the things folks do is nice, and some ain’t nice, but that’s as far as any man got a right to say”. ‘I was layin’ under a tree when I figured that out’ - Jim Casey, ‘the Preacher’, Grapes of Wrath

This genuinely existential utterance never for a moment forgets its situation or forsakes the uncertainty that accompanies the ambiguities of human existence. This, therefore, is where an exploration of the possibilities of existentialism may properly begin: in the Dust Bowls of Oklahoma, in the confused utterance of a single individual, estranged from and yet inextricably bound to the world into which he finds himself thrown. In The Grapes of Wrath, Steinbeck’s fictionalised account of the 1930s exodus of displaced farmers from the Oklahoma Dust Bowls to the promised land of California, the reader is confronted by a depiction of the human condition that is thoroughly existential, and no less because the term ‘existentialism’ is nowhere found.

If an exploration of ‘existential-ism’ were to be sought, presumably one would begin with the emergence of a philosophical and literary movement around the later half of the nineteenth century. However, if it is existential thought, or the existential mode of philosophizing that is the concern, one must begin no later than 500 B.C., in the writings of Heraclitus and Parmenides. Heraclitus writes, ‘To God, all things are beautiful, good and just; but men have assumed some things to be unjust, others just’. The parallel between this statement and Steinbeck’s comment above on moral ambiguity begins to

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reveal the breadth of existential thinking; that under various designations can be found in
the furthest corners of history, for it draws from the deepest recesses of the human heart.  

Here a crucial distinction must be established between existentialism, and existential
thought or an existential orientation. It would be quite reasonable and perfectly accurate
to identify the beginning of existentialism in the writings of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche
and follow this through to its popularised form in Jaspers, Sartre, Heidegger and others. It
is, however, a grave error, at least of naivety, to suppose that the mode of philosophizing
present in the writings of so-called ‘existentialists’ emerged only within and through this
circle of thinkers. To say as much would represent a failure to grasp one of the most
elementary features of existentialism, namely its resistance to all ‘isms’.

Walter Kaufmann attempts to characterise existential-ism in the following terms:

The refusal to belong to any school of thought, the repudiation of the adequacy
of any body of beliefs whatever, and especially of systems, and a marked
dissatisfaction with traditional philosophy as superficial, academic, and remote
from life – that is the heart of existentialism.

While this may be the ‘heart of existentialism’, the question remains, what is the heart of
existential thought? Or, what is the character of an existential orientation? Does it have a
face? What does it look like? How may one recognise it in, for example, the 1930s Dust
Bowls of Oklahoma?

A radical existential position might deny that an adequate response to these questions is
possible; that the particularity of situation is such that any descriptive statement that
attempts to postulate consistent themes is mere abstraction, and even worse, constitutes
an example of the very thing existential thinking seeks to avoid (of course, such a
position must also deny the label ‘existential’ lest it be identified as a member within a
definable class). However, ‘existential thinking’ is not a contradiction in terms as

4 Clearly I am not here suggesting that existential thinking necessarily poses ethical content or even has a
unique relevance to questions of morality. Rather, I am attempting to reveal the scope of existential
thinking as a methodological tool which can be applied to questions of ethics and morality. Such an
application may be recognised in Søren Kierkegaard’s notion of the teleological suspension of the ethical.
thinking is an elemental quality of being human. Rather, it is the attempt to think about existence in a mode that is estranged from existence, to neglect the contingency and thrown-ness of being here and not there, that an existential mode of philosophy seeks to challenge. Reflecting upon fundamental matters of human existence is always defined by the one who thinks the thoughts, as the form of a piece of fine furniture is always defined by the decisions, choices, weaknesses and particularities of the craftsman and his tools. Thus, we can, and should, speak of the character of existential thought, lest the intrinsically existential nature of philosophy be dwarfed by the existential-ism that purports to offer a unified front, and thus end up being a thoroughly un-existential school of thought.

To be clear, however, my aim is not to refute the merit of existential thinking that arises within the framework of Existentialism, but only to show that the one does not necessitate the other; that existential thought can and must be recognised aside from its academic classification: existentialism. This chapter does not seek to chart in anything like its entirety the history of existential thinking but only to provide a brief and general background to existentialism, so as to recognise and elicit something of the flavour of the existential mode of philosophical reflection, apart from the school of thought with which it sits in awkward relation.

Beginning this way, one recognises ‘existentialism’ as a ‘style of philosophizing’, a ‘mood embracing a number of disparate philosophies’. To characterise a mood is to speak in generalities; thus broad categories identified under an existentialist heading are not its weaknesses but ensure a definition that is suitably open-ended. Friedman provides a useful outline when he suggests that the existential mood can best be described as a reaction against the static, the abstract, the purely rational, the merely irrational, in favor of the dynamic and the concrete, personal involvement and “engagement”, action, choice, and commitment, the distinction between “authentic” and “inauthentic” existence, and the actual situation of the existential subject as the starting point of thought.

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Clearly this definition does not state which philosophies are existential and which are not, or the names of the philosophers who have been deemed existentialists by common academic consents. Rather, such a definition provides a map by which one may navigate through the history of Western thought and search for the traces of existentialism that are woven through its many and varied philosophical garments.

**Existential Traces in the Pre-Socratics**

To discover the origin of existential thought one must return, according to Jaspers and Heidegger, to the pre-Socratics, to the ‘axial period’ around 500 B.C.E. and in particular to the writings of Heraclitus and Parmenides.\(^9\) This period represented a profound shift from the mythological to the authentically philosophical,\(^10\) where man becomes conscious of Being as a whole, of himself and his limitations. He experiences the terror of the world and his own powerlessness. He asks radical questions. Face to face with the void he strives for liberation and redemption.\(^11\)

It is this mode of thinking and seeing that Heidegger seeks to renew in his benchmark text, *Being and Time*, which from the outset establishes the ontological (and existential) priority of all philosophical questions.\(^12\) The question of Being is one of the defining characteristics of the existential mode of philosophy and yet one can go back to the ancient thinkers and discover there too an ontological priority, for it is ‘in Parmenides

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\(^{9}\) It ‘is among the pre-Socratic philosophers that Heidegger has found the authentic beginnings of Western philosophizing, and especially the insight into the relation between being and knowing, or between being and thinking, which he attributes to Parmenides and Heraclitus’. Macquarrie, *Existentialism*, 41.

\(^{10}\) The distinction between the mythological and the philosophical, while made by Jaspers in the text below, cannot be asserted uncritically. In contrast, Macquarrie claims, ‘existentialist accounts see in mythology man’s first groping towards an identity; to tell a story of human origins, for example, is to confess a self-understanding’. Although the implication is that ‘self-understanding’ is expressive of an existentialist mode of philosophical inquiry, one could argue that the existentialist mode consists in considerably more than a concern with ‘self-understanding’. It is thus an ambiguous distinction. Macquarrie, *Existentialism*, 35.

\(^{11}\) Karl Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History*, trans. Michael Bullock (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1953), 2. This characterization of the ‘axial period’ describes a general shift only, to which exceptions could easily be found. For example, it appears that this conception of being human does not exist within Homer’s anthropology-cosmology.

\(^{12}\) It is further worth noting that Heidegger is not alone in his reference to the ancient thinkers: ‘it is no accident that existentialists such as Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger and Martin Buber have turned increasingly to Heraclitus to rediscover what they feel to have been lost in the stream of Greek philosophy since Plato’. Friedman, *The Worlds of Existentialism*, 17.
and Heraclitus, according to Heidegger, that we find a way of thinking which remembers to think on being, as contrasted with the thinking which has tended to forget being’.  

Heidegger’s existential concern with the priority of being was not a discovery but a revival; for ‘that which the ancient philosophers found continually disturbing as something obscure and hidden has taken on a clarity and self-evidence such that if anyone continues to ask about it he is charged with an error of method’.  

However, according to Heidegger this apparent clarity and self-evidence has not arisen through reflection and resolution but through neglect of the ontological and existential heart of philosophy.

In what may be recognised as some of the earliest stirrings of philosophical consciousness Heraclitus, around 500 B.C., reflected upon the mysteries of human existence in a mode that would later be broadly termed existential. In an oracular style he delivered a series of pronouncements that hint at fundamentally existential concerns. For example, he discussed powerlessness and limitation: ‘The wisest man will appear an ape in relation to God, both in wisdom and beauty and everything else’; ‘Human nature has no power of understanding; but the divine nature has it’; contingency and flux: ‘It is not possible to step twice into the same river’; finitude and arbitrariness: ‘The fairest universe is but a dust-heap piled up at random’; the limitation of rational inquiry: ‘The lord at Delphi neither speaks nor conceals, but indicates’; and the internality of truth: ‘I searched into myself’.

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15 The existential mood can equally be recognised in Parmenides and the pre-Socratic thinker, Protagoras who wrote ‘Man is the measure of all things: of things that are, that they are; of things that are not, that they are not’. Diane Barsoum Raymond, *Existentialism and the Philosophical Tradition* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1991), 4.
16 Freeman, ed., *Ancilla to the Pre-Socratic Philosophers*, 83.
17 Freeman, ed., *Ancilla to the Pre-Socratic Philosophers*, 78.
18 Freeman, ed., *Ancilla to the Pre-Socratic Philosophers*, 91.
19 Freeman, ed., *Ancilla to the Pre-Socratic Philosophers*, 124.
20 Freeman, ed., *Ancilla to the Pre-Socratic Philosophers*, 93.
21 Freeman, ed., *Ancilla to the Pre-Socratic Philosophers*, 29.
Indeed Heraclitus’ writings could never represent, in their totality, a modern existentialist perspective for his recognition of difference is underpinned by a conviction of the essential unity of the universe. However, fragments of his writings do express an existential mood in its infancy and one which has particular relevance for questions concerning being and existence.

Grappling with the fundamental philosophical problem of the One and the Many (which would later be synthesised in the dualism of Plato), Heraclitus proposes the *logos* in which truth and being are united; in which the rational and the experiential are inextricably bound. In the history of Western thought the term *logos* has appeared in many guises through a variety of philosophies and theologies. However, at its most basic, *logos* can be defined as a Greek term meaning ‘reason, word, speech, discourse, definition, principle, or ratio’. While ‘the function of the term in philosophy has turned largely on the *logos* as ‘reason’, its origin can be traced back to Heraclitus who applied the term to refer to ‘a formative and shaping power’ ‘in the universe’ ‘analogous to the power of reason in man’ whereby ‘man’s soul is part of the objective reason or *logos* of things’.

With characteristic obscurity, Heraclitus writes, ‘though all things come into being in accordance with this Law [logos], men seem as if they have never met with it, when they meet with words (*theories*) and actions (*processes*) such as I expound, separating each thing according to its nature and explaining how it is made’; ‘though men associate with it [logos] most closely, yet they are separated from it, and those things which they encounter daily seem to them strange.’ Here it may be argued that Heraclitus is suggesting the human beings are inclined towards a ‘forgetting of being’, the mistaking

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22 See Freeman, ed., *Ancilla to the Pre-Socratic Philosophers*, 28-30.
24 Reese, *Dictionary of Philosophy and Religion*, 424. Interestingly, this rendering bears a striking resemblance to the understanding of *logos* proposed by the writer of John’s Gospel in the Prologue.
25 Freeman, ed., *Ancilla to the Pre-Socratic Philosophers*, 29.
26 Seidel, *Martin Heidegger and the Pre-Socratics*, 27.
of truth for an idea, and the neglecting of the particularities of the thinker who thinks the thoughts.

The relation between the terms ‘truth’ and ‘being’ is problematic (to say nothing of the meaning of the terms independently!). For example, Macquarrie writes,

existentialism finds itself once more at variance with much of the philosophic tradition. In particular, there is a long tradition that thought and reality is one. It goes back at least to Parmenides: ‘for thinking and being are the same’. The tradition continued to dominate Western philosophy and found perhaps its most systematic expression in Hegel; the real is the rational, it is absolute thought thinking itself.28

The problem, as I see it, is this: Macquarrie, despite claiming that the history of Western thought has been in error in claiming the two (thinking and being) are the same, understands ‘the same’ as ultimately implying a priority of ‘cognitive truth’ or ‘thought’ over ‘being’ or ‘existence’. However, where truth and being are united, as in the thought of Parmenides and Heraclitus, all notions of truth are grounded in the ontological question of being. This position is strongly suggested in Heraclitus’ use of the term logos.

The reintegration of truth and being represents a mode of philosophizing in which thinking and being are recognised as inseparable, where being permeates all thinking, and where truth about existence is never purely cognitive. Where this is the philosophical framework, one may hear echoes of Nietzsche’s claim to the effect that ‘all philosophy is confession’. With a similar concern with the personal, Kierkegaard wrote in his impassioned journal, that ‘the thing is to find a truth which is true for me, to find the idea for which I can live and die’.29

Without entering into a thorough-going analysis of this most multi-layered of terms, for now it is sufficient to note that Heraclitus proposed an understanding of the term logos that was neglected from Plato onwards, but renewed in Heidegger’s analysis of Being.

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28 Macquarrie, Existentialism, 140.
Between these two points the term was applied by the writer of John’s Gospel to express the fundamental identity of Christ; the cornerstone of the Christian confession and creed.

**Plato: Leaving the Cave**

By the time Western philosophy had begun formally in Plato and Aristotle, the priority of Being had been surpassed by metaphysical concerns, and bodily existence had become an inhibitor to intellectual understanding.\(^\text{30}\) The departure from the pre-Socratics in Plato’s thought (as well as from Socrates himself to some degree) can be identified in his famous ‘Analogy of the Cave’, in the seventh book of his *Republic* and his postulation of the World of Forms, with the highest expression being the Form of the Good.\(^\text{31}\) Plato’s World of Forms stands over and against any form of existential reflection, regarding human, bodily, incarnate existence as the veritable source of deception. In its quest for absolute truth, unshackled from contingencies of existence, Plato’s world of Forms wears a face that neither matures nor ages nor flinches.

Plato’s truth, his Form of the Good, stands shining and eternal, universal and immutable, in perfect and untainted glory outside the cave within which human existence is contained (a mere shadow world of the supreme, disembodied reality). In this understanding the human soul is not so much incarnate as it is ensnared within the flesh that ‘intrude[s]…into our investigation, interrupting, disturbing, distracting, and preventing us from getting a glimpse of the truth’.\(^\text{32}\) This statement indicates the spirit of dualism that, to a significant degree, defined the scope and ambitions of Western philosophy for the next 2,500 years.\(^\text{33}\)

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\(^\text{30}\) Attributing a metaphysical priority to both Plato and Aristotle does not suggest parallel positions but merely an overlap. Within this discussion, both these philosophers represent a departure from the pre-Socratic style of philosophizing in terms of a de-emphasis upon the ontological and existential dimension of all philosophical reflection. A discussion of the unique character of Socratic philosophy has been deferred until Chapter V of this thesis, which explores SK’s closely related notion of truth.


Heidegger’s response, in the middle part of the twentieth century, attacked the disjunction that occurred between truth and being, idea and existence, claiming that ‘Plato and Aristotle represent…a degeneration and falsification of a truer and more original and more authentic tradition’ of the pre-Socratics.\(^{34}\) Under the sway of Platonic thinking ‘the room made for truth as unconcealedness caved in, and all that could be salvaged from out of the ruins was Idea, statement, et cetera …’.\(^{35}\)

Although Plato’s contribution to Western philosophy could be argued to represent a ‘forgetting of being’ in the quest for objective truth, his analogy of the cave, re-read with a focus upon that which lies within the cave may reveal hidden possibilities for clarifying the character of existential philosophy. In the style of Heraclitus’ thought, one must recognise that the Platonic Cave and the sun that generates the shadows of our existence does not, in itself, necessarily determine the place of truth.\(^{36}\) Thus I would argue it is Plato’s cave itself that provides, when inverted, one of the most compelling and illuminating images of the existential mode of philosophizing.

For the existential thinker, truth is not outside of the cave, not in direct and unmediated apprehension of ‘the light’, but in the midst of shadowy ambiguity, where nothing is certain and everything could be otherwise. For the existential thinker, ‘the real beginning of any genuine illumination is the realization that the allegorical sun amounts to no more than a cold, glittering phantom’.\(^{37}\) In this way the method prescribed by Plato in the Allegory of the Cave provides a mirror image (rather than a replica) of the general approach encouraged by later existential writers. In both modes of philosophizing the quest is for the authentic and the real, both seek liberation from deception and delusion, and, analogously speaking, both consist in a willing agent who seeks truth through

\(^{34}\) Seidel, *Martin Heidegger and the Pre-Socratics*, 43.

\(^{35}\) Seidel, *Martin Heidegger and the Pre-Socratics*, 43.

\(^{36}\) Heraclitus writes ‘The way up and the way down is one and the same’. One response to this statement may be that it is at once true and misleading. However, such a statement can assist in expanding the possibilities of Plato’s cave whilst still allowing the cave to remain Plato’s. Heraclitus in Freeman, ed., *Ancilla to the Pre-Socratic Philosophers*, 29.

decision and action. Therefore, the existential mode of philosophy should be understood as a ‘redirection rather than an utter dismissal of Platonic teaching’.  

In Plato’s Cave, the significance of the pure light, this supreme truth, creates the very shadows that constitute worldly existence. Though the existential thinkers seek their truth in the world of shadows, were it not for the fire that casts its rays into the cave, ‘far above and behind them’, there would be no shadows. Therefore one is left, either way, with the necessity of a light, a permanent and universal source that generates the shadows and the associated questions of authenticity. And yet, when the direct apprehension of this light is sought it manifests as pure idea, as a ‘cold glittering phantom’. With an existential orientation it would seem that, like Moses, one must turn one’s face from the alien and unfathomable Platonic god and content oneself with the shadows if one is, paradoxically, to encounter the truth.

This discussion is suggesting that existential philosophising is a method that is applied in the concrete and ambiguous circumstances of existence. Whilst sharing with Plato a quest for the real and the authentic, the existential way rejects the certainty, and the desire for certainty, that attends the traditional understanding of Plato’s analogy of the cave. Rather than seeking direct apprehension of the light itself, the existential mode conducts its inquiry whilst chained and bound within the cave, in the midst of shadows where each ‘individual has manifold shadows, all of which resemble him, and from time to time have equal claim to be the man himself’. Adrift in this possibility, where the ambiguity and dynamism of the shadows are revealed to be dependent upon the presence of ‘a light’, and where Heraclitus’ and Parmenides’ treatment of truth and being stand together, the discussion now turns to St. Augustine.

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38 Gill and Sherman, ed. The Fabric of Existentialism, 77.
41 This reading of Plato’s cave could be understood as analogous to a Christian salvific cosmology in terms of an unseen God revealed in Christ: ‘No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known’. John 1:18 (NRSV). Thus humanity has been reconciled to God through Christ because he ‘pitched his tent among us’.
Writing during the later half of the fourth century, Augustine’s vision expresses his Platonic and Gnostic influences. And yet despite this (and perhaps even because of it), he was able to produce his *Confessions*; a work of profound religious thought, written under the sway of an existential mood.

**St. Augustine**

In his *Confessions*, St Augustine shares his own dazzling encounter with ‘Plato’s light’, ‘theism’s God’ and Christianity’s ‘Christ’. Yet despite articulating something in the order of ‘absolute truth’, he chooses to re-enter the shadowy cave of his own soul in his quest to enter more deeply into the mystery of God’s revelation. However, it would seem that Augustine does not return to the shadows primarily to enlighten his fellow prisoners, as Plato would have it, but returns to the ambiguous world of his interior condition because that is where, paradoxically, the light shines most surely, most authentically. And it is in this movement, this return to the self that he understands not, that one encounters the existential mood of this early Christian theologian. Where ‘Plato and Aristotle had asked the question, What is man? St. Augustine (in his *Confessions*) asks, Who am I?’ and in so doing relocates the fundamental questions of human existence to the realm of subjective experience.43 Here bodily existence does not ‘intrude, interrupt, disturb and distract us from the glimpses of the truth’, as Plato suggested, but rather is the cloak that Truth chooses freely to wear, precisely in order to be recognised.44 In rigorous self-reflection Augustine writes,

> I have become a problem to myself . . . I am investigating myself, my memory, my mind. There is nothing strange in the fact that whatever is not myself is far from me. But what could be nearer to me than myself? Yet I do not understand the power of memory that is myself, although without it I could not even speak of myself.45

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44 Paraphrased from Plato’s *Phaedo*, 66b-d.
In the *Confessions*, Augustine confronts the fundamental mystery of his own being, a mystery that resides within and yet seems to determine all that is without. Encountering this he notes that ‘men go out and gaze in astonishment at high mountains, the huge waves of the sea, the broad reaches of rivers, the ocean that encircles the world, or the stars in their courses. But they pay no attention to themselves’. This last comment echoes harrowingly through the history of Western thought, largely neglected or assumed, until it is brought firmly into the centre of philosophical inquiry by Kierkegaard and the later existential writers.

The departure from what Barrett describes as the ‘zoological perspective’, in which one looks out upon a ‘world of objects’, and yet ‘stands zoologically within it’, cannot be properly appreciated apart from the understanding of Christian Truth that defined Augustine’s thinking. Between Plato and Augustine the Christian confession in an incarnate God emerged, changing the character of truth irrevocably. On this side of the Incarnation, Plato’s sun does not stand aloof outside the cave, shining its rays into the darkness of mortal existence, but in Christ, enters into the cave itself, in the mystery of the Trinity, and suffers the birth and death of a life lived in the shadowlands. Writing out of this world-view, Augustine could not begin his inquiry into God in any way other than to look within himself; for the presence of the Absolute, from a Christian perspective, is manifested through the bodily subjectivity of human experience.

Although much can be made of the existential mood of Augustine’s writings, the subjective and experiential priority of his vision were ultimately subsumed under Neo-Platonic categories. Inspired by the neo-Platonism of his day, Augustine’s thorough-going treatment of the problem of evil, along with his postulation of mind as embodiment of self, characterised his overall contribution as that of a ‘formal theologian (thinking with the concepts of Greek metaphysics)’ rather than as an ‘existential lyricist of

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46 An examination of the interior condition in order to understand the exterior is not, in itself, an existential method; all religious and philosophical inquiries take with varying degrees of seriousness the internal state. However, Augustine characterises his own interior condition as a ‘problem to himself’, and yet despite the problematic character of his interior state as restlessness, et cetera – this is where he seeks to encounter the light. In this his existential bent is revealed.

47 Augustine, *Confessions*, 223.

religious experience’. It would appear that while Augustine dared to return to the cave of shadows upon his conversion, he ultimately abandoned the cave in which truth dwells incarnate as a person of shifting shadows and silhouettes, and sought instead to dwell in the pure and unsullied light of Plato’s sun.

As Augustine’s restless self moved beyond the uncertainty of subjective experience, the existential bent was temporarily lost to Western thought, further dwarfed under the scientific breakthroughs of the Middle Ages, until Pascal. Looking upon the very same discoveries as his contemporaries, Pascal did not rejoice with triumphant glee at the fruits of scientific exploration, but hesitated and trembled at the possibilities his own mathematics were revealing. Recoiling between microscope and telescope, between the infinitesimal and the infinite, he reflected not upon a metaphysically ordered universe, but upon an impersonal, indifferent abyss in which human existence stood as a ‘middle point between all and nothing’. From this vantage point he heard not the consoling words of scientific certainty but only the ‘eternal silence of those infinite spaces’ and shuddered with a sense of holy dread at the sheer contingency of human existence, cast adrift, homeless, in an exponentially expanding void.

**Blaise Pascal**

Through the discoveries of Copernicus and Galileo, Pascal witnessed a changing world order; not socially, economically or culturally, but *cosmologically*. The cosmological centrality of the earth and its human residents were altered irrevocably. Wrenched from the ‘great chain of being’, and the security afforded by a geocentric and anthropocentric cosmology, the human individual was set adrift in his own land, in a place that was becoming increasingly familiar and yet at once inconsolably foreign. While the progress of science set the scene for the Enlightenment that was to follow, the pre-dawn light of this new age was anticipated by Pascal, who perceives in it not the light of scientific progress but the darkness of a humanity, existentially cast adrift.

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51 Pascal, *Pensées*, 66.
Unlike Augustine, in Pascal one does not need to look for the existential thread in his thought; his reflections are arrestingly existential.\textsuperscript{52} His main though suitably unfinished work, \textit{Pensées}, sets in motion a range of themes that would later be identified as existential. These include finitude, thrownness, contingency, homelessness, the contradictory and ambivalent nature of the human individual, and the distinction between reason and intuition, to name but a few. His writing is unhesitating as it works to dislodge its readers from anything that could allow content repose, and instead he places them reeling in a state of ‘thrownness’ (as Heidegger would later term it):

When I consider the brief span of my life absorbed into the eternity which comes before and after – the small spaces of which I occupy and which I see swallowed up in the infinite immensity of spaces of which I know nothing and which know nothing of me, I take fright and am amazed to see myself here rather than there: there is no reason for me to be here rather than there, now rather than then.\textsuperscript{53}

On the point of contingency, Pascal took with utmost seriousness, for example, the length of Cleopatra’s nose. Never forgetting the particularity of situation, Pascal recognised that the destiny of the Roman Empire could rest on such a thing.\textsuperscript{54} In the collision of particularities that in sum constitute the history of human endeavor, Pascal saw ‘man’ as ‘only a reed, the weakest in nature, but…a thinking reed’.\textsuperscript{55} This is a crucial concession to an otherwise damning and forlorn depiction of the human condition for it opens the door through which can be glimpsed the contradictory and ambivalent nature of humanity: our greatness and wretchedness, our state of exile from a land that we can hardly conceive and yet to which we yearn to return. Set adrift between the infinitesimal and the infinite, ‘all and nothing’, Pascal proposes the paradox that ‘man’s greatness comes from knowing he is wretched: [for] a tree does not know it is wretched’.\textsuperscript{56}

Furthermore, ‘man’s greatness is so obvious that it can be deduced from his

\textsuperscript{52} Barrett, \textit{Irrational Man}, 97.

\textsuperscript{53} Pascal, \textit{Pensées}, 19. See also 59-61, s.199.

\textsuperscript{54} ‘Anyone who wants to know the full extent of man’s vanity has only to consider the causes and effects of love. This indefinably something, so trifling that we cannot recognise it, upsets the whole earth, princes, armies, the entire world. Cleopatra’s nose: if it had been shorter the whole face of the earth would have been different’. Pascal, \textit{Pensées}, 120.

\textsuperscript{55} Pascal, \textit{Pensées}, 66.

\textsuperscript{56} Pascal, \textit{Pensées}, 29.
Thus the human condition, though one of wretchedness, is not unredeemed but rather, in existential terms, is plagued by the possibility of it being otherwise.

In this way, the apparent homelessness of humanity implies the existence of a home from which it came, as the sense of wretchedness is aroused most acutely by it being a state of fallenness from a prior condition of greatness. In these terms Pascal characterises the human condition as analogous to a ‘ruined or disinherited nobleman cast out from the kingdom which ought to have been his. Thus he takes as his fundamental premise the image of man as a disinherited being’. In this sense of nature in animals we call wretchedness in man, recognizing that, if his nature is today like that of the animals, he must have fallen from some better state which was once his own.

In Pascal’s writings one is led towards a depiction of the human condition as fundamentally in tension: neither ordered, as Plato would construct it, nor temporarily estranged as Augustine might suggest, but eternally restless in a state of foreignness and contradiction. How is it that Pascal, gazing into the infinite possibilities of scientific discovery, reacted to those seemingly indisputable evidences of progress with such a sense of all-prevailing, crippling, nothingness? The answer, it would seem, lies in his daringness to distinguish starkly between ‘instinct and reason’ which, according to Pascal, are ‘signs of two natures’.

‘The heart has its reasons, which reason knows not’. It is this understanding that underpins Pascal’s vision and is the lynch-pin of all existential thought. Two hundred years before Kierkegaard, Pascal turned reason back upon itself and yet maintained the importance of reason, noting the ‘two excesses: to exclude reason, to admit nothing but reason’. Far from excluding reason, Pascal opened himself to that which is beyond

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57 Pascal, Pensées, 29.
58 Pascal, Pensées, 29. See also Barrett, Irrational Man, 99.
59 Pascal, Pensées, 30.
60 Pascal, Pensées, 28.
61 Pascal, Pensées, 28.
62 Pascal, Pensées, 54.
reason and so doing allowed himself to be filled with ‘dread’. In emphasizing the distinction between ‘the mathematical and the intuitive mind’, Pascal created the possibility that scientific progress could at once stand as an exaltation of the human capacity for understanding, and as a revelation of our smallness, wretchedness, our homelessness. In this mode Pascal was able to recognise that ‘man himself is a creature of contradictions and ambivalences such as pure logic can never grasp’. Holding the two in tension he made the revolutionary assertion that ‘we know the truth not only through our reason but also through our heart’. Thus Pascal writes,

If he exalts himself, I humble him.  
If he humbles himself, I exalt him.  
And I go on contradicting him  
Until he understands  
That he is a monster that passes all understanding.

Pascal’s profound vision, of the mystery of being and the subjectivity of truth, was entombed by the achievements of the Enlightenment, and largely forgotten by the idealism of Hegel. And thus it remained until the middle of the nineteenth century by which time the ‘light of the Enlightenment had become its own darkness’, and the Western tradition, disillusioned by its own progress, returned to the door of the cave, and gazed, once again, upon the shadowlands of existence.

**Hegel and the Kierkegaardian Backlash**

One could argue that the (re)emergence of existential thinking owes, ironically, a debt of gratitude to Hegel. Although few philosophers can be more certainly excluded from the existential camp than Hegel, it can also be seen that the comprehensiveness and confidence of Hegel’s philosophical system brought the force of Idealism to a head in the form of ‘absolute idealism’. In so doing it provided the crucial point of reaction for Kierkegaard; a reaction that set in motion a range of concerns that would later be called

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64 Pascal, *Pensées*, 182.  
‘existentialism’, and change the face of philosophizing irrevocably.\textsuperscript{69} Despite the brevity of this survey, the Hegelian link must be acknowledged. Unfortunately, the scope and limitations of this chapter make a critique of Hegel’s work, as vast and dense as it is, impossible. Although some further reference to Hegel’s position will occur in later chapters (via the existential reactions he generated in the writings of Kierkegaard), for now only some general remarks will be possible. These, hopefully, will provide a narrow though firm bridge between the implicitly existential inclined thinkers of the distant past, and the explicitly existential writers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Hegel’s historical and formative context is inseparable from the French revolution which represented, more symbolically than actually, a new beginning towards justice, equality and peace. It would have appeared that reason and existence, as understood at the time, were on the cusp of consummation; that some cosmic intelligence was beginning to prevail, and a pattern and goal could now be discerned in what had hitherto been the vagaries of history: ‘it is not difficult to see that ours is a birth-time and a period of transition to a new era … the gradual crumbling that left unaltered the face of the whole is cut short by a sunburst which, in one flash, illuminates the features of the new world’.\textsuperscript{70} Indeed, as Hegel saw it, this was a time of confidence and optimism for which a suitably confident and optimistic philosophy would be required.

With this background, three themes of Hegel’s voluminous work can be identified. The first is his conviction in the rationality of reality and the individual’s access, through consciousness and reason, to this universal truth, such that it can be said that ‘reason is the certainty of consciousness that it is all reality’.\textsuperscript{71} The second theme is his emphasis upon opposites, upon a dialectic movement between ‘thesis’ and ‘antithesis’ towards a

\textsuperscript{69} The philosophical movement termed ‘Idealism’ is, like existentialism, a school of thought as varied as its members. Thus no single definition or set of conditions can be applied to the term. For a brief overview of the term see Robert Audi, ed., \textit{The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995). Notwithstanding, however, Hegel’s influence upon this school of philosophy can be said to be distinctive and central. ‘It would be true to say that it was Hegel who above all influenced the new movement [Idealism]’. John Macquarrie, \textit{Twentieth-Century Religious Thought: The Frontiers of Philosophy and Theology, 1900-1960}, ed. Ian T. Ramsey John McIntyre, \textit{The Library of Philosophy and Theology} (London: SCM Press, 1963), 24.


\textsuperscript{71} Hegel, \textit{Phenomenology}, 140.
sacred ‘synthesis’. The third theme is the crown and glory of his proposition – namely that ‘world history is the progress of the consciousness of freedom’,\(^72\) under the reign of God, being brought to actualization by means of Reason, exhibited in the dialectic movement, the Absolute Spirit (\textit{Geist}) or ‘divine Reason realizing itself in history’.\(^73\)

By means of the movement between thesis and antithesis to synthesis, ‘a restless clash and progression of “forms” comes about, continuing through the ages until the last triumphant link in the chain is forged’.\(^74\) From these few general remarks something of the flavor of Hegel’s philosophy may be conveyed. Despite Hegel’s attention to difference, his ultimate orientation is towards an all-prevailing unity, thus rendering all difference merely \textit{identity-in-difference}, and all disunity as preliminary steps towards unity. Thus, ‘reality is so much a unity that no individual fact can be fully understood except in its relation to the whole’.\(^75\) And it is on this point that the loose thread in Hegel’s grand system is revealed most starkly, onto which Kierkegaard fastened his polemic grip and proceeded to unravel the fragile edifice of Hegelian Idealism.

In this last and crucial feature of his thought, Hegel’s ‘pretensions to final certainty’ are revealed.\(^76\) Kierkegaard’s objection to the Hegelian system can be for now identified in the certainty with which Hegel’s philosophical system was proposed. Thus Kierkegaard writes, ‘if he had written his whole \textit{Logic} and declared in the Preface that it was only a thought-experiment (in which, however, at many points he had shirked some things), he would have been the greatest thinker that ever lived. Now he is a comic’.\(^77\) It is the finality, certainty and conclusiveness of the Hegelian system that Kierkegaard attacks with particular venom.\(^78\) Such certainty can never befit matters of existence which are an


\(^{74}\) Gill and Sherman, ed., \textit{The Fabric of Existentialism}, 122.

\(^{75}\) Macquarrie, \textit{Twentieth-Century Religious Thought}, 24.

\(^{76}\) Gill and Sherman, ed., \textit{The Fabric of Existentialism}, 120.


on-going ‘extension in time’, a daily revelation of possibilities unimaginable.\textsuperscript{79} Furthermore, a ‘system’, according to Kierkegaard’s understanding, entails \textit{finality}; thus an incomplete system is not, in fact, a system at all.\textsuperscript{80} On this basis ‘a logical system is possible’, but ‘an existential system is [necessarily] impossible’.\textsuperscript{81}

In light of this fragment of Kierkegaard’s critique of Hegel, we return to Macquarrie’s observation of Hegel’s philosophy that ‘reality is so much a unity that no individual fact can be fully understood except in its relation to the whole’.\textsuperscript{82} More specifically, it is the last words here that encapsulate Hegel’s loose thread: ‘the whole’ of which we can understand little or nothing, the ultimate goal of existence that can only be confessed by faith at its most daring and its most foolish, but never expressed with the rigours by which philosophy defends its authority.

Furthermore, the multifarious nature of individual existence, the individuals that have existed, do exist and are yet to exist, can never be adequately accounted for by today’s philosophy, nor by yesterday’s, nor tomorrow’s: for only God could hold ‘all truth concealed in his right hand’, and in his left he holds humanity’s pain and privilege – ‘the persistent striving for truth’.\textsuperscript{83} In the context of this thesis, the persistent striving after truth – the provisionality and ongoing-ness that this entails - will be shown to be the only authentic way of approaching and speaking about truth. It is however, an \textit{ethico-religious} notion of truth that is assumed here, one that recognises as authentic an incomplete and partial understanding. More specifically, it will be shown that a christologically grounded notion of truth demands an existential epistemology. This is how Kierkegaard’s identity as Christian writer and existential philosopher form an inseparable union. In the century after Kierkegaard planted the seeds of his fertile vision, an epistemology admitting of persistent striving came to characterise the existential mode of philosophizing.

\textsuperscript{80} ‘System and finality are pretty much one and the same, so much so that if the system is not finished, there is no system’. Kierkegaard, \textit{Postscript}, 98.
\textsuperscript{81} Kierkegaard, \textit{Postscript}, 99, 107.
\textsuperscript{82} Macquarrie, \textit{Twentieth-Century Religious Thought}, 24.
\textsuperscript{83} Kierkegaard, \textit{Postscript}, 562.
The conclusiveness which stood as a commendation of Hegel’s system became the measure of inadequacy in any philosophy of an existential kind, for truth ‘is lost where it is believed to have become a final possession.’ 84 It is against this error that the existential mode of philosophizing continually rallies, striving to keep at the heart of all philosophical inquiry the fact of existence and the mystery in which it is engulfed.

Having now introduced some of the essential themes of existential philosophy, a more concentrated reflection will be made on the relationship between the concreteness of individual existence and that which Wittgenstein describes, in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, as ‘the mystical’. 85 Affirming a realm that exceeds logical and linguistic designation demands that all philosophical claims be asserted provisionally. And the claims that need not be asserted provisionally – the philosophical problems that can be solved – have no relevance to the ‘problems of life’. 86 The following exploration of the *Tractatus* will provide depth and context to some of the fundamental themes already introduced in this discussion and will, in particular, begin an extended reflection on questions of methodology in philosophical inquiry.

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Chapter II - Mystical and Existential Aspects of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*

People who always keep asking “Why?” resemble tourists who read Baedeker while they stand before a building and through reading about the building’s history, origins and so on are kept from seeing it.

- Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*

Before exploring the idea of ‘the mystical’ proposed in Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, some preliminary remarks regarding the scope and limitations of this inquiry are required. First, this chapter does not apply the term ‘mystery’ in a theological, Christian or biblical sense. Rather, the concern is with a ‘philosophical mystery’, of a kind in which the limitations of thought and language imply the existence of something beyond those limitations, a ‘domain beyond the facts’. The second preliminary point is that Wittgenstein’s writings serve as a contribution to the topic, rather than constituting the topic itself. It is not Wittgenstein’s understanding of ‘the mystical’ that this discussion seeks to establish, but rather the value of his ideas in developing an existential notion of truth. This emphasis is a crucial one. In other words, the claims made in this chapter do not represent a contribution to the voluminous attention already afforded to interpreting what Wittgenstein ‘really meant’ by ‘the mystical’ (for such a task seems hardly necessary). Rather, his writings are examined, interpreted and applied as a springboard to encountering and ‘understanding’, in a particular sense, mystery itself. Indeed, if it is mystery of which we are speaking, it could never withstand confinement as ‘Wittgenstein’s concept of the mystical’, ‘Kierkegaard’s mystical’, yours or mine. While

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the encounter is thoroughly individual, particular and subjective, that which is encountered ‘must lie outside the world’.

**Wittgenstein and Christianity**

With regard to Wittgenstein’s thought and the theological dimension of this discussion, although Wittgenstein is not a religious writer, much less a theologian, his contribution to religious thought cannot be underestimated. Arguably, his most significant influence lies in his exploration of the limits of meaningful discourse, in postulating the possible and the impossible; what lies within the domain of logic and what may be beyond, as well as his later reflections on the relationship between linguistic meaning and existential practice. Although his closing remarks on ‘the mystical’ in his *Tractatus* cannot be directly associated with God, much less with a specifically Christian conception of divinity, that there is a definite connection cannot be ignored. Comments such as ‘God does not reveal himself in the world’ (6.432) represents either a challenge to the most basic conception of Christian revelation, or else a fundamental revision of what constitutes the limits of ‘the world’. If it is the latter, should one then infer that God does not manifest Godself in thought and language? If so, does that suggest that if God were to manifest in the world, nothing less than an incarnation would be required – nothing less than the fullness of human personhood in which God is encountered face to face, rather than spoken about in abstract and indirect proposition?

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6 All citation of the *Tractatus* will hereafter be referenced by the original paragraph number enclosed in brackets. All reference to the Introduction to the *Tractatus* will be in regular footnote format.

7 For a discussion of this matter see Sontag, *Wittgenstein and the Mystical*, 35.
To borrow Hudson’s term, the type of reading proposed in this chapter represents an ‘ethico-religious interpretation’ (in contrast to a strictly ‘logical interpretation’).

Despite Wittgenstein’s outward and explicit interest in logic, a comprehensive survey of his writings reveals a deep and persistent concern with ethical and religious questions. It is this underlying concern that legitimates the kind of reading undertaken in this chapter.

**Wittgenstein and Existentialism**

In a thesis primarily concerned with existential thought and its potential for an authentic interpretation of the Christian understanding of truth, Wittgenstein’s writings, generally regarded as a foundational contribution to logical positivism, could appear to be a bizarre or mistaken inclusion. However, though it may be bizarre, it is not mistaken, at least not entirely. The purpose of this introductory discussion is to identify some of the echoes of existential thought in Wittgenstein’s writings, and note their implications for exploring a Christian notion of truth. Far from being extraneous to the inquiry, Wittgenstein’s treatment of the limits of thought and language and his postulation of ‘something beyond’ are crucial at the outset, when the wound of doubt must be pried open, and the poison of certainty let out.

Indeed, Wittgenstein stands in no obvious relation to any school of existential thought, for he produced no explicit writings on the topic of existence itself. However, there is evidence to suggest that Wittgenstein himself identified the most significant aspects of his work with the thought of Heidegger, and Kierkegaard in particular.

I can well understand what Heidegger means by Being 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 the paradox).

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Certainly this does not make Wittgenstein’s thinking ‘existential’, but it does reveal that his work was motivated by, and engaged with, existential concerns. This aspect is further revealed in questions of finitude and freedom, which later become the cornerstone of Sartre’s famously existential vision.11

Wittgenstein’s existential bent, I argue, is particularly evident in the closing lines of the *Tractatus*, where he writes, ‘we feel that even when all possible scientific questions have been answered, the problems of life remain completely untouched’ (6.52). Here a sense of estrangement can be seen to emerge, of the kind identified by Pascal, where the progress of empirical knowledge achieves little more than enlarging a void which engulfs all knowledge, for ‘the deepest problems are in fact not problems at all’ (4.003). In other words, the authentic philosophical quest is not plagued by answers yet outstanding, but by something intrinsically incomprehensible.

In Wittgenstein’s thought it would appear that ‘the impulse toward philosophy arises out of a sense of profound rupture with the world’.12 This gulf between thought and experience, between what can be said and what can be felt, is not bridged by further explanation but rather is demonstrated to be the point at which explanation must terminate. It is as if Wittgenstein is saying, ‘one must be content to remain, philosophically speaking, on this side of the ravine, for it is sheer foolishness to attempt a linguistic leap; it cannot be made; it results in nonsense’.

The temptation to leap is not, of course, an intellectual imperative but rather an existential compulsion that fuels the philosophical drive; the ‘difficulty of philosophy [is] not the intellectual difficulty of the sciences, but the difficulty of a change of attitude’.13 However, as long as the quest for final explanation remains strictly philosophical, conceptual and linguistic, it is a futile drive, a fatal leap, for the reason that, as Pascal

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11 For an exposition of this connection see A.W. Moore, *The Infinite* (London: Routledge, 1990), 194-95.
noted three hundred years prior, ‘the heart has its reasons that reason knows not’.\(^{14}\) Or, as Wittgenstein says, ‘the sense of the world lies outside the world [of thought and language]’ (6.41). And yet this cryptic statement implies that there is a ‘sense’, the possibility of meaning, of which almost nothing can be said. Furthermore, this ‘sense’ stands as an expression of a broader category: ‘the mystical’ that ‘cannot be put into words’, and yet ‘manifest[s]’ (6.522). Wittgenstein’s identification of and concern with this possibility establishes his contribution to this discussion as one of supreme importance.

The selection of Wittgenstein’s writings will, in general, concentrate on his ‘early period’.


\(^{16}\) Hudson, *Wittgenstein and Religious Belief*, 97.
failure. Alternatively one is left, as T.S. Eliot puts it, with only ‘the infirm glory of the positive hour’.17

The Limits of Explanation

My whole task consists in explaining the nature of the proposition. That is to say, in giving the nature of all facts, whose picture the proposition is.
- Ludwig Wittgenstein, Notebooks, 22nd January, 1915

By 1918, when Wittgenstein wrote the Preface to his Tractatus, his whole task had seemed to become complicated by a preoccupation with that which lies beyond the proposition. At the beginning of his Preface he proposes that the aim of the Tractatus is to ‘draw a limit’ to the ‘expression of thoughts’.18 By the end of his Preface, with the colossal confidence that is made only a little less absurd by his genius, he believes himself ‘to have found, on all essential points, the final solution of the problems [of philosophy]’.19 However, in this moment of glorious achievement, Wittgenstein confesses that ‘the second thing in which the value of this work consists is that it shows how little is achieved when these problems are solved’.20 By this process Wittgenstein seeks to ‘locate’ the mystical through dislocating it from the realm of ‘facts’. In the Tractatus one is confronted by a dual aim, the second of which Bertrand Russell is reluctant to acknowledge in his Introduction to Wittgenstein’s book. Russell writes

in order that a sentence should assert a certain fact there must, however the language be constructed, be something in common between the structure of the sentence and the structure of the fact. This is perhaps the most fundamental thesis of Mr Wittgenstein’s theory.21

Although Russell is certainly not in error to identify this as Wittgenstein’s ‘fundamental thesis’, Russell’s neglect of the implications that follow from this render his analysis of the Tractatus, when considered in its entirety, narrow and impoverished.

With regard to the inadequacies of problems solved, and the possibility that what lies beyond them cannot be spoken of but may be shown, Russell admits that such a

18 Wittgenstein, Tractatus, 3.
19 Wittgenstein, Tractatus, 4.
20 Wittgenstein, Tractatus, 4.
21 Wittgenstein, Tractatus, x-xi.
possibility leaves him ‘with a certain sense of intellectual discomfort’. While Russell may feel such discomfort, it seems unlikely that Wittgenstein wrote the *Tractatus* so as to provide ‘intellectual comfort’. Furthermore, it seems likely that Wittgenstein ‘condemned as superficial and misleading’, Russell’s Introduction to his *Tractatus* precisely because he did not explore more deeply the possibilities that lie on the other side of intellectual discomfort.

The purpose of this brief survey is to reveal that the aim of the *Tractatus* is not singular and forthcoming. Rather, there are at least two aims, the first of which I will refer to as *philosophical*, and the second as *ethico-religious*. While the philosophical aim, identified by Russell, is afforded the most attention by Wittgenstein and his commentators, it should become clear by the end of this section that it is the second aim – the possibility that value/meaning lie beyond language – with which Wittgenstein is ultimately concerned. Although many commentators quickly identify a sharp distinction between the ‘early Wittgenstein’ and the ‘later’, characterizing these two periods by reference to the *Tractatus* (1921), and the *Investigations* (1953) respectively, I propose that it is in fact his period of silence, living anonymously and humbly as an elementary school teacher in small Austrian villages, that represents the fulcrum point of his philosophical life. This third period I argue constitutes the full expression of his *Tractatus* and provides the supreme introduction to his later, posthumously published writings. His *Investigations* are but footnotes to this period.

However, for now we must begin where the *Tractatus*, this most cryptic of books, begins, namely with setting out to establish the boundaries of meaningful expression, to speak clearly of ‘all that is the case’ (1).

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24 It is crucial to note here that Wittgenstein’s response to the ‘mysticism’ of the *Tractatus* is particular to Wittgenstein. That is, there can never be a full and complete expression of ‘the mystical’ for the mystical manifests in the infinite varieties of personalities and circumstances. Wittgenstein’s particular response to the *Tractatus*’ ‘call to silence’ is an overarching symbol of the central claim of this thesis; that the mystical is encountered and revealed in the lived orientation of the existing individual.
Ascending the Philosophical Ladder

Wittgenstein’s attempts to explain the logical structure of language so as to distinguish meaningful propositions from nonsense, represents the philosophical aim of the *Tractatus*. However, his aim is not exclusively linguistic, for if it were, how could he possibly ‘solve all the problems of philosophy’? Rather, his movement between the linguistic, the cognitive and the ontological is based upon a conviction that these ‘three domains, composed of such different elements . . . are *isomorphic*’.\(^{25}\) Thus, ‘if the proposition you state is *true*, then your word-proposition, the thought it expresses, and the situation in the world that they describe, are all identical in structure’.\(^{26}\)

I will not attempt a detailed exposition of his method here, which has been admirably undertaken by various commentators, including G.E.M. Anscombe and Max Black.\(^{27}\) Instead, a brief overview can be offered. With his claim to the interactive and *isomorphic* structure of thought, language and ‘the world’, Wittgenstein inherits Frege’s idea that the ‘sense of a proposition must be completely determinate’\(^{28}\) and accordingly writes ‘the requirement that simple signs be possible is the requirement that sense be determinate’ (3.23). In order to achieve this there must be proposed some theory that explains the structure and mechanisms of language, a kind of meta-language. This, however, must not be in need of explanation itself, for if it were, one would be confronted by an infinite regress of explanations which would undermine determinate meaning. To this problem an atomistic ontology is proposed whereby ‘objects’ constitute the building blocks of ‘facts’ which, as ‘states of affairs’, constitute the world – ‘the totality of existing states of affairs is the world’ (2.04).

In linguistic terms, Wittgenstein sought ‘simple signs’ or ‘elementary signifiers’ in order to explain propositions and their ontological content. He writes, ‘a name is the

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representative of an object’ (3.22), which is an ‘element’ of a proposition that establishes a ‘fact’ or ‘picture’- ‘A picture is a fact’ (2.141) and ‘What constitutes a picture is that its elements are related to one another in a determinate way’ (2.14). In turn, facts constitute the world – ‘the world is a totality of facts’ (1.1). This is a cursory exposition of Wittgenstein’s ‘picture theory’.

Wittgenstein is confident that these relations can be accounted for exhaustively:

It now seems possible to give the most general propositional form: that is, to give a description of the propositions of any sign-language whatsoever in such a way that every possible sense can be expressed by a symbol satisfying the description, and every symbol satisfying the description can express a sense, provided that the meanings of the names are suitably chosen (4.5).

This last condition is crucial and leads one to the terminus of explanation. The infinite regress of explanations is halted here for the connection between ‘names’ and their meaning – the ‘objects’ for which they stand linguistically – cannot be explained, but only *shown* – ‘Objects can only be named. Signs are their representatives. I can only speak *about* them: I cannot *put them into words*. Propositions can only say *how* things are, not *what* they are’ (3.221). And with this condition Wittgenstein appears to have under his command a very powerful, precise and comprehensive philosophical system, such that he can claim that ‘if all true elementary propositions are given, the result is a complete description of the world’ (4.26).

Despite the apparent precision of this system, it is impossible to ignore its cracks. These are blessed cracks, however, through which light may enter an otherwise bleak and hollow vision of a world devoid of value and meaning. While he claims he has solved ‘all the problems of philosophy’, Wittgenstein concedes that ‘the deepest problems are in fact *not* problems at all’ (4.003). The deepest problems are, in Marcelian terms, mysteries

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29 Russell notes this in his Introduction, where he writes of Wittgenstein’s ‘fundamental thesis’: ‘that which has to be in common between the sentence and the fact cannot, so he contends, be itself in turn *said* in language. It can, in his phraseology, only be *shown*, not said, for whatever we may say will still need to have the same structure’. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, xi.

30 And again, the ‘world is completely described by giving all elementary propositions and adding which of them are true and which false’ (4.26).

31 Wittgenstein, *Tractatus* - ‘In the world everything is as it is, and everything happens as it does happen: in it no value exists’ (6.41).
that comprehend us,\textsuperscript{32} for ‘propositions can express nothing that is higher’ (6.42). Ethics, for example, cannot be put into words’ (6.422).

It might be reasonable at this point to ask why ethical propositions do not correlate to facts in the world, why they cannot be broken down into elementary propositions, names deputizing for objects in the world. The answer is given in part by Wittgenstein’s conviction that ‘all that happens and is the case is accidental’ and therefore if ‘there is any value that does have value, it must lie outside the whole sphere of what happens and is the case’ (6.41). Ethics as a source and expression of meaning and value is not ‘accidental’ and therefore lies outside the world. All that he can speak of clearly is without meaning.\textsuperscript{33} Thus he writes, ‘we feel that even when all possible scientific questions have been answered, the problems of life remain completely untouched. Of course there are then no questions left, and this itself is the answer’ (6.52). At the point of ethics and value, God and the mystical, Wittgenstein’s quest for explanation terminates.

**The Final Rung of the Philosophical Ladder**

Although Wittgenstein’s own perception of his success may initially appear extravagant, on closer reading it can be found that what has been explained is, by his own admission, of very little significance. In this way the *Tractatus* stands as a critique of philosophical explanation that seeks to establish the proper boundaries of what can be said clearly and ‘what we must pass over in silence’.\textsuperscript{34}

Wittgenstein’s rejection of modernity’s confidence is stated clearly,

people today stop at the laws of nature, treating them as something inviolable, just as God and Fate were treated in past ages. And in fact both are right and both wrong: though the view of the ancients is clearer in so far as they have a clear and acknowledged terminus, while the modern system tries to make it look as if everything were explained (6.372).

\textsuperscript{32} ‘A mystery . . . is something in which I find myself caught up . . . it is as though in this province the distinction between in me and before me loses its meaning’. Gabriel Marcel, *Being and Having*, trans. A \& C Black (London: Dacre Press, 1965), 109.

\textsuperscript{33} Here I am applying ‘meaning’ in existential rather than linguistic sense. For examples of Wittgenstein’s existential, or non-linguistic application of the terms ‘meaning’ and ‘sense’ see 5.02, 5.451, 6.521.

\textsuperscript{34} Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, 3.
Therefore, the explanation proposed by the *Tractatus* is not a definitive explanation of everything but rather, a definitive explanation of what can be said *clearly*. In the Preface he writes, ‘what can be said at all can be said clearly, and what we cannot talk about we must pass over in silence’ (7). With regard to the second claim in this sentence, one must assume Wittgenstein actually means, ‘what we cannot talk about *clearly* we must pass over in silence’, otherwise his statement is merely tautologous. The important consequence that follows from this apparent detail is that the limit of explanation is *not* the limit of experience. And here we encounter not ‘Wittgenstein the logical positivist’, but ‘Wittgenstein the mystic’ who leaves us, by way of an analysis of language, on the rim of the ‘fly-bottle’, on the precipice of the linguistic abyss. At this point a brief examination is required of what I earlier termed the *ethico-religious* aim of the *Tractatus*.

**Throwing Away the Ladder**

In a letter to his close friend, Paul Engelmann, in which he attempts to provide some ways of seeing his *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein writes

> my work consists of two parts: the one presented here plus all that I have *not* written, and it is precisely this second part that is the important one. The book draws limits to the sphere of the ethical from the inside as it were, and I am convinced that this is the ONLY rigorous way of drawing those limits.\(^{36}\)

This intriguing statement suggests the possibility that Wittgenstein’s method, characterised by rigour and precision, can mislead one, as it misled the Vienna Circle, into understanding his work as a dismissal of anything that cannot be spoken of clearly. Rather, if his comments to Engelmann are to be taken seriously, one finds that it is precisely by means of his rigorous method, and the stark limits that it draws, that he opens a way to something beyond language, and it is there one finds the beating heart of the *Tractatus*.\(^{37}\)

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\(^{35}\) For Wittgenstein, the task of philosophy is to enable one to find one’s way out of the ‘fly bottle’ which is a symbol of philosophical/existential confusion. Accordingly, philosophy does not provide answers but strives to eliminate erroneous questions.

\(^{36}\) Engelmann, *Letters from Ludwig Wittgenstein, with a Memoir*, 143-44.

\(^{37}\) Although the focus of this chapter is upon questions of value within an existential framework, the realm which cannot be accounted for includes mental states – see *Tractatus* 5.54-5.541
Although Wittgenstein begins with the philosophical, and engages with unquestionable devotion to philosophical problems, ultimately the *Tractatus*, in its fullness, exceeds and transcends philosophy. As something analogous to a ladder, once climbed it must at some point be cast aside.\(^3^8\) In his closing remarks he writes,

> my propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually recognises them as nonsensical, when he has used them – as steps – to climb up and beyond them. (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it.) He must transcend these propositions, and then he will see the world aright (6.54).

How is one to understand the propositions of the *Tractatus* as nonsensical? Is it possible that the merit of the propositions lie, paradoxically, precisely in their failure? Ostrow suggests that
to grasp the propositions of the *Tractatus* is, it would seem, really to engage in a double movement. We are to see in them the kind of thing we ourselves are aiming for and simultaneously recognise that goal as unachievable. We are to acknowledge as illusion what we thought was our sought-after end.\(^3^9\)

If the ‘sought-after end’ of the *Tractatus* is complete clarity, the failure to achieve this with regard to value, ethics and existential meaning reveals the ineffable as the ineffable; not by describing it as such but by *showing* it to be so; as that which exceeds and provides ‘sense’ (6.41) to ‘all that is the case’ (1.1). This is the method of the *Tractatus*, whereby Wittgenstein attempts to ‘set limits to what can be thought; and, in doing so, to what cannot be thought. It [philosophy] must set limits to what cannot be thought by working outwards through what can be thought’ (4.114). Beginning with what can be said in order to arrive at what cannot be said resembles the ‘way of negation’, a style of inquiry often found in Eastern philosophical traditions. Similarly, apophatic theology is often restricted making quasi-assertions or pseudo-propositions that identify the mystical with ‘feeling the world as a limited whole’ (6.45). The philosophy that leads one to this point, according to Wittgenstein, is a ladder of ‘nonsense’, albeit the most valuable kind of nonsense, but which should ultimately be cast aside.\(^4^0\)

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\(^{3^8}\) Perhaps a more appropriate analogy may be taken from a raft that is used to cross a river. Once landing on the other side, the raft is left, for its usefulness cannot be maintained when traveling on land – where it, in fact, inhibits movement.

\(^{3^9}\) Ostrow, *Wittgenstein’s Tractatus*, 130.

\(^{4^0}\) ‘For Heaven’s sake, don’t cease from talking nonsense’, Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, 64e.
That ‘of which we cannot speak’ should not be dismissed as mere ‘nonsense’ but recognised as belonging to the higher realm that ‘must lie outside the world’ (6.41). Englemann writes that Wittgenstein, in stark contrast to the logical positivists, ‘passionately believes that all that really matters in human life is precisely what, in his view, we must be silent about’. To this ‘silence’, a concession is made: ‘There are, indeed, things that cannot be put into words. They make themselves manifest. They are what is mystical’ (6.522). This claim frees the *Tractatus* from a glib, reductionist, quasi-scientific philosophy of the kind proposed by the so-called ‘logical positivists’. More importantly, however, is that 6.522 reveals the ethico-religious vision of the *Tractatus*, a vision that leads one to the gate at the end of the path which opens out onto the realm of value, meaning and existential truth.

In the closing passages of the *Tractatus* the ethico-religious movements become particularly clear. When Wittgenstein writes, ‘the solution of the problem of life is seen in the vanishing of the problem’ (6.521), he follows this comment with the claim that ‘there are, indeed, things that cannot be put into words. They make themselves manifest. They are what is mystical’ (6.522). In this way the problems are exceeded by mysteries, and the cognitive is dwarfed by the existential and experiential: ‘is this not the reason why those who have found after a long period of doubt that the sense of life became clear to them have been unable to say what constituted that sense?’ (6.521) And so, as Wittgenstein confessed to Englemann, where the conceptual and linguistic certainty of the *Tractatus* ends, the most important part begins: in the infinite possibilities of the mystical. Thus in the apparent failure of the *Tractatus*, there begins a liberation, paradoxically, by way of limitation. Wittgenstein’s ‘insight into das Mystische – wonder at the existence of the world – is, more precisely, wonder at the existence of the world in the absence of explanation’. Indeed, the mystical cannot be spoken of, for to explain it is to abrogate it, and so the *Tractatus* ends, and Wittgenstein’s lived silence begins, far

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41 Englemann, *Letters from Ludwig Wittgenstein, with a Memoir*, 97. His interest in drawing the limits of the thinkable and the expressible had more to do with what lay beyond them than with what lay within them’. Moore, *The Infinite*, 189.

42 Hudson writes of the comment at 6.522 that it ‘seems to imply that Wittgenstein intended to do something more than to dismiss the mystical pejoratively as nonsense in the manner, say, of the logical positivists’. Hudson, *Wittgenstein and Religious Belief*, 86. See also pp. 113-32.

from the chatter of Cambridge, in the lonely rural villages of Austria. And so, while the ‘world is all that is the case’ (1), there would appear to exist something beyond the world, that lies outside the world, that is not of the world, and yet manifests within the world. Though it cannot be explained, perhaps one can point to it and say “yes, there it is, that is the mystical”. While it may exceed what can be described by the most agile propositions, it may be recognised in the experience of personal and subjective encounter.

**The Mode of Silence: a Distinction between Saying and Showing**

In a quest for final explanation and determinate meaning, why did Wittgenstein transgress the boundary of sensible discourse? He writes in the closing passages of the *Tractatus*, ‘to view the world *sub specie aeterni* is to view it as a whole – a limited whole. Feeling the world as a limited whole – it is this that is the mystical’ (6.45). Why did a rigorous analytic philosopher enter the murky waters of pseudo-propositions and risk rendering his entire *Tractatus* absurd? In the final remark of the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein writes, ‘what we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence’ (7). In this statement the temptation that plagues the philosophical quest – to seek complete explanation – is resisted. Seeking complete explanation results in merely ‘running against the walls of our cage’, which is ‘perfectly hopeless’.44 And yet Russell, in his Introduction to the *Tractatus*, claims that ‘Mr Wittgenstein manages to say a good deal about what cannot be said, thus suggesting to the sceptical reader that possibly there may be some loophole through the hierarchy of languages, or by some other exit’.45

This ‘loophole’ promises a different epistemology, one that allows engagement with ‘the mystical’ without abrogating the paradoxical identity by bringing it within the ‘cage’ of thought and language. The loophole is Wittgenstein’s crucial distinction between *saying* and *showing*.

Although Russell presumably has good reason for making this accusation, it is far from clear that the *Tractatus* does ‘say a good deal about what cannot be said’. Indeed

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45 Russell, in Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, xxiii
Wittgenstein does speak of the mystical, God, ethics and aesthetics, though he ‘speaks’ of these, I would suggest, in the mode of silence. In other words, he does not describe their content, but rather describes a method of encountering them, a way the reader, by his or her own means and according to his or her own circumstances, may engage with that ‘of which we cannot speak’ (7).

Wittgenstein’s invocation of ‘silence’ at the close of the *Tractatus* needs to be understood in a particular sense; as an expression of the ‘long tradition on the edification of silence’. Understood this way, ‘silence is not an abandonment of the quest; it is placing the search, at last, in the right context’. Wittgenstein’s ‘swansong of metaphysics’, does not, contra Russell’s understanding proposed in the Introduction, commit him to an ‘absolute philosophical silence’ but puts forward ‘pseudo-propositions’ that constitute the final rungs on the ladder of ‘nonsense’. This ladder is the *Tractatus* itself; the propositions that attempt to draw the limits of thought and language, and speak on the conditions of the mystical, ‘when analyzed, turn out after all only to shew what they were supposed to say’. That is, when reduced to their constituent parts, to elementary propositions and names, one finds no reference in the world, no object for which the names ‘deputise’; ‘pseudo-propositions do not depend on how things are, since they concern ‘transcendental’ preconditions of representation and the world’. By their very failure to represent a state of affairs, they show themselves to fall outside Wittgenstein’s rigorous conditions for meaningful expression, and are thus nonsense. As ‘nonsense’ they show what they say.

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50 Wittgenstein, *Notebooks*, 16e.
52 Wittgenstein’s application of the term ‘nonsense’, like his use of the term ‘problem’, is not straightforward. On the one hand, ‘nonsense’ refers to that which is neither true nor false. For example, ‘Scepticism is not irrefutable, but obviously nonsensical, when it tries to raise doubts where no questions can be asked’ (6.51). On this basis, Wittgenstein writes, ‘most of the propositions and questions to be found in philosophical works are not false but nonsensical’ (4.003). These works (of metaphysics) are regarded by Wittgenstein as nonsense for they transgress the boundaries of meaningful discourse. In a variation of this application, the propositions of the *Tractatus* are also nonsensical for they attempt to describe the limits of sensible discourse. As propositions, they fail for they attempt to say what can only be shown (4.1212), and
This analysis so far suggests that Wittgenstein’s attempts to eliminate ‘nonsense’ from the problems of philosophy only effects a reduction in the scope and value of philosophy, which, somewhat ironically, raises the significance of that which lies beyond. Rather than attempting to explain ‘the mystical’, the *Tractatus* renders propositions concerning value, meaning, God and ethics eternally nonsensical. To this situation the later Wittgenstein remarks in his ‘Lectures on Religious Belief’:

> there will be cases where we will differ, and where it won’t be a question at all of more or less knowledge . . . Sometimes it will be a question of experience . . . which might come out in Mr. Lewy saying “Wittgenstein is trying to undermine reason”, and this wouldn’t be false. This is actually where such questions rise.\(^{53}\)

Although Wittgenstein’s comments in the *Tractatus* on the mystical are brief and obscure, it would be difficult in the extreme to dismiss these as anything less than perplexing expressions of his most fundamental concerns.

The doctrine of ‘showing’ runs throughout the *Tractatus*, first in its logical instantiation and later, as an expression of the ethico-religious dimension.\(^{54}\) It is the second expression with which I am concerned. The distinction between saying and showing is ‘the lynch-pin of the whole book’ and reveals the crucial relevance of Wittgenstein’s thought for an existential exploration of a Christian notion of truth.\(^{55}\) However, it is still necessary to ask

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\(^{54}\) The ‘logical doctrine of showing’ and the ‘ethico-religious doctrine of showing’ bear little resemblance to one another, and may be regarded as a ‘purely verbal coincidence’ See Hudson, *Wittgenstein and Religious Belief*, 11. However, the connection, or lack of, is not relevant to this study but only that there can be recognised in the *Tractatus* an ethico-religious doctrine of showing, that opens the way to the second, unwritten part of the *Tractatus*, which reveals the existential and mystical priority underlying the *Tractatus*.

\(^{55}\) Moore, *The Infinite*, 188.
whether this distinction provides a compelling way forward beyond the limits of language, when all the possibilities of what can be said have been exhausted.

In drawing these limits, Wittgenstein is returning to a kind of Socratic wisdom that recognises the infinitude of the mystical and the finitude of human capacities for understanding. Vigilant of this conceptually irreconcilable gulf, he makes no attempt to define the indefinable, but instead points to it. Barrett claims that the ‘point of the Tractatus as a whole . . . [is to] show (manifest) how seeming propositions of a philosophical kind should be taken, that is, as indicators, pointers, rungs of a ladder, steps leading upwards, pointing to an intuition of what cannot be stated’. This instance of the ‘act of showing’ may be termed ethico-religious, for it leads ultimately to silent engagement with, inter alia, the ethical, religious, and aesthetic aspects of existence. And it is these aspects of life that are at once the most obscure and the most urgent, the most abstract and the most personal, the most indefinable and yet, the efforts of philosophy would suggest, most in need of defining.

Readers of the Tractatus, if they have understood his propositions (that is, recognised them as nonsense), must cast them aside (6.54). In this way Wittgenstein shows the doctrine of ‘showing’ to his readers and encourages them to recognise the crucial failure of the Tractatus. If one understands his ‘elucidations’ (6.54), presumably one agrees that ‘when all possible scientific questions have been answered, the problems of life remain completely untouched’ (6.52). This recognition does not constitute an answer but rather renders the ‘problems of life’ beyond the scope of ‘philosophy’ (as the early Wittgenstein set the limits of the discipline). And this is the ‘solution to the problem of life – the vanishing of the problem’ (6.521). Thus the doctrine of showing does not abrogate itself by then proceeding to show us something by means of carefully constructed propositions; to do so would undermine the very distinction being made between saying and showing.

As Kierkegaard similarly noted,

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56 See Wittgenstein, Tractatus, 6.372.
57 Barrett, Wittgenstein on Ethics and Religious Belief; 17.
58 Hudson, Wittgenstein and Religious Belief, 78.
59 Barrett, Wittgenstein on Ethics and Religious Belief, 22.
to explain an unutterable joy, for example, what does that mean? Does it mean to explain that it is this or that? In that case the predicate “unutterable” becomes merely a rhetorical predicate, a strong expression... he dupes the reader, he calls the joy unutterable – and then comes the surprise, a truly surprising surprise: he gives it utterance.\(^{60}\)

Before his famous injunction to silence, Wittgenstein makes the following remark, and in so doing he sets as the penultimate aim of his book the existential priority of showing: ‘He [the reader] must transcend these propositions, and then he will see the world aright’ (6.54). But for his call to silence, this is where Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* ends, at a point where the ‘problems of life’ are *shown* not to be ‘problems’ at all, and where value, ethics, God, aesthetics and the mystical are freed from the inappropriate constraints of empirical science and metaphysics.

Within the *Tractatus* itself, the doctrine of showing shows only the *Tractatus*, its limitations and its propositions, as nonsense. By doing so, however, the ‘saying/showing distinction invites extension to the mystical. It promises a handle for contrasting the empirical propositions of science with not just logic and metaphysics, but also with ‘the higher’, the realm of value – ethics, aesthetics and religion’.\(^{61}\) However, if Wittgenstein intended to offer any more clues to how the doctrine of showing could be enacted in a person’s life, so that the manifestations of the mystical could be recognised, one must surely look beyond the doctrine to the characteristics of the life of its author who dared to live by the philosophy he professed. Thus, Wittgenstein’s invocation to silence at the close of his *Tractatus* is not a call to passive withdrawal from the questions that set the philosophic discipline in motion, but rather, I argue, a call to active participation and engagement with the most fundamental concerns of human existence, for despite the importance of ‘facts’ in the context of the *Tractatus*, ‘the facts of the world are not the end of the matter’.\(^{62}\)

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\(^{62}\) Wittgenstein, *Notebooks*, 74e.
The Face of the Mystical

‘As if grounds did not come to an end sometime. But the end is not an ungrounded presupposition: it is an ungrounded way of acting’ 63

To suggest, as I have, that Wittgenstein’s life itself provides an insight into his understanding of the mystical is not to abandon its philosophical features but rather to focus upon the integration of the conceptual and experiential dimensions of existence. The inseparability of philosophy from life, acutely evident in Wittgenstein’s life, indicates the relevance of biographical context, especially when it is philosophy that speaks of the ‘domain beyond the facts’. 64 It is on this basis that the discussion will proceed.

The first question to ask of the Tractatus in this context is why Wittgenstein concluded his analysis of what can be said, with that which can never be spoken of? If the Tractatus is a work of philosophy, why exceed, or at least strain the boundaries of, the discipline? One response must refer to a fundamental sense of acute and intoxicating awareness of the sheer ‘is-ness’ of existence. That is to say, an awareness not of the blueness of the ocean or the darkness of the night sky, but simply that there is an ocean upon which we can gaze, that there is a night sky under which we sleep. This, I argue, is the feeling that gives rise to Wittgenstein’s postulation of the mystical, for ‘it is not how things are in the world that is mystical, but that it exists’ (6.44). This is echoed in the Notebooks, where he writes, ‘the miracle is that the world exists. That what exists does exist’. 65 A sense of wonder at the sheer existence of the world, as distinct from the properties that can be attributed to the world or an explanation of how the world came into existence, can be seen to arise from feeling the world in its totality, viewed from the perspective of eternity: this ‘feeling the world as a limited whole – it is this that is the mystical’ (6.45). Augustine, in his Confessions, writes, ‘the thought of you [God] stirs [one] so deeply that he cannot be content unless he praises you, because you made us for yourself and our

65 Wittgenstein, Notebooks, 86e.
hearts find no peace until they rest in you’.

Similarly, while this feeling exceeds any single proposition or combination of propositions, it can be recognised within the spirit of the *Tractatus*. This spirit is the point of closure for Wittgenstein’s philosophical endeavour, and the point of departure for his lived ‘silence’, the second unwritten part of the *Tractatus*.

At the origins of a philosophical quest one finds only a ‘sense’ or ‘inclination’ that sets the rigorous inquiry in motion, as at the beginning of Augustine’s *Confessions*. This restless awareness may have provided the initial spur for the *Tractatus*. It appears to move full circle, for just as there is no necessity to begin the inquiry, but for an overwhelming sense of wonder at the world existing, there is no intellectual or conceptual duty for Wittgenstein to exceed the end of explanation and make obscure references to ‘the mystical’. The duty, if there is one at all, is of the experiential kind; an ‘urge towards the mystical [that] comes of the non-satisfaction of our wishes of science’. The distinction is made repeatedly, albeit implicitly, between how the world exists and that the world exists (cf. 6.44). The question is not ‘why this and not that?’, but rather ‘why anything at all?’ This is the first point, that the mystical arises from, and is an expression of, the sheer existence of the world as such.

**The Mystical and the Problematic**

Before considering directly Wittgenstein’s idea of the mystical, a brief but important detour must be made via Marcel’s writings. The purpose of this inclusion is only as an aid in the explication of Wittgenstein’s notion of the mystical. Specifically, Marcel’s distinction between *problem* and *mystery* and his claim that *value* resides within mystery will enrich the terse comments of the *Tractatus*.

Although the philosophies of Marcel and Wittgenstein represent starkly different realms of thought, they are, I suggest, mutually illuminating, for both make the crucial

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distinction, between ‘problems’ and ‘mysteries’.\textsuperscript{68} Marcel makes the distinction through the use of the terms ‘problem’ and ‘mystery’, while a parallel can be found in Wittgenstein’s distinction between ‘scientific questions’ and the ‘problems of life’ (6.52), and his conviction that the ‘sense of the world’, its meaning, ‘lies outside the world’ (6.41) in the realm of mystery. Further, while the early Wittgenstein would recoil from the prospect of ‘clarifying’ mysteries where clarity is sought through dialectic inquiry, there is nothing in his writings that precludes a quest for clarity through ‘silent’ participation and action, a most ‘Marcelian’ notion.

In establishing a distinction between ‘problem’ and ‘mystery’ Marcel writes, ‘a problem is something met with which bars my passage. It is before me in its entirety. A mystery, on the other hand, is something in which I find myself caught up … it is as though in this province the distinction between \textit{in me} and \textit{before me} loses its meaning’.\textsuperscript{69} And further, ‘a genuine problem is subject to an appropriate technique by the exercise of which it is defined; whereas a mystery, by definition, transcends every conceivable technique’.\textsuperscript{70} Therefore, ‘mystery’ does not stand before us, waiting to be comprehended or explained, but rather, we stand within it, comprehended by it; and yet it is both within us and eternally elusive. As Blackham writes,

> a mystery . . . is not a problem which lies beyond the scope of present knowledge; it is an experience which is quite indubitable and which escapes in principle being reduced to a public object before a universal subject: subject and object interpenetrate and cannot be separated; they are mutually involved constituents each of the other.\textsuperscript{71}

‘Mystery’, understood in these terms, could place one simply and firmly within the fog that arises from attempting to define the indefinable. Indeed, it has already been conceded that mystery ‘transcends every conceivable technique’. However, for Marcel it appears

\textsuperscript{68} \textit{The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy} identifies as primary in Marcel’s thought his ‘distinction between problem and mystery’ and his claim that ‘clarified mysteries … can provide depth and meaningfulness to human life’. Robert Audi (ed.), \textit{The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 535.

\textsuperscript{69} Marcel, \textit{Being and Having}, 109.


certain that mystery is something with content. Though mystery is ultimately unknowable, it is not merely unknowable. Thus Marcel writes,

we must carefully avoid all confusion between the mysterious and the unknowable. The unknowable is in fact only the limiting case of the problematic, which cannot be actualised without contradiction. The recognition of mystery, on the contrary, is an essentially positive act of mind.\(^\text{72}\)

This act of recognition is, for Marcel, recognition of something more than the terminus of knowledge; it is, I argue, an assent to transcendent ‘value’, in the sense proposed by Wittgenstein in his *Tractatus* at 6.41.

In the closing paragraphs of his essay ‘On the Ontological Mystery’, Marcel defends the reality and content of mystery, freeing it from any Christian or religious necessity. He notes that ‘there is in the depth of Nature, as of reason which is governed by it, a fundamental principle of inadequacy to itself which is, as it were, a restless anticipation of a different order’.\(^\text{73}\) In his *Metaphysical Journal* his position is more explicit, when he writes in his entry for January 21\(^{\text{st}}\), 1919, that ‘mystery has its own peculiar value. . . [and further] that it is known [or recognised] does not change the nature of a thing, but transforms its value; it gives it a renewed significance and hence a superior efficacy’.

The mystical, understood in the above terms, reveals the impossibility of an answer. Wittgenstein writes, ‘when the answer cannot be put into words, neither can the question be put into words. The *riddle* does not exist’ (6.5). Thus, the ‘question’ that is contained within the realm of the mystical, is not in fact a question at all, but rather a gesticulation, some kind of fundamental and exclusively human response to a ‘feeling’ or ‘sense of wonder’. The recognition of this constitutes the solution to the problem, not by answering or explaining the problem, but in revealing it not to be a ‘problem’, properly so-called, at all.\(^\text{74}\) However, this response to the ‘problems of life’ (6.52) does not deny the sense of estrangement that compels the philosophical urge but rather relocates the sense of

\(^{72}\) Marcel, *Mystery of Being I*, 212.


\(^{74}\) ‘The solution of the problem of life is to be seen in the disappearance of this problem’. Wittgenstein, *Notebooks*, 74e.
perplexity to its native realm, that of the experimental.\textsuperscript{75} Wittgenstein claims that the ‘problems of life’ are not riddles to be solved by deploying wit and knowledge, in the way that one may find the solution to a cryptic crossword. He does not naively believe that life, experientially considered, is liberated from anxiety by way of semantic clarification. This, of course, would represent nothing more than the ‘solving of a riddle’. Rather, he preserves the priority of experience and asks, ‘is it possible for one so to live that life stops being problematic? That one is living in eternity and not in time?’\textsuperscript{76} Which is to say, can one dwell in the state of the mystical, and not merely assert it as a solution? This leads to the third point, that the mystical is not utterly ‘content-less’; it is not merely ‘that of which we cannot speak’, but rather possesses characteristics; the mystical wears a face such that it can be recognised as manifesting, such that one can live within it.

This insight can also be found in Marcel’s writings, where he establishes a distinction between the unknowable and the mystical: ‘here precisely lies the difference between what is mysterious and what is unknown. Only that which has interest in not being revealed is mysterious. Transition from the idea of mystery to the idea of revelation’.\textsuperscript{77}

For Marcel, it would appear, one is called to participate in mystery, and it is through the act of participation that meaning, significance and value are revealed, not impersonally and from afar, but in the concrete experience of the individual person. For Marcel this is possible because ‘there is an intimate relationship between the idea of mystery and the idea of value’.\textsuperscript{78}

While mystery and the merely unknowable cannot be collapsed into one another, the quest for explanation stands as an authentic prelude to both. As Marcel observes, his own

\textsuperscript{75} Wittgenstein does not make the same terminological distinctions as Marcel does between ‘problem’ and ‘mystery’. In the \textit{Tractatus}, there is no single term that can be cited as an exact translation of Marcel’s use of ‘problem’. Wittgenstein does apply the term ‘problem’ to refer to both the ‘problems of philosophy’ and the ‘problems of life’, albeit to convey fundamentally different meanings, as I have argued under the subheading ‘The Mystical and the Problematic’ above. The closest equivalent to Marcel’s meaning of ‘problem’ may be Wittgenstein’s understanding of ‘scientific questions’ (6.52).

\textsuperscript{76} Wittgenstein, \textit{Notebooks}, 74e.


\textsuperscript{78} Marcel, \textit{Metaphysical Journal}, 161.
‘philosophy . . . is carried by an irresistible movement towards the light which it perceives from afar and of which it suffers the secret attraction’.\(^7^9\)

While the final lines of the *Tractatus* could appear to leave the reflective reader, concerned with matters of meaning, ethics, divinity, and value, in a linguistic, conceptual and ontological abyss, Wittgenstein does make some clear remarks that identify ‘the mystical’ with that which ‘is higher’ (6.432). This category includes ethics, aesthetics, value, sense and God, all of which are necessary, ‘non-accidental’ (6.41), lie ‘outside the world’ (6.41) provides ‘sense’ or ‘value’ (6.41/6.521), and ‘make themselves manifest’ (6.522).

**The Mystical and Manifestation**

The possibility that referring to ‘the mystical’ can be philosophically meaningful (and the credibility of Wittgenstein’s distinction between *saying* and *showing*) rests upon how one understands the statement, ‘there are, indeed, things that cannot be put into words. They make themselves manifest. They are what is mystical’ (6.522). If the mystical is to be spoken of at all, even in the most general terms as that which exceeds language, and yet contains the source of value and sense, the notion of manifestation must be taken in utmost seriousness. However, this claim heard in conjunction with another remark creates an immediate tension: ‘How things are in the world is a matter of complete indifference for what is higher. God does not reveal himself in the world’ (6.432). These two distinct, and yet related statements suggest the realm of meaning/value/sense are, to some extent, inexpressible. Without critical examination, the question he posits in his *Notebooks*, ‘is it possible for one so to live that life stops being problematic? That one is living in eternity and not in time?’\(^8^0\) can only be responded to in the negative. If ‘God’, who is necessarily defined as the highest expression of value, meaning, all that is ‘non-accidental’, and who lies outside of the world, does not reveal himself in the world, Wittgenstein’s notion of the mystical, and his distinction between saying and showing, becomes, by his own standards, entirely hollow; saying and showing become defined by empirical standards.

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\(^7^9\) Marcel, *The Philosophy of Existentialism*, 46.

\(^8^0\) Wittgenstein, *Notebooks*, 74e.
By such standards, all that can be shown is ‘how little is achieved when these [scientific] problems are solved’. 81 Furthermore, if the mystical is neither within the boundaries of empirical science, nor able to be recognised outside of them, then the reference becomes utterly meaningless. Alternatively, when some strain is be exerted upon proposition 6.432, the fullness of its meaning begins to emerge and in so doing reveals further dimensions of what it means for the mystical to be manifest in the world. 82

The first distinction that must be applied to the claim of 6.432 is between ‘how something is’ and ‘that something is’. As I have argued above, the mystical does not arise from a feeling of how the world is, but ‘that it exists’ (6.44). At 6.432 Wittgenstein identifies God with ‘what is higher’, which in turn is identified with the mystical (6.41 to the close of the Tractatus). From this arrangement it follows that Wittgenstein is claiming that God is indifferent to all that is accidental, all that can be spoken of, all that lies within the scope of language and thought. God’s ‘precinct’, one could say, is not in the how of the world but in the that of the world, in that it is.

The second distinction concerns Wittgenstein’s application of the term ‘the world’. At 6.41 he is clear in stating a somewhat obvious point, namely that if value or sense is to be provided to the world, it must originate from outside the world. Meaning cannot be self-generated:

if there is any value that does have value, it must lie outside the whole sphere of what happens and is the case. For all that happens and is the case is accidental. What makes it non-accidental cannot lie within the world, since if it did it would itself be accidental. It must lie outside the world (6.41).

Here one is reminded that ‘the world’ is synonymous with ‘all that is the case’, as stated in the first proposition of the Tractatus. 83 Further, ‘the world is determined by the facts, and by their being all the facts (1.11), and ‘the totality of facts determines what is the

81 Wittgenstein, Tractatus, 4.
82 Wittgenstein’s application of the phrase – the mystical manifests – in the form of an intransitive verb (rather than the reflective) represents a specific aspect of his philosophical vision. Exploration of this feature is however beyond the scope of this discussion. Indeed Wittgenstein’s ‘Intransitive Vision’ may constitute a thesis in its own right! For a good, brief introduction to Wittgenstein’s notion of intransitivity see, Antonia Soulez, ‘Conversion in Philosophy: Wittgenstein's "Saving Word"’, Hypatia 15, no. 4 (2000), 134-35. See also Roger Scruton, ‘Wittgenstein and the Understanding of Music’, British Journal of Aesthetics 44, no. 1 (2004), 6-7.
83 ‘The world is all that is the case’ (1)
case, and also whatever is not the case’ (1.12). The above statements lead to the most important claim, that ‘the facts in logical space are the world’ (1.13). It is reasonable to assume Wittgenstein applied the term ‘the world’ consistently, and therefore in his later application at 6.432 one can infer that he is claiming that ‘God does not reveal himself’ in the ‘facts’ of the world, within ‘logical space’. God is not, according to Wittgenstein, ‘a fact like other facts, much less a thing among other things’.

At this point the distinction between ‘God’ and ‘the mystical’ should be addressed. This distinction is not made explicitly by Wittgenstein himself, though there are, I would argue, compelling reasons for the Tractatus to be read in light of this distinction. In short, between the Tractatus and his Notebooks, God is mentioned specifically and, with the exception of 6.432, is without attributes, while the mystical is discussed in conjunction with ethics and aesthetics. One implication that can be drawn from this is that God manifests Godself in the mode of the mystical, by way of the ethical and the aesthetic, and yet cannot be collapsed into either.

If this reading holds, it reinforces, rather than confuses, the claim that God, as the origin or source of the mystical, manifests Godself not in the world of facts, but in the world of individual experience: ‘to believe in a God means to see that the facts of the world are not the end of the matter’ (Notebooks, 74e). More specifically, however, though God is not manifest in logical space, neither is God manifest in an unadulterated and unmediated form. This is the second sense in which one can affirm that ‘God does not reveal himself in the world’.

On the strength of this distinction, the Tractatus can be seen to present three realms, or dimensions of existence. The first is ‘the world’ in the Tractatus’ sense of the term: a realm of facts which are devoid of meaning and in which God does not reveal Godself. The second is that the realm of the mystical ‘cannot be put into words’. By recognizing that ‘the facts of the world are not the end of the matter’, space is created that allows God

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84 Barrett, Wittgenstein on Ethics and Religious Belief, 95.
85 See Wittgenstein, Notebooks, 74e. & 86e.
to be recognised in the mode of the ethical and the aesthetic. In the ethical and the aesthetic, the mystical can be said to ‘manifest’ itself in a concrete and meaningful way. The third realm is value or God as such, on which absolute silence must be maintained, for it exceeds every possible mode of comprehension and expression. This reading of the *Tractatus* is necessary if Wittgenstein’s final invocation to silence, and his claim to have solved all the problems of philosophy, is to be taken with due seriousness. If the fullness of silence is to be heard most compellingly, as Wittgenstein may have heard it himself as he penned the final lines of his farewell discourse, then the ethical and the aesthetic should be recognised as the realm in which value and meaning, which is God, manifests itself with a clarity and presence that is only possible in the mode of incarnation.

However, if the mystical cannot find linguistic expression, in what sense can it be said to be present in the ethical? Wittgenstein states that ‘it is impossible for there to be propositions of ethics’ as ‘propositions can express nothing that is higher’ (6.42). Emphasizing this point, he writes, ‘ethics cannot be put into words. Ethics is transcendental’(6.421). From this one may conclude that Wittgenstein is not referring to the academic discipline of ethics, which operates within the realm of language (and therefore of what can be expressed), but rather is implying something like an existential orientation towards the Good, an ‘ungrounded way of acting’ that ‘cannot be put into words’ (6.421), but only shown. This notion of ‘the ethical’ finds expression within the arena of individual choice and action, in the ‘good or bad exercise of the will’ (6.43), in the decisions and actions that occur within the context of individual human freedom.

**The Ethical and the Individual**

The position proposed so far, regarding the relationship between the mystical and the ethical, opens the way for the central thesis of this chapter to be expressed. If the mystical is manifest in the ethical, and the ethical encompasses the freedom and responsibility that accompanies the exercise of the will, it follows that the mystical finds expression in the action of human beings, in the particularity of individual choice, within the wrestling of

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86 Wittgenstein, *Certainty*, 17e.
87 Wittgenstein, *Notebooks*, 17e.
conscience in the face of freedom. While the mystical is excluded from ‘the world’, from ‘facts’ and ‘all that is the case’, it is not excluded from, but rather, according to Wittgenstein, finds a most compelling expression within individual orientation and action. The human person, considered comprehensively, is evidently not a ‘fact’ in ‘the world’, but rather a vessel for value and meaning, a harbour in which the mystical comes to rest and be manifest. Reconsidering Wittgenstein’s statement at 6.432 in light of this reading, it would appear that if God were to ‘reveal himself’ (6.432) he would, according to the Tractatus, manifest himself in time and place, wearing the face of a particular human being, perhaps even, as Christians claim, the face of Jesus the Christ. The implications of this are far-reaching but begin by demanding that Wittgenstein’s philosophy be considered in existential terms. If ethics is the mode in which we meet the mystical, the centrality of the individual must be acknowledged, and the possibility must accordingly be considered that any postulation of ‘the mystical’ is, to borrow Marcel’s term, grounded in the ‘mystery of being’.

**The Mystical and the Shadowlands of Plato’s Cave**

Before considering more carefully the existential possibilities of Wittgenstein’s ‘deeply mysterious I’ 88, it may prove helpful to review the above analysis through Plato’s analogy of the Cave. In chapter one of this thesis it was argued that an existential style of philosophizing does not abandon Plato’s Cave, nor challenge the ‘structure’ of the cave, but rather locates the ‘seeker’ and the place of enlightenment within the cave itself, chained and bound in the shadowlands of existence. Here I argue that the Tractatus represents an obscure form of existential philosophy that, analogously speaking, finds its ultimate expression in the realm of Plato’s shadows; the concrete, immediate, and elusive features of individual existence. Operating within the analogy of Plato’s Cave, the parallels can be drawn as follows. The ‘world’ of the Tractatus is Plato’s Cave, outside of which lies its ‘sense’ or ‘value’. Like Plato’s Sun, sense or value generates the preconditions of human existence without which the shadows would dissolve into the inky-black void of nihilism. The limits of the cave are the limits of our language. To speak of what lies beyond the cave is to generate nonsense, to postulate signs to which

88 ‘The I, the I is what is deeply mysterious!’ Wittgenstein, Notebooks, 80e.
nothing in the cave corresponds. The Sun cannot be spoken of for it, in itself, does not ‘manifest itself in the world’. The Tractatus is written from within the cave and attempts to speak exhaustively of the features of the cave so as to lead the reader to the brink of the cave. By this process of negation, one arises at the point of the mystical: standing at the entrance to the cave one recognises the cave as a cave, and in this moment, feels ‘the world as a limited whole’, ‘sub specie aeterni’ (6.45). In this state of enlightenment the seeker does not transgress the boundaries of his/her existence and attempt to speak of the Sun as it is in itself, does not say ‘God’ but humbly confesses ‘Yahweh’, and returns to the shadowlands though anchored to eternity by way of art and action, the aesthetic and the ethical.

Like the light that emanates from Plato’s Sun, the aesthetic and the ethical cannot be spoken of directly but only engaged with. This is the final world of the Tractatus, a word that resides between the lines and that reveals the invocation to silence to be, equally, an invocation to action. This is perhaps what its author heard as he renounced his inheritance and abandoned the privileges of his aristocratic heritage for a humble and austere life teaching elementary schools in Lower Austria.

An Active Silence

Without compromising the philosophical and theological boundaries of this thesis, some reference must be made to the significant aspects of Wittgenstein’s life after he had finished the Tractatus, so that his final call to silence can be appreciated in its fullness. Glock argues that ‘the mystical passages [within the Tractatus] owe their existence to Wittgenstein’s experiences during the war’. Furthermore, it is generally held that during the war Wittgenstein became an obsessive reader of Tolstoy’s Gospel in Brief, so consumed by its content that he is said to have remarked, “at its time, this book virtually kept me alive”. Thus, the vision to which the Tractatus seeks to give expression is one that was revealed through the lens of wartime and the intellectual and spiritual persuasion of Tolstoy’s unorthodox and deeply humanistic presentation of Christianity.

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89 Glock, A Wittgenstein Dictionary, 108.
90 Sontag, Wittgenstein and the Mystical, 123.
Under the heading, ‘How the Mystical Shows Itself’, W. Donald Hudson provides a brief though insightful examination of Wittgenstein’s ‘silent years’.\(^{91}\) The years 1920-26 Wittgenstein spent living in the villages of Trattenbach, Puchberg and Otterthal. His living conditions, according to reports, were austere, absent of any of the privileges and material pleasures that would befit an Austrian aristocrat. Such a departure from what would be expected cannot be dismissed too easily, and some inquiry into his motivation needs to be made.

In agreement with the central contention of Wittgenstein (1973), by W.W. Bartley, Hudson claims that ‘Wittgenstein’s decision [to teach in the elementary schools of Lower Austria] should be seen as an application of the doctrine of showing’\(^{92}\) and, furthermore, ‘consciously or unconsciously, for better or worse, he [Wittgenstein] was engaging in an imitation of Christ’.\(^{93}\) Whether this is an accurate interpretation of Wittgenstein’s action, in terms of its specifically Christian dimension, is largely irrelevant to the concerns of this thesis. However, to the extent that Wittgenstein’s motivation to live and work in a capacity well below his talent, without reward or praise, represents the second and most important ‘part’ of the *Tractatus*, the Christian analogy is most fruitful.

By way of the Christian connection made by Bartley, one may recognise the incarnate mysticism of the *Tractatus*. That is, while the mystical is beyond all predications, it is *made flesh* in the mode of ‘the ethical’. That about which ‘we cannot speak’ can, it would appear, be *shown* and in fact can *only* be shown. Wittgenstein’s desire to ‘get the peasantry out of the muck’, however misguided his ambitions and expectations, represents the fullness of his invocation to silence.\(^{94}\) The actual content of Wittgenstein’s turn to the ethical is largely unimportant. As one influenced during his formative years by Roman Catholicism, and its understanding of mercy, justice and love, the expression of his impulse towards the ethical is not surprising. However, Wittgenstein was not a man so

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91 For a comprehensive account of these years see Ray Monk’s *Wittgenstein: the Duty of a Genius* (London: Cape, 1990).
consumed by his Christian identity that his actions represent, at heart, a turn to the Christian life. Rather, one should say that he was a man thoroughly consumed with the problem of meaning, the sense and value of life. After conceding that the ‘sense of the world must lie outside the world’ (6.41), and of such things one ‘must pass over in silence’ (7), he entered what Russell identifies as ‘a loophole through the hierarchy of languages’ – the way of showing. ⁹⁵ In this light it appears reasonable that Wittgenstein’s lived silence is the second part of the *Tractatus*, and it is the fulfillment of the ethical purpose for which he wrote the book. Hudson writes that ‘Wittgenstein made a conscious effort to live out the implications of the *Tractatus*, that is to *do* what could not be said but could be shown’. ⁹⁶ In the mode of the ethical (one aspect of the doctrine of showing) the ineffability of the mystical is not compromised by the finitude of language but rather is conveyed in the mode of particular engagement. If the mystical originates as a ‘feeling’ (6.45), as Wittgenstein claims, and finds expression in action, as he strongly implies by the way of life he choose after completing the *Tractatus*, the individual becomes primary as the vessel through which what is ‘higher’ (6.432) is made manifest or expressed.

**The Mystical and the Existential**

This reading of the *Tractatus* offers little in support of Wittgenstein’s position among the logical positivists of the Vienna Circle for it is, unashamedly, an existential reading. As stated at the outset, there is no attempt made here to offer a comprehensive view of Wittgenstein’s philosophy but rather to highlight philosophical possibilities that have, overall, been neglected and remain latent. ⁹⁷ Out of the possibilities so far explored, two stand as central to this discussion: first, the limit of thought and language in the realm of the mystical and; second, the possibility that in the ‘domain beyond the facts’ the mystical finds expression through becoming, in the general sense, ‘incarnate’ through the actions of individuals. ⁹⁸

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⁹⁷ My research has found only one text (not including journal articles) that undertakes an explicitly existential reading of Wittgenstein’s philosophy, though it focuses more upon his later writings. See Bearn, Gordon, *Waking To Wonder: Wittgenstein’s Existential Investigations* (New York: State University Press, 1997).
⁹⁸ Here the term ‘incarnate’ is being used in an anthropological-theological sense consistent with Marcel’s application, and distinct from the christological application assumed by a Christian framework.
Before exploring this second possibility, which seeks to establish the existential priority of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*, it should be noted that ‘the mystical’ – ‘feeling the world as a limited whole’ – and ‘the existential’ – in which the particularity of individual existence is held to be primary – cannot be straightforwardly associated without some explanation. Indeed, to view the world ‘*sub specie aeterni*’ (6.45) does not sit comfortably with a priority upon individual experience. Indeed, one should ask whether Wittgenstein’s notion of the mystical undermines the existential aspects of the *Tractatus*.

Wittgenstein makes no attempt to explain the content of the mystical; the *Tractatus* is not a guidebook to values, sense or meaning but only claims that these fundamental features of our existence lie outside the world, beyond facts and therefore cannot be spoken of and are necessarily ineffable. His fundamental concern is, in a sense, epistemological. Again, Plato’s analogy of the Cave can prove helpful. The limit of the cave is the limit of language and to attempt to articulate the mystical, to confine Plato’s Sun to the limitations of propositional thought, is to trespass into the realm of nonsense. Therefore, Wittgenstein’s postulation of the mystical does nothing more than confess the feeling that, beyond the cave of human comprehension, there is something that is the precondition of our existence [that, of course, is never ‘a thing’], that generates the shadows of which we can speak, and, furthermore, provides meaning to life. One may feel this possibility acutely in the disclosive emotion of sensing that even ‘when all possible scientific questions have been answered, the problems of life remain completely untouched’ (6.52). To engage with the problems of life, beyond the realm of the problematic, does not negate the ineffability of the mystical, nor does it undermine the possibility of authentic life, albeit lived in the shadows. If this is possible, then the end of logical inquiry does not suggest the end of inquiry as such. However, if the inquiry continues, the form or mode of expression must change to include the ethical orientation and practice of each individual. To ‘see the world aright’ (6.54), which is arguably the fundamental purpose of Wittgenstein’s philosophy, consists in recognizing that the condition of existing occurs within a ‘cave’ and that the pure light can never be grasped, articulated or encountered directly but only shown in its shadowy manifestations. This is
how the *Tractatus* can be read so as to maintain both its mystical and existential dimensions.

The final feature of this existential reading of the *Tractatus* will focus upon Wittgenstein’s understanding of the ‘deeply mysterious I’ in relation to ‘that of which we cannot speak’. The question arises directly from the doctrine of showing, and asks, simply, to whom is the mystical shown?

**The Mystical and the Individual**

‘The I, the I is what is deeply mysterious!’

The final movement of this chapter seeks to trace ‘the mystical’ of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* back to the more fundamental mystery of human being (Dasein), in the mode of the individual; the deeply mysterious I. Although the ontological mystery is not one of the primary concerns of his early philosophy, there are features of the *Tractatus* that demand that the ontological and existential implications be examined. For example, the mystical (‘that [the world] exists’ – 6.44) manifests itself in the ethical, which takes the form of an ‘I’ who ‘is the bearer of ethics’. If the ethical is borne within the ‘I’, and if the mystical manifests itself within the ethical, an immediate tension arises between the comprehensiveness of the mystical vision – ‘feeling the world as a limited whole’ – and the contingency of individual experience, where ‘the world is my world’ (5.62). If value lies outside the world and is ‘non-accidental’, as Wittgenstein argues at 6.41, and yet can manifest itself within the ethical (and aesthetic), one finds in the actions of the individual the meeting of two realms: the world of facts and the domain of meaning, sense or value.

When Wittgenstein writes, ‘The limits of my language mean the limits of my world’ (5.6), followed by ‘I am my world’ (5.63), he appears to be proposing a form of solipsism in which ‘nothing exists apart from oneself and the contents of one’s mind’. In this understanding, radical subjectivity reigns and the ‘subject [who] thinks or entertains ideas’ dissolves (5.631). If one were to write a book on ‘the world’, it should properly be

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100 Wittgenstein, *Notebooks*, 80e.
titled, ‘The World as I found it’ and would ‘include a report on my body, and should have to say which parts were subordinate to my will, and which were not, etc.’ (5.631). This position means that whether one is in Plato’s Cave or Wittgenstein’s world of facts, the subject determines ‘all that is the case’, or rather, ‘it is all that is the case’ for that particular subject, at that particular moment. Analogously, one might say that the headlights of a car determine the limits of what can be seen and what remains hidden. As the car moves, that which is illuminated changes, and yet whatever is revealed is constantly determined by the scope of the lights. In this way the headlights, like the human subject, establish the limit of the world – the ‘subject does not belong to the world: rather, it is a limit of the world’ (5.632). Wittgenstein compares this with ‘the eye and the visual field’ and notes, ‘really you do not see the eye. And nothing in the visual field allows you to infer that it is seen by an eye’ (5.633). Thus, the eye establishes the limits of the visual field, while for the ‘metaphysical subject’ (5.633, 5.641), the limit of language serves the same purpose.

From this point onwards, the dialectic nature of the Tractatus begins to reveal itself until it culminates in the postulation of ‘the mystical’. If there is ‘the mystical’, albeit inexpressible, the limits of language cannot be the final word, so to speak. McGuinness, in his article entitled ‘The Mysticism of the Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus’, 102 conducts a survey of ‘mystical experience’ which though careful not to explain what mystical experience is, attempts to describe how it feels. Quoting from William James’ The Varieties of Religious Experience, a text with which Wittgenstein was familiar, McGuinness proposes that in the mystical state ‘individuality itself seemed to dissolve and fade into boundless being’. 103 This understanding seems to correspond with Wittgenstein’s, that ‘feeling the world as a limited whole – it is this that is mystical’, to ‘view the world sub specie aeterni’ (6.45). Further to this point, ‘it is not how things are in the world that is mystical, but that it exists’ (6.44). Within Wittgenstein’s peculiar form of solipsism, considered in relation to his claim that there are ‘things that cannot be

102 McGuinness, ‘The Mysticism of the Tractatus.’
put into words … [but which] manifest’ (6.522), the reader faces the conundrum that individuals are shown existence as such, apart from its properties.

The way forward rests upon a distinction between the ‘thinking subject’ and a ‘metaphysical self who is not only the ineffable subject of experience, but also the ‘willing subject’, who ‘is the bearer of good and evil’. It is the ‘willing subject’ who is the point of contact between the mystical and the individual, who shows, by way of the ethical, the face of the mystical. The ‘thinking subject’, as Wittgenstein argues, does not really exist, for it stands within the thoughts it thinks (5.631). The ‘willing subject’ however, ‘is the bearer of ethics’, a vessel of ‘good and evil’, the home of the ‘I’, all of which are not facts within the world. An analysis of these terms and their relationship to one another could continue ad infinitum. However, the most important point is that beyond the limits of language the mystical and the existential can correspond, by means of the willing subject, the ‘I’. Wittgenstein says as much when he writes, ‘if the good or bad exercise of the will does alter the world, it can alter only the limits of the world, not the facts – not what can be expressed in words’ (6.43). As long as one remains within the limits of language, the world as a ‘limited whole’ is limited by my particular vantage point, it will always be ‘The World as I found it’ (5.631), the world of facts, which, of course, is the only world I can describe. If this was the final proposition of the Tractatus, Wittgenstein’s early philosophy is rendered complete, consistent, and utterly impoverished. If a reading of the Tractatus concludes with the limit of language, and fails to engage with the ethical and mystical priority of the work, it misses the second and most important part of the Tractatus, the ‘unwritten part’. Such a reading would neglect the crucial saying/showing distinction in which ‘the things that cannot be said at all, emerge only when I pass from consideration of how things are in my field of vision to consideration of how things are, full stop – to consideration, in other words, of the world as a whole’. And this is only possible through recognizing that at the heart of Wittgenstein’s quest for meaning stands the existing individual.

104 Glock, A Wittgenstein Dictionary, 386.
105 ‘What is good and evil is essentially the I, not the world.’ Wittgenstein, Notebooks, 80e.
106 Moore, The Infinite, 190.
Although Wittgenstein does not use the term, ‘existing individual’, it is strongly implied by his understanding of the ‘willing subject’ who takes up an attitude towards the world of facts – ‘the will is an attitude of the subject to the world’. The choice faced by the subject is whether to accept the world as it is, or reject it. That is, either to live in accord with the vicissitudes of the world, or to live in discord. Thus each subject faces an either/or in his or her choice of attitude. The substance of this choice, as well as its potential outcomes, is irrelevant to the concerns of this argument. What is important, however, is that choice is possible and that this choice by the willing subject is exercised from outside the world of facts. This follows from the willing subject adopting an attitude towards the facts, which, necessarily, cannot itself be a fact. This choice determines that ‘the world of the happy man is a different one from the world of the unhappy man’ (6.43). In the act of making a choice, in taking up an attitude towards the world, the mystical and ethical manifest themselves in the particularity of individual decision.

Within this reading of Wittgenstein’s early thought one may find the crowning glory of his ethico-religious vision: holding in exquisite tension the mystical and the existential; ‘There are two godheads: the world and my independent I’. Prior to this statement Wittgenstein acknowledges that one’s will is dependent on an alien will that ‘we can call God’. This alien will governs ‘the world – which is independent of our will’, and which can be called ‘God’. In the statement above, the ‘two godheads’ of which he speaks is ‘God’ and the ‘independent I’. Although this could be read as pointing towards a version of the Nietzschean ‘Overman’, the priority within the Tractatus upon the mystical and the ethical would suggest a different reading. Instead of equating his will with God, I suggest that one could reasonably infer from Wittgenstein’s comments that

107 Wittgenstein, Notebooks, 87e.
108 For an exposition of this aspect of Wittgenstein’s thought see Barrett, Wittgenstein on Ethics and Religious Belief, 103-06.
109 The ‘willing subject would have to be happy or unhappy, and happiness and unhappiness could not be part of the world’. Wittgenstein, Notebooks, 79e.
110 Wittgenstein, Notebooks, 74e.
111 Wittgenstein, Notebooks, 74e.
112 Wittgenstein, Notebooks, 74e. The ambiguity that arises between the association of ‘the world’ with ‘God’ and the statement in the Tractatus at 6.432 which says ‘God does not reveal himself in the world’ has been noted. However, Wittgenstein’s use of the terms could warrant an entire chapter. Here this is not possible, or necessary. The application of the two terms rests on the understanding that ‘the world’ and ‘God’ are one and therefore God does not manifest Godself ‘in the world’.
the individual, in his or her freedom, must choose to accept or reject God; to take up an attitude of acceptance towards the world, or to reject it. Only by upholding the priority of the ‘willing subject’ can the movement be made to the ‘domain beyond the facts’, to the realm of value and meaning beyond the constraints of language, without, at once, speaking of the unspeakable. As I have argued above, the ‘willing subject’ is the lynchpin that holds together the mystical and the ethical dimensions of the *Tractatus*, and that retains the fullness of both. This reading has suggested that the individual and the mystical, though not reconcilable within philosophical discussion, are integrated in the actions of the willing subject. In particular, aesthetics, ethics and religious belief are realms in which the individual acts and through which the mystical manifests itself. In other words, aesthetics, ethics and religious belief are the conduits through which the mystical is recognised in the world.

This discussion has understood Wittgenstein’s withdrawal from philosophical work and his subsequent ‘silence’ in the rural villages of lower Austria as the final argument of the *Tractatus*. Arising from this understanding, it has been argued that the mystical and the individual are conjoined through a relationship that is existential in its structure; that the mystical manifests itself through the situational actions of the individual, revealed in those practices (such as aesthetics, ethics and religious belief) that invoke, rather than exhaust ‘that of which we cannot speak’ (7).

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Chapter III - Existential Philosophy and Incarnation: Gabriel Marcel on Mystery, Truth and the Call to Be

In light of the call to silence present at the end of the Tractatus Logico-Philosophus, it is pertinent to reconsider the potential of philosophy, and therefore language, to invoke the domain beyond the facts, to re-consider the relationship between concrete experience, ultimate mystery, and the limits of sensible discourse. To this end it will be argued that there is another ‘loophole’ within the position of the Tractatus other than an absolute silence.1 Gabriel Marcel’s philosophical reflection upon concrete situations establishes in positive terms a definite way forward, restoring to philosophical inquiry the validity and relevance of personal experience.

While Marcel’s writings are not an intended response to the void left by the Tractatus, his method of philosophizing challenges some of the concluding themes of the Tractatus, in particular the scope of expressing that which lies in the realm of ‘the mystical’. This application of Marcel’s work is identified by Robert Rosthal, in his translator’s introduction to Creative Fidelity (1964). Conceding that Wittgenstein was right to claim that the mystical remains ‘inaccessible to communicable knowledge’, Rosthal insists that ‘cognitive knowledge does not exhaust the whole of reality, and “what cannot be said need not be nonsense; it can also be mysterious”’. We cannot of course speak of it in any cognitive way: “Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent”,2 but we can, according to Rosthal, speak of it in a ‘suggestive’ way.3 Even a cursory review of the body of literature found in Western philosophy that engages with questions of value, meaning, art, aesthetics, religious belief and ethics, not to mention Wittgenstein’s own philosophical efforts after the Tractatus, suggests that the

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1 This is evidenced, in part, by the indefiniteness of the ‘later Wittgenstein’s’ Philosophical Investigations. Ludwig Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001). One could speculate that, although Wittgenstein initially claimed that the dissolution of the question is itself ‘the answer’ (6.52), dissatisfaction with such an ‘answer’ began to emerge. After twelve years of ‘silence’ he did return to Cambridge, for perhaps, after all, ‘the world’ is more than ‘the totality of facts’ (1.1). To the extent that outcome is determined by method, Wittgenstein’s Tractatus cannot be the final word, for its method is so limiting and, at times, bizarre that its conclusion could never catch within its pincer-grip any of the substantial experiences that give rise to the act of philosophizing.
3 Marcel, Creative Fidelity, xxv.
closing remarks of the *Tractatus*, though seductive, are merely the end of one chapter in
the philosophical inquiry, not the end of philosophy as such, as Wittgenstein himself
acknowledged by his later career.

This chapter will begin by examining Marcel’s notion of ‘mystery’, focusing in particular
on its emphasis upon concrete situations and personal experience as disclosive.
Identifying ‘the mystical’ as the point at which traditional philosophical inquiry
terminates, as it did in the *Tractatus*, it will then consider Marcel’s alternative
methodology of ‘secondary reflection’. It will be argued that secondary reflection allows
for the possibility that the existential and ontological dimensions of human existence can
be held in tension and not collapsed one into the other. Marcel’s methodology, to the
extent that it allows this tension to be maintained, is the most valuable aspect of his
philosophy and will be further explored through his notion of ‘ontological exigence’; the
call to be, the relationship between Being in its universal mode and Being in its particular
expression, and between mystery that *is* and mystery that *beckons* us. This possibility will
be animated through the theatrical metaphor of ‘the mask’. The purpose of this metaphor
is to reveal how the universal can manifest itself in the particular, without compromising
the fullness of either. This claim forms the crux of the chapter and, in Marcel’s
philosophy, finds its most comprehensive expression in his notion of ‘incarnation’.

**Encountering ‘the Mystical’**

As argued above, Marcel’s distinction between ‘problems’ and ‘mysteries’ can be
understood as parallel to Wittgenstein’s separation of ‘scientific questions’ and the
‘problems of life’.

However, in the introduction to *Creative Fidelity*, this distinction is
proposed as an alternative to Wittgenstein’s call to silence. This identification supports a
tentative connection between Wittgenstein’s notion of ‘the mystical’, and Marcel’s
understanding of ‘mystery’. The term ‘mystery’, with its capacity for general and non-
technical application, to say nothing of its religious and non-religious expressions, is
particularly susceptible to abuse. The tendency to appropriate a term according to its

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familiar or traditional application cannot be overstated. Echoing the later Wittgenstein’s concept of ‘language-games’, as well as the earlier Wittgenstein’s concern with the parameters of sensible discourse, Marcel notes the inclination ‘within us to transfer the definitions and the categories that are valid only in the purely objective world into a realm of discourse where they do not properly apply’. As a prelude to engaging directly with Marcel’s understanding of ‘mystery’, I will explore the term as it is applied within three closely related contexts: first Wittgenstein’s use of the term ‘the mystical’; second, the theological application of the term and; third, in the domain of the problematic.

A Delineation of the Concept of Mystery

First, (as has been noted in the Translator’s Introduction to Creative Fidelity), a connection between Marcel’s notion of mystery and Wittgenstein’s use of ‘the mystical’ cannot be ignored. However, where Marcel can concede that ‘a mystery is something which, while insoluble in principle, is yet not senseless’, for Wittgenstein it is senseless; that is, ‘lacking sense’ by the logico-linguistic standards that he sets for meaningful discourse. In contrast, Marcel’s notion of mystery is a positive affirmation of a ‘deeply personal act by which the innermost part of being is revealed; it is a form of inter-subjective participation, which implies commitment, creativity, and inexhaustibility’. This characterization of mystery in terms of revelation and inexhaustibility establishes more firmly an association with Wittgenstein’s notion of ‘the mystical’ which, as argued above, is encountered in the lived experiences of ethics, aesthetics, and religious commitment. The association can be further strengthened by introducing Marcel’s notion of ‘inter-subjective participation’ which describes the creative and experiential dimension of human (inter)relationships, where aesthetics, ethics and religious commitment can be recognised most clearly. However, the fundamental dissociation lies in the fact that Wittgenstein’s mystical is the point at which the philosophical inquiry terminates, whereas for Marcel it is where it properly begins.

7 Marcel, Creative Fidelity, xxv.
Second, without attempting to identify the range of theological applications of this deeply religious term, it can be said that Marcel’s notion of mystery is not intrinsically or necessarily religious or theistic. Despite his identity as a religious thinker, a (reluctant) Christian existentialist, and a Roman Catholic, Marcel establishes a robust distinction between the ‘mystery of being’, the mystery that resides within the human condition and within each person, and the mysteries of Christian doctrine. On this he writes,

there is no question of confusing those mysteries which are enveloped in human experience as such with those mysteries which are revealed, such as the Incarnation or Redemption, and to which no effort of thought bearing on experience can enable us to attain.\(^8\)

It is the former expression with which Marcel’s philosophy is concerned, the universal-ontological ‘mystery of being’.

The third and final context concerns a distinction that has already been given considerable attention within an earlier discussion, but which requires one brief and final emphasis before proceeding. As Wittgenstein compellingly said by the close of his Tractatus, the domain of the problematic, comprising the ‘spectacle of empirical scientific inquiry’,\(^9\) must be put aside before one can authentically engage with the realm of mystery. This takes with utmost seriousness Wittgenstein’s remark that ‘we feel that even when all possible scientific questions have been answered, the problems of life remain completely untouched’ (6.52). Marcel’s characterisation of the realm of the problematic suggest that when ‘all evidence has been collected and all solutions announced, there is still no mention of basic existential questions: the meaning of being, the significance of time, space, eternity, God’.\(^10\) The domain of mystery does not merely describe the realm of the ‘unknowable’, which ‘is in fact only the limiting case of the

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8 Gabriel Marcel, *The Philosophy of Existence*, trans. Manya Harari (London: Harvill, 1948), 30. Further to this point Gerber writes ‘Mystery has neither a preternatural nor theological meaning. The term distinguishes a certain mode of investigation with respect to certain aspects of reality’, Rudolf J. Gerber, ‘Marcel and the Experiential Road to Metaphysics’, *Philosophy Today*, no. 12 (1968), 268. To be clear, Marcel is not claiming that his category of mystery has no bearing on religious thought, but only that a theological framework is not entailed and assumed within his category of mystery. Rather his work is a ‘generalization of his Christian faith and thus available to all humans, whatever their peculiar religious or non-religious commitment’. Robert E. Wood, ‘The Dialogical Principle and the Mystery of Being: The Enduring Relevance of Martin Buber and Gabriel Marcel’, *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 45, no. 2 (1999), 83.

9 Gerber, ‘Marcel and the Experiential Road to Metaphysics’, 268.

10 Gerber, ‘Marcel and the Experiential Road to Metaphysics’, 268.
problematic, [and] which cannot be actualised without contradiction’. The ‘recognition of mystery, on the contrary, is an essentially positive act of the mind, the supremely positive act in virtue of which all positivity may perhaps be strictly defined’. This emphasis that Marcel places on mystery, as the root condition of all philosophical inquiry, compels him to provide an account of it in terms that, though cautious, are distinctly positive. Accordingly, while his category of ‘mystery’ can be revealed in terms of what it is not, it can also, in qualified sense, be spoken of positively.

**Marcel’s Notion of Mystery**

The priority of ‘mystery’ in the thought of Gabriel Marcel is thoroughly evident. Apart from the efforts of many commentators, Marcel himself points his readers to the primacy of mystery as the way into his existential ontology. In the final chapter of *The Mystery of Being: Reflection and Mystery*, Marcel writes, ‘mystery . . . is the notion in which this whole first volume logically culminates, and it is around this notion, as a starting point, that the lectures in my second volume will be built up’. Again, in the introduction to his *Metaphysical Journal* Marcel writes, ‘for what is the unverifiable, of which so much is said in the first part of the *Journal*, if not mystery itself?’

Marcel’s notion of mystery is born out of a ‘central conviction [that] personal experience cannot be adequately accounted for either in the mode of subjectivity . . . or in the mode of objectivity’. Hence he proposes the ‘inter-subjective nexus’, the point at which object and subject meet, which, however, ‘cannot be in any way asserted; it can only be acknowledged’. Although this position, in terms of the limitations of assertion, may seem to echo the closing remarks of the *Tractatus*, Marcel’s comment is more corrective.

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13 Marcel, *The Mystery of Being: Reflection and Mystery*, 204.
15 Further to this point, Reeves identifies Marcel’s position between the purely objective and the merely subjective: ‘personal experience is neither merely subjective nor objectively impersonal, and only by a kind of self-betrayal can a person claim it is either’. This act of ‘self-betrayal’ consists, in Kierkegaardian terms, of forgetting the thinker who thinks the thoughts. Hahn and Schilipp, ed., *The Philosophy of Gabriel Marcel*, 246.
in spirit, rather than definitive. Countering the positivistic and individualistic philosophy of the Cartesian cogito, as well as the abstract formulations of traditional ontology, Marcel proposes a ‘metaphysic of we are as opposed to a metaphysic of I think’. Given this claim, Marcel is careful to avoid saying too much on the inter-subjective nexus as such, for to do so would undermine the very claim he is making. Furthermore, his notion of ‘assertion’ is bound to the domain of ‘facts’ and Marcel is careful to prevent the point of contact between objective and subjective domains from being reduced to a ‘fact in the world’.

Mystery and Personal Experience

Ever vigilant against the philosophical tendency towards abstraction, Marcel, the existentialist, characterises the ‘inter-subjective nexus’ by way of the details of personal experience. Enquiring in this way, the question of being is faced as a mystery that comprehends the inquirer, where ‘the distinction between what is in me and what is before me loses its meaning’. With this awareness, Marcel explores the category of mystery by ‘approximating through concrete examples’ which include, in the first volume of Mystery of Being, the somewhat strange but useful phenomena of ‘presence’ and ‘charm’. These qualities are not exhaustive but suggest two specific permissive conditions in which the concrete reality of the unverifiable may be revealed. In the case of ‘presence’, Marcel describes a situation in which a diner at a restaurant feels closer to a loved one, thousands of miles away, than he does to his fellow diners to whom he could reach out and touch. To his fellow diners he has, as Marcel describes it, merely ‘communication without communion’.

Similarly, according to Marcel, ‘charm’ is that which remains after everything has been accounted for. Charm ‘is not a physical quality, like red hair; nor is it a moral quality, like self-control, nor an intellectual quality, like a gift for mathematics. Thus the assertion ‘X

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18 ‘What can I assert? A fact, and nothing but a fact, since the fact is the only thing which is presented to me. But it is apparent by definition that what I call the inter-subjective nexus cannot be given to me, since I am myself in some way involved in it’. Marcel, The Mystery of Being: Faith and Reality, 10.
19 Marcel, The Mystery of Being: Reflection and Mystery, 211.
20 Marcel, The Mystery of Being: Reflection and Mystery, 211.
21 Marcel, The Mystery of Being: Reflection and Mystery, 205.
has charm”, or “X had charm” tends to undermine itself”. For Marcel, these qualities, presence and charm, are disclosive of something beyond themselves. They are not possessed by the subject yet they are manifest within the subject and thus are ‘shown’ by one subject to another. By these reflections Marcel assists his readers to recognise the inter-subjective nexus. Charm and presence are felt in an atmosphere of a certain intimacy . . . [and thus] not necessarily felt by anybody at all who comes across our charming person . . . [for it] works in some conditions and not in others, for some people and not for others . . . [which] underlines [its] non-objective character . . . [however] non-objective does not . . . in the least mean merely subjective . . . it does not mean being more or less of the nature of an intermittent hallucination. Instead of subjectivity we should think of intersubjectivity.

These examples illustrate the triadic structure of Marcel’s epistemology. Intersubjectivity exists between the two poles of objectivity and subjectivity. Intersubjectivity is the defining characteristic of personal experience which is located at the heart of all philosophical inquiry.

Mystery as Philosophical Context

Interestingly, in one of Marcel’s most explicit statements regarding his philosophical motivation he identifies with the restless heart of Augustine’s Confessions: ‘the most important element of my work is neglected unless the existence of ‘the “restless heart” mentioned by St. Augustine in his Confessions is clearly recognised as my motivating force from beginning to end’. Although Marcel establishes this passionate connection with what may be regarded as among Augustine’s most personally religious writings, his task is not essentially religious or theological. Rather, his task is ontological and the restlessness he shares with Augustine can, more specifically, be described as a yearning to be. It is the plenitude or fullness of being, first and foremost, which stirs within Marcel the restlessness that characterises his writings, albeit a ‘fullness’ that is experienced, as

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22 Marcel, The Mystery of Being: Reflection and Mystery, 206-07.
23 Marcel, The Mystery of Being: Reflection and Mystery, 207.
St. Paul says, as if ‘in a mirror dimly’ and ‘known only in part’ NRSV, 1 Corinthians 13:9,12). The extent to which Marcel’s idea of ‘being’ implies, entails or can be substituted for a conception of God is, for the time being, irrelevant. For now it is more important to note that this ‘restlessness to be’ is the spirit which moves Marcel’s inquiry; it is therefore the lens through which his philosophy should first be viewed.

**Revising the Philosophical Aim**

The notion of ‘being’, whether in the form of verb or noun, resists any attempt at straightforward appropriation or expression. Grappling with this philosophical ‘unknowable’ in his *Journal*, Marcel writes,

> whenever I try to consider [my philosophical] development as a whole, I have to observe that it has been dominated by two interests which may at first seem contradictory; the first of these is more directly expressed in metaphysical terms, but still lies in the background at least, of almost all my plays without exception. The latter is what I shall call the exigence of being; the first is the obsession with *beings* taken in their individuality but also affected by the mysterious relations which link them together. Clearly the paramount problem was to find some means whereby these two different inquiries could meet, although they first seemed oriented in opposite directions.\(^{25}\)

Two distinct though inseparable notions underlie this remark; individuality and the exigence of being. For Marcel, the question of being is meaningless apart from its manifestation within the individual. However, the exigence of being does not demand the suspension of particularity in favour of universality; rather, it consists in the realisation and *fulfilment* of particularity in the mode of *participation*.\(^{26}\) This understanding results in certain questions becoming impossible while other questions develop a previously unimaginable urgency. For example, Plato and Aristotle’s question ‘What is man?’ is surpassed by St. Augustine’s ‘Who am I?’, which is a question that Marcel was ‘guided and goaded by’ ‘throughout his life’.\(^{27}\) In short, by re-framing the inquiry in terms that regard personal experience as integral to philosophical authenticity, the seeking after


\(^{26}\) This understanding correlates with Martin Buber’s notion of the ‘I-Thou’ relation.

\(^{27}\) ‘Throughout his life Marcel has been guided and goaded by the question “who am I?” How to understand my own life, my own existence and my own world, these are the concerns that underlie all of Marcel’s work, both as a philosopher and as a playwright’. Clyde Pax, *An Existential Approach to God: A Study of Gabriel Marcel* (The Hague, Netherlands: Martinus Nijhoff, 1972), I.
being as such is abandoned. Instead, the inquirer is revealed to be thoroughly implicated as both the ground and object of the inquiry.

Further challenging the binary tendencies of the Western philosophical tradition, Marcel writes,

... the more the mind concentrates on being in its unity, in its transcendence, the more it is led to abstract from the diversity of beings, to view the latter as of trivial importance, as insignificant ... and inversely, the more our attention is concentrated on that diversity, the more we tend, it seems, to view being in itself as a fiction ... I have always rejected this dilemma [and have sought] 'to find some means whereby these two different inquiries could meet'.

His response is to relocate metaphysical questions from the abstract categories of objective thought to the concrete situations of individual persons. Underlying this approach is the conviction that metaphysical questions of philosophy are most authentically grasped through engagement with, and reflection upon, the existential dimension of human experience. But how can the ambiguity of individual existence – the questions of value and meaning, the conditions of hope and despair – find expression within any discipline, especially the philosophical one characterised by logic, reason and argument? These are questions of methodology which are not peripheral reflections undertaken instead of a more concentrated analysis of philosophical claims, but rather an exposition that is essential to making sense of any philosophical position, for ‘the truth of a philosophy is judged not only by checking the truth of its assertions but also by judging the fundamental attitude on which it is based’.

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28 Marcel, *Creative Fidelity* 148.
29 Hahn and Schilipp, ed., *The Philosophy of Gabriel Marcel*, 222. The ‘attitude’, one might say, establishes the parameters of the inquiry which, from the outset, determine the validity of the assertions. For example, Kierkegaard’s attack on Hegel’s philosophy is not targeted primarily towards the assertions, but rather, towards the fundamental attitude upon which it is based. Hegel’s attitude was in a particular sense ‘false’, for the goal and parameters were broad and all-encompassing to the point of impossibility. Kierkegaard’s critique of Hegel’s attitude over and above the assertions is revealed in this pointed comment: ‘If he had written his whole Logic and declared in the Preface that it was only a thought-experiment (in which, however, at many points he had shirked some things), he would have been the greatest thinker that ever lived. Now he is a comic’; Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, trans. David Swenson (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1944), 558. Another example where the truth or validity of the attitude is more foundational than the truth of the assertions can be found in Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*, which is concerned not with what is said but rather the basis upon which anything can be said meaningfully.
It is the contention of this chapter that personal experience is integral to philosophical inquiry, and where the inexhaustible, fathomless character of human experience is neglected, one is left with only the empty shell of philosophy in which ‘the problems of life remain completely untouched’ (6.52). Alternatively, the restoration of the personal, relational and experiential dimension of existence to philosophical inquiry will help to overcome subjective-objective dualism. However, if this is to be undertaken without compromising intellectual rigour, a revised methodology will be required: one that admits wholeheartedly the blurry datum of personal experience. This is, as Pietro Prini describes it, ‘a methodology of the unverifiable’.  

With this kind of orientation, the horizon of philosophical inquiry widens and invites us ‘beyond the frontiers of the realm of the problematical.’

**In Search of an Appropriate Methodology: Two Modes of Reflection**

Both the fruits of Marcel’s philosophical labour and his method of harvesting provide a dramatic point of contrast to the early Wittgenstein. Marcel characterises the spirit or mood of his philosophical inquiry in terms of a quest or exploration: ‘we must investigate, search, continue on; in the same way as the adventurer indicates a path to follow, the explorer the trails he has not been able to take’.  

His method is suitably approximate, open-ended and gently persistent, for his attitude is that of an explorer rather than an athlete, for whom the goal must be clear and in sight.

Although Marcel’s discussion is at times repetitive, or circular, ‘like switchbacks on a trail up the side of a mountain’, it is not wayward, blind or without direction; and though it moves towards an unspecifiable goal, it moves with the promise or sense of destination. That ‘destination’ is, for Marcel, a state of intimacy with Being. It is a state of intimacy (or estrangement), the fulfilment of a deep urge and restlessness, and is in this way a ‘mystery that comprehends us’ rather than an answer to a question. For this reason, any attempt to provide an abstract and exhaustive definition of ‘being’ does violence to

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32 Marcel, *Creative Fidelity*, 61.
Marcel’s entire endeavour and represents a failure to understand the fundamental attitude or spirit of his work.  

One of the strengths of Marcel’s philosophy is that it explicitly discourages any impulse to reduce mysteries to problems. The reduction of the mysterious, the ineffable, into an article of knowledge over which a conclusion can be stretched, though characteristic of the Western philosophical tradition, seems to reach its zenith in the Hegelian system, when Hegel’s philosophy is understood as not merely positing the existence of a logos, but in fact promising that it can be grasped within an intelligible framework. This is the reading of Hegel against which Kierkegaard launched his impassioned protest, accusing Hegelian philosophy of purporting to be a complete philosophical system. This understanding of Hegel’s philosophy, though not unequivocal, is also assumed in the passionate protests of Schelling, Nietzsche, and, later, Heidegger. Further, this spirit can be found in Wittgenstein when he writes, ‘God does not reveal himself in the world’ (6.532). However, in rejecting all metaphysical conjecture as ‘nonsense’, Wittgenstein renders philosophy almost entirely useless for responding to ‘the problems of life’. By contrast, Marcel proposes a way forward in the form of secondary reflection, which seeks to penetrate ‘by hint and metaphor and symbol, into a realm in which we participate and which we do not merely survey’.  

This is distinct from primary reflection which, broadly speaking, is characterised by a more scientific model of inquiry.

One can speculate that Marcel, if he were to have examined Wittgenstein’s Tractatus would have concluded that it is a work of primary reflection, one that ‘abstracts out certain features [of existence] for consideration which leads to the development of philosophy, of the sciences and technical arts and consequently to a transformation of that first lived immediacy into a set of problems’.

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33 However, to preclude certain approaches to the question of being implies that something is known. For example, to say that ‘Being is unknowable’, is inescapably to predicate of Being ‘unknowability’. Of course no inquiry is without its object, however indefinite, for an inquiry without some inkling or hunch of that which is being inquired after, is not an inquiry at all. A search, without some conception of the object of the search, is sheer absurdity. See Socrates in ‘Meno’s Paradox’.
Primary Reflection

Marcel’s resistance to clear definitions of his key terms makes it difficult to identify their precise meaning. This imprecision, however, is integral to his method of primary reflection. Accordingly, attempts to provide definite and once-and-for-all-time definitions of ‘primary reflection’ are highly questionable. That said, his distinction between the scientific and the philosophical modes of inquiry does provide some insight into his understanding of the meaning of authentic philosophical inquiry.36

For Marcel, a problem is something within a class of objects, something that stands before one, waiting to be comprehended, solved, and thus ‘obtained’.37 Clearly, the object of the inquiry determines the means of the inquiry; a telescope is used to gaze at the stars, not to peer into a person’s soul; the methods of a cardiologist are sought in the case of a heart attack, not in the case of a ‘broken heart’. Similarly, primary reflection is the method of inquiry for the objective and the problematic; ‘primary reflection is problem-solving thinking’.38 As there are many different expressions of ‘problems’, equally there are many different modes of primary reflection, though its enduring characteristic is its capacity to ‘abstract out certain features for consideration’ (which has occurred in the construction of this sentence).39

Primary reflection is the cornerstone of scientific and technological inquiry, for without this cognitive process no pattern, prediction, or principle could arise. Without abstract conception every black crow seen, for example, would become a new discovery, and one’s world would shrink to that of a goldfish, for which every cycle around the bowl is, it is speculated, a new experience. Perhaps the most important and immediate example of

36 His distinction between primary and secondary reflection operates within a matrix of dichotomous poles that, at base, can be conceived in terms of ‘objectivity’ and ‘subjectivity’. At these epistemological poles Marcel identifies a series of parallel expressions. For example, ‘problem’ (objective) and ‘mystery’ (subjective), ‘abstract’ (objective) and ‘concrete’ (subjective), ‘having’ (objective) and ‘being’ (subjective). For a tablature presentation of these ‘two poles’ see Gene Reeves’ essay in Hahn & Schilipp, ed., The Philosophy of Gabriel Marcel, 245-71.
primary reflection is language itself, for it is by abstracting from objects their defining features that communication occurs.

To be clear, Marcel does not dismiss the importance of primary reflection, and the principles of verification that it entails. Rather, this protest against the spirit of abstraction arises when the methods of primary reflection are misapplied to ontological inquiry and concrete experience; when questions of meaning, value and ethics, truth and being, are treated as problems that stand before the inquirer ‘in their entirety’.  

Primary reflection, though ‘necessary and beneficial in approaching problems, is incapable of handling the original data of mysteries in which the knowing subject is implicated’.  

Clearly, the question, ‘who am I’? is one in which the knowing subject is implicated and therefore it cannot be treated as a straightforward problem, of a kind with, ‘what is brass?’ , ‘what is gold?’ To push the question – ‘who am I?’ – away from the inquirer is to apply the method of primary reflection. However, ‘when I probe into my meaning in asking myself that question’ I have exceeded the category of primary reflection and entered into the realm of secondary reflection. Thus the need for secondary reflection begins to emerge when the ‘problem-thinking approach of primary reflection folds back on itself; when the very principles, conceptual strategies, and data employed to solve the problem preclude the possibility of ever reaching an objective solution’.

This is the conundrum Wittgenstein faced in the *Tractatus*; it is the philosophical ‘fly-bottle’ from which he sought release. Though Wittgenstein may have been to some degree successful in demonstrating that metaphysical propositions are, strictly speaking ‘meaningless’, his proposal consists in little more than releasing the inquiring fly from

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40 Marcel, *Being and Having*, 109. In support of Marcel’s position, Reeves writes, ‘I would argue that abstracting is both necessary and good but that the spirit of abstraction becomes perverted when the abstract and the concrete are confused and the abstract made to appear more real and more valuable than the concrete’, in Hahn and Schilipp, ed., *The Philosophy of Gabriel Marcel*, 247.

41 Gerber, ‘Marcel and the Experiential Road to Metaphysics’, 270.

42 Marcel returns to the ‘question on which, really, all the other questions hang: it is the question I put when I ask myself who I am and, more deeply still, when I probe into my meaning in asking myself that question’. Gerber, ‘Marcel and the Experiential Road to Metaphysics’, 270.

43 Thomas A. Michaud, ‘Secondary Reflection and Marcelian Anthropology’, *Philosophy Today* 34, no. 3 (1990), 224.
one prison into another; that is, from the prison of nonsensical propositions into the prison of a silent void.\textsuperscript{44} Marcel offers an alternative by conceding that his philosophical inquiry has been impinged upon by the existential particularities of his life, and that these ‘impingements’ are actually integral to doing philosophy authentically. In the second volume of \textit{The Mystery of Being}, he states in the opening paragraphs,

> life has intervened since that distant time, with all the joys and sorrows, all the discoveries and frustrations that it can bring to any being. I find since that time that the formulae which used to give me a certain amount of satisfaction are no longer apposite.\textsuperscript{45}

Marcel is, inescapably, an existentialist who refuses to separate life from thought and who, furthermore, sees in such division the signs of a ‘broken world’. This state of ‘brokenness’ illustrates a condition where thought has forgotten its existential origins; where the abstract concept has omitted the concrete situation out of which it has been abstracted. In his play, \textit{The Broken World}, the title of which he believes ‘can be applied very fittingly to the entire collection of [his] dramatic works’,\textsuperscript{46} Marcel expresses this state of ‘lifeless thought’ where, for example, the expression ‘I love you’ has become a quotation. This existential point of crisis, where the limitations of primary reflection can be witnessed most compellingly, is presented by the character of Christiane, facing the reality of her loveless partnership, in Act 1, scene IV, of \textit{The Broken World}:

> Don’t you feel sometimes that we are living . . . if you can call it living . . . in a broken world? Yes, broken like a broken watch. The mainspring has stopped working. Just look at it, nothing has changed. Everything is in place. But put the watch to your ear, and you don’t hear any ticking. You know what I’m talking about, the world, what we call the world, the world of human creatures . . . it seems to me it must have had a heart at one time, but today you would say that the heart had stopped beating.\textsuperscript{47}

\textsuperscript{44} ‘The correct method in philosophy would really be the following: to say nothing except what can be said, i.e. propositions of natural science – i.e. something that has nothing to do with philosophy – and then, whenever someone else wanted to say something metaphysical, to demonstrate to him that he had failed to give meaning to certain signs in his propositions. Although it would not be satisfying to the other person – he would not have the feeling that we were teaching him philosophy – \textit{this} method would be the only strictly correct one’ (6.53).

\textsuperscript{45} Marcel, \textit{The Mystery of Being: Faith and Reality}, 2.

\textsuperscript{46} Francis J. Lescoe, ed., \textit{The Existentialist Drama of Gabriel Marcel} (Connecticut: The McAuley Institute of Religious Studies, 1974), 10.

\textsuperscript{47} Lescoe, ed., \textit{The Existentialist Drama of Gabriel Marcel}, 36.
This is a depiction of existence unhitched from its moorings, estranged from its source, like an astronaut severed from the mother ship. It is, furthermore, an image that points us towards the peril of separating an inquiry into existence from the dynamic particularities of existence, which are at once the forces that underpin the inquiry. The danger, as Marcel presents it, is that outwardly ‘nothing has changed’ and ‘everything is in place’. And yet, if one were to incline one’s ear and listen for sounds of movement and life, for the beating of a heart, if one were to step forth and embrace it, one would find only the corpse of an inquiry, an apparently animated face behind which, however, the mainspring has stopped working – the facade of life.

The limitations of primary reflection can be identified in many other aspects of Western philosophy. In fact, even without reference to Socrates, Pascal, or Augustine, one needs to look no further than the closing lines of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* to find a similar impasse. Wittgenstein is clear that the scientific method, or its philosophical expression in logical positivism, leaves ‘the problems of life’ ‘completely untouched’ (6.52). After all, how can the ground of the inquiry be at once the object of the inquiry? If ‘all of us are the persons we are trying to understand’, there is no place for an objective mode of investigation. Therefore, where philosophical inquiry is limited only to those things that can withstand logical or ostensive definition, it is indeed impossible to discuss metaphysical or ontological matters without falling into ‘nonsense’. On this point, there is agreement between Wittgenstein and Marcel. However, where the difference emerges most starkly is in their responses to this limitation. Where Wittgenstein’s invocation of silence presumptuously claims the final philosophical word, Marcel identifies the beginning of authentic philosophical exploration. It is on this side of Wittgenstein’s silence that Marcel’s inquiry proceeds, forging a way by means of *secondary reflection*, redeeming the philosophical quest by purging it of a need for certainty that neither befits, nor can be sustained by, the open-ended particularity of human existence. It is against ‘the spirit of abstraction’, that Marcel’s philosophy rallies. Like Kierkegaard, whose literary flair and pseudonymous biographical method defined his philosophical thought,

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48 See Chapter One of this thesis
Marcel employs the ‘*dramatis personae*’ as ‘the means to explicate and communicate what is in the philosopher’s mind’.  

51 Engagement with the literary element of philosophical inquiry overcomes the spirit of abstraction that plagues Western philosophy and characterises Marcel’s method of secondary reflection. However, like the second unwritten part of the *Tractatus*, the inadequacies of primary reflection reveal the necessity of secondary reflection.

**Secondary Reflection**

The deep significance of secondary reflection lies in its promise to allow the heart to beat once again; to restore to the philosophical clock the mainspring of personal experience. The essential unity that Marcel identifies as constitutive of being human, primary reflection ‘tends to dissolve . . . [despite] the unity of experience which is first put before it’.  

52 Secondary reflection, therefore, ‘is essentially recuperative; it reconquers that unity’.  

53 It does this through a wholehearted engagement with the ‘reality of the self, with which we have already come in contact so often, [and yet are] always to be struck by its disquieting ambiguity’.  

54 This acknowledgement of ambiguity provides an important clue to understanding the category of secondary reflection, for it is, above anything else, an ‘epistemological device for dealing with those data which cannot be completely detached from the questioning subject and which, therefore, cannot yield absolute objectivity’.  

55 Unlike primary reflection, which proceeds, by way of abstraction, from the immediacy of concrete experiences to the generality of universal principles, secondary reflection traces a path back to the concrete and the personal, finding there the only authentic engagement with fundamental questions of existence. In the history of philosophical and theological writings, this movement can be recognised, for example, in Augustine, who responds to the question of the human being’s relationship to God through recording the movements of his own heart in his *Confessions*, and also in Kierkegaard, for whom the universal is revealed by way of the particular, presented through a variety of pseudonymous biography. These expressions of ‘secondary reflection’, through ‘replunging into the

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51 Allen, *Existentialism from Within*, 150.
52 Marcel, *Mystery of Being: Reflection and Mystery*, 83.
54 Marcel, *The Mystery of Being: Reflection and Mystery*, 83.
immediacy of personal existence, re-establish[es] the primacy of the existential within the ontological horizon’.\footnote{Gerber, ‘Marcel and the Experiential Road to Metaphysics’, 271. However, while this account may seem a compelling way of proceeding, one must ask why the existential was neglected in the first place? One could speculate that the western philosophical tradition, defined as it is by ‘logical, didactic and analogical (rather than dialectic) thinking’, resisted the tension and the inherent ambiguity that such an approach entails. The tension arises from placing the existential factors at the heart of the ontological inquiry, affording a primacy to the particular in a quest for the universal. The ambiguity that follows from this is appropriately unavoidable, for any existential confession can never stand as an objective and absolute truth.} Thus, the method of secondary reflection is one of restoration by way of the indistinct, for it takes as its point of departure the eternally elusive and mysterious self, existing in a unique, dynamic and particular situation.

From this analysis two main points emerge: \textit{First}, Marcel’s task, through his deployment of secondary reflection, restores to the methods of philosophy, a \textit{concrete approach}. That is, the individual in his or her situation is the point of departure \textit{and} place of arrival for all ontological inquiry. Kierkegaard makes a similar point when he writes,

\begin{quote}
the subjective thinker is an existing individual and a thinker at one and the same time; he does not abstract from the contradiction and from existence, but lives it while at the same time thinking. In all his thinking he therefore has to think the fact that he is an existing individual.\footnote{Kierkegaard, \textit{Postscript}, 42.}
\end{quote}

He disputes the possibility of speaking of ‘being as such’, divorced from its particular manifestations. Individual being, for Marcel, is the only path to Being as such. Through the emphasis he places on the particular, while at the same time resisting the tendencies of solipsism or radical subjectivism, Marcel introduces the universal dimension of the individual person. The individual person is, in a sense, a vessel for Being. This is the \textit{second} point; the ‘fulcrum’ or ‘springboard’ of secondary reflection, as Marcel describes it, ‘is just that massive, indistinct sense of one’s total existence which a short time ago we were trying to . . . locate as an existential centre’.\footnote{Marcel, \textit{The Mystery of Being: Reflection and Mystery}, 93. Marcel’s statement here can be related to Wittgenstein’s at 6.45: ‘To view the world sub specie aeterni is to view it as a whole – a limited whole. Feeling the world as a limited whole – it is this that is mystical’.} In this, Marcel reveals the existential and ontological character of his vision, in which the individual experiences a sense of the universal - of his or her total existence. From this perspective existential data casts an unmistakable shadow on the ontological horizon.\footnote{However, it is not a lone shadow that is cast in Marcel’s philosophy but a community of shadows, a composite of individuals, defined and held together by a relational anthropology.}
In upholding the primacy of the individual in all metaphysical questions, Marcel has placed at the centre of his inquiry data that encroach upon and implicate the inquirer. And yet he refuses to abandon metaphysical questions as such. Consequently, his method reveals the inexhaustible and imprecise nature of philosophical knowledge. This position, though not without its opponents, can be recognised in none other than Wittgenstein himself, the so-called ‘logical positivist’, who initially responded to the impossibility of an adequate philosophical language with a call to silence, and then who later absorbed the inherent ambiguity into the framework of ‘language games’. Marcel, in a sense, moves straight to position of the later Wittgenstein, convinced that a dynamic and imprecise method is ‘synonymous with philosophy itself viewed as an effort to restore the concrete beyond the disconnected and discontinuous determinations of abstract thought’.  

Marcel takes ‘original data . . . in which the knowing subject is implicated’ as the only suitable material out of which to weave the philosophical fabric. However, the ‘knowing subject’ is no passive entity, merely acted upon from without, but the dynamic individual, grounded in the particular circumstances of his or her existence and who can, most importantly engage with or resist the onto-existential dimension of his or her life. This choice, as Hamlet might say, ‘to be or not to be?’ is indeed the existential choice par excellence, and places at the heart of Marcel’s ontology the freedom of the individual.

**Ontological Exigence: ‘The call to be’**

Marcel’s impetus to philosophy, as already noted, is of a kind with Augustine’s restless heart that calls us to enter into and realise the fullness of Being. Marcel speaks of a metaphysical lack: ‘One thing we, or at least some of us, feel acutely: it is this lack of something, this impoverishment, this aridity . . . We have already seen that it is by starting from that point that we can experience what I have called ontological exigence’.  

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60 Marcel, *Creative Fidelity*, 22.
61 Gerber, ‘Marcel and the Experiential Road to Metaphysics’, 270.
Thus it is out of the ashes of the inadequacies of logical categories, the limitations of philosophy narrowly construed, that the call to be is heard. It is a call rather than a question; a demand that exceeds the realm of the problematic, manifesting with the spirit of immediacy in the concrete conditions of personal experience. Marcel illustrates this distinction through an analogy of encountering a flower in his garden. He writes,

it is not the flower which tells me its name through the medium of the botanist; I shall be forced to see that the name is a convention . . . [and] by that convention we slip out of being properly so called, and all that we shall learn will be what one can say about the flower if we leave out the one important thing – the singularity which forced my attention, or which, in other words, spoke to me.\textsuperscript{63}

Resisting the temptation to label the flower, to account for its existence by abstracting from its particularity its genus and species, one is faced with its sheer existence, its ‘is-ness’. In fact, even to say “flower” would indicate entry into the realm of the problematic and cognitive, and simultaneously a forgetting of being. Echoing something of the Zen traditions of edifying silence and immediate experience, Marcel implies that the exigence of Being cannot be heard, in its fullness, through its attributes. Being, to use a somewhat trite expression, ‘simply is’. However, it is encountered with this clarity once, as Wittgenstein would say, ‘all possible scientific [and philosophical] questions have been answered’. Therefore, ‘being, in the full sense of the word, cannot be treated as a datum’.\textsuperscript{64} But if it is not datum, what form does its exigence take, if to define it is to undermine it?

This reading of Marcel’s existential ontology may appear comparable to Wittgenstein’s notion that the mystical is manifest only within the creative dimension of human existence, in particular within art, ethics and religious commitment. Indeed there can be found significant points of contact. However, the main difference in Marcel’s vision is the identification of a primordial ‘call to be’. It is, as he says above, a ‘singularity which forced my attention, or which, in other words, spoke to me’. This call is heard, as if from a personal deity. Though Marcel does not use such terms, the relational character of all his writings strongly implies that the call to be is of a kind with a religious or spiritual call to authentic existence, not entirely dissimilar, for example, to Moses’ call to lead his

\textsuperscript{63} Marcel, The Mystery of Being: Faith and Reality, 14.
\textsuperscript{64} Marcel, The Mystery of Being: Faith and Reality, 37.
people out of bondage in Egypt. And though it is not a call to political action, Marcel’s ‘call to be’ is most definitely a summoning to existential action, to be liberated from our own Egypt in which we are imprisoned daily. It is thus a call from within and beyond; at once inexplicable and impossible to ignore.

If this analysis were the final point, ontological exigence would be rendered beyond the scope of philosophy altogether (allowing for a fruitful approach only from within a religious, spiritual or social-anthropological context). However, Marcel is committed to upholding both the metaphysical-philosophical and personal dimension of ontological exigence: ‘the exigence of being is not a simple desire or a vague aspiration. It is, rather, a deep-rooted interior urge, and it might equally well be interpreted as an appeal’.65 The important point is that ontological exigence, or the call ‘to be’, is addressed to individuals, heard and responded to by individuals, and yet consists in something greater than any particular individual or the sum total of all individuals.

Clarifying the ambiguous relationship between the universal and particular dimensions of individual existence, Marcel writes; it is ‘my being and not my being which we are considering’.66 This subtle distinction holds the key to understanding Marcel’s existential ontology, and offers a way beyond the impasse of pure objectivism or pure subjectivism. The essence of the distinction is revealed by the place of italicised words in the sentence. That is, ‘my being’ implies the possession of being by oneself. As argued above, if it can be possessed, it becomes an object, even an object of inquiry, datum awaiting quantification. Alternatively it might be seen as entirely subjective, and the whole ontological question descends into solipsism. Such an understanding of Being is not, according to Marcel, an understanding of Being at all. Another possibility, and one which needs to be rejected, is that of Being ‘emptied of individual characteristics’.67 Within an existential inquiry, such a notion of being is a fiction as being can only be approached ‘in

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terms of particular beings and their relations’.  

Therefore ‘being’ is always considered, in some sense, as ‘mine’.

This now leaves open for consideration another reading. By placing the emphasis upon being, Marcel shows the character of being as at once universal and yet, most importantly, only encountered through the particularity of being human. This distinction can be clarified by way of an analogy with the use of a ‘family name’. For example, a family name such as ‘Hugo’ belongs to no one exclusively. It can never be possessed by an individual in its entirety. The family name ‘Hugo’ does not belong, in its entirety, to ‘Victor’. If it could, it would cease to be a family name. However, one attempts to consider it aside from the particular persons who hold the name, equally it ceases to be a family name. If there are no persons who bear the family name the conditions for its meaning are absent. Equally, if there is a single person who bears and exhausts the full meaning of the name, it no longer satisfies the criteria for being a ‘family name’.

Similarly, Marcel’s notion of Being is one that is present within all human beings and cannot exist aside from this fact. Thus, there can be no conception of ‘being’ ‘emptied of individual characteristics’. Equally, however, there is no being that can be ‘yours’ or ‘mine’, for being is at once within each human being and beyond any human being.

In the domain of mystery, in which Being is encountered in the interplay between universality and particularity, the application of metaphors that hint at but never exhaust meaning may prove helpful. Accordingly, a theatrical metaphor will now be drawn into this discussion as a means of exploring the ambiguous relation between Plato’s pure light, and the shadowlands of individual existence.

It is significant that, of all available metaphors, the theatrical should be chosen to elicit the more subtle features of Marcel’s philosophy. Although Marcel’s dramatic works were not received as favorably as his philosophical writings, he attributed to them primary significance for conveying his philosophical ideas. While not explicitly connected, Aldo

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68 Marcel, Creative Fidelity, xxi.
69 Marcel, Creative Fidelity, xxi.
Tassi’s article, ‘Person as the Mask of Being’, takes up many of the themes of Marcel’s philosophy, addressing questions of being in terms of the metaphor of the ‘actor’s mask’. This metaphor illustrates what is arguably the central contention of Marcel’s philosophy: the notion that ‘the more the mind concentrates on being in its unity, in its transcendence, the more it is led to abstract from the diversity of beings, to view the latter as of trivial importance, as insignificant’. The image of the theatrical mask, as the metaphorical face of being, suggests that the general or abstract can only be encountered by way of the particular or individual. That is to say, the ‘theatrical character’, prior to being inhabited by the actor, floats above and beyond the stage in a state of sterile, isolated, abstraction until it manifests itself in the particularity of a performance. This is when an individual inhabits the character and, in so doing, reveals the character to the audience.

Metaphorically speaking, Being, until it is considered in terms of his being, her being, yours and mine, remains a lifeless ‘character’, an idea upon the page of a script, not an individual who can be encountered upon the creaking floorboards of a stage. Until that character is inhabited by the actor, it remains in the realm of abstraction. Therefore, the purpose of the mask is not primarily to conceal but rather to reveal. It is ‘a withdrawal that reveals’, in which the ‘actor hides ‘behind’” the mask in such a way that it releases a ‘revelation’.

In proposing that the question of being is concealed in the mystery of personal experience, Marcel locates the most fruitful realm of inquiry in the ‘intersubjective nexus’.

The claim underlying the theatrical metaphor is that the ‘character’, unembodied by the actor, is shapeless and un-built. There is no character as such, and yet there is something, prior to theatrical embodiment, that may be called ‘a character’. Although a name, and a series of attributes revealed through a series of events can constitute a ‘character’, it could be seen, from the perspective of the theatrical metaphor that the character is floating around in a state of abstraction until embodied by an actor. For example, in everyday language one often hears it said, at the awarding of an accolade for a theatrical performance, “You brought Ophelia to life”, or “After your performance, I felt like I

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70 Marcel, Creative Fidelity, 148.
personally knew Don Quixote”. Similarly, ‘in nature’s world, being transforms itself into something else, into someone, a person’.\(^{72}\) This is, in Marcel’s terms, ‘being in the world’ and yet it is this very condition that allows us to turn ‘our glances up towards a higher sphere’ and herein lies the paradox of Marcel’s existential metaphysics.\(^{73}\)

This exposition of Marcel’s notion of Being, and the call ‘to be’ has so far focused on its more general features, which now require some brief remarks, by way of summary. Marcel is clear that Being can only be approached by way of the individual, that ‘the more we are able to understand the individual being . . . the more we shall be oriented, as it were directed towards, a grasp of being itself’.\(^{74}\) This approach is born out of the understanding that ‘in affirming being I affirm myself in a uniquely intelligible way’;\(^{75}\) and the questions, ‘Is there being? And Who am I? – cannot be separated’.\(^{76}\) The implication that follows reveals most sharply the genuinely existential character of Marcel’s ontology: ‘human beings are a species “in-between”, ‘between Being and Non-Being’ who are ‘called upon to be – that it is our responsibility to be’\(^{77}\). The act of ‘affirming being’ is an act of freedom and an expression of response to the ‘invocation of being’.\(^{78}\) This ‘invocation’ is also described by Marcel as the ‘exigence of being’ or the ‘call to be’. It is, in short, an invitation to which the individual may respond or ignore. Accordingly, Marcel’s notion of being and individuality achieve their sharpest expression when explored within the context of individual human freedom. Marcel’s methods of ‘first-degree and second-degree reflection’ are expressions of this freedom, for they are presented as alternative means of inquiry and are, therefore, ‘decided by an option, a radical choice’\(^{79}\). The capacity to choose and the possibility of alternatives are fundamental to being an individual. In fact they contribute to the definition of what it means to be an individual; ‘to live means for the individual: to be and to will his being,

\(^{72}\) Tassi, ‘Person as the Mask of Being’, 204.

\(^{73}\) Marcel, \textit{The Mystery of Being: Reflection and Mystery}, 219.


\(^{75}\) Schilipp and Hahn, ed., \textit{The Philosophy of Gabriel Marcel}, 382.

\(^{76}\) Schilipp and Hahn, ed., \textit{The Philosophy of Gabriel Marcel}, 382.

\(^{77}\) Gabriel Marcel, \textit{The Existential Background of Human Dignity} (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1963), 77.

\(^{78}\) Schilipp and Hahn, ed., \textit{The Philosophy of Gabriel Marcel}, 382.

\(^{79}\) Schilipp and Hahn, ed., \textit{The Philosophy of Gabriel Marcel}, 222.
the two aspects form an inseparable unity’. Out of this analysis of Marcel’s philosophy, three key categories emerge, all of which are distinct from one another and yet, at once, inseparable: being, the individual, and freedom; enveloped, as it were, in the cocoon of mystery.

The confession of mystery does not imply the abandonment of a search for metaphysical truth, but rather that metaphysical truth can only be located within the existential fulcrum of concrete experience. When this becomes ‘the given’, so to speak, then there is no way ‘forward’ that is not, epistemologically speaking, a way backward; to the initial impulse and concrete set of circumstances out of which the questions arose: This is the method of secondary reflection. This way, for Marcel, is the only way of doing authentic philosophy; for the ‘affirmations of existential philosophy are perpetually in danger of losing their inner substance, of ringing hollow’, which occurs when the questions of human existence are abstracted from the mystery of particularity in which they are implicated.

Again, we return to the individual person who participates in Being. However, though Being is universal in its reach and significance, it is one ‘which embraces all beings not by abstracting from but by including the unique individuality of each’. Thus the individual is sustained by it and yet cannot be reduced to it, and can, furthermore, choose to be or ignore the invocation. This situation, as Marcel describes it, is one of incarnation; a category which offers the fullest expression of his existential ontology.

**Incarnation**

Marcel’s notion of incarnation is not a reference to the Christian article of faith that asserts the historical and particular incarnation of God the Son in the person of Jesus, whom Christians confess as ‘the Christ’; nor is it a reference to the various expressions of incarnation found in Hinduism or Buddhism. Marcel’s use of the term ‘incarnation’ is not christological or religious in any formal sense. It does not imply the manifestation of God

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in the form of a particular human being in a historical, salvific or unique way. Rather, incarnation describes the fullness of the ontological and existential dimensions of being human.\textsuperscript{82} In the revealing title of his first chapter of \textit{Creative Fidelity} – ‘Incarnate Being As The Central Datum Of Metaphysical Reflection’ – Marcel proposes this definition:

interpreting the word “being”, here, in its verb rather than substantive form . . . to be incarnated is to appear to oneself as body, as this particular body, without being identified with it nor distinguished from it – identification and distinction being correlative operations which are significant only in the realm of objects.\textsuperscript{83}

In what would later become his \textit{Metaphysical Journal}, Marcel writes, ‘I am \textit{always and at every moment} more than the totality of predicates that an enquiry made by myself – or by someone else – about myself would be able to bring to light’.\textsuperscript{84} This comment makes clear that he is open, from the outset, to the reality of mystery and the limitation of explanation. Regarding the definition of ‘incarnate being’ provided above, it can further be seen that the personal pronoun ‘I’ exceeds one’s empirical identity, in the union of one’s self and one’s body; the condition, it might be said, is one of \textit{enfleshment}, carrying with it the particularity of ‘being here’ and ‘not there’. This existential ontology is revealed in the meaning of the term ‘incarnate’; for there is something more than the material and empirical self that is incarnate and yet there is, equally, the carnal, the flesh inhabited by that which is not flesh.\textsuperscript{85} This is the ‘fundamental situation [of] incarnation. I am involved in, I participate in, the world, I can think only within and out of concrete situations’.\textsuperscript{86}

The effect of a philosophy that rests upon the category of ‘incarnation’ is that it returns ‘to the immediacy of personal experience and thus re-establishes the primacy of the

\textsuperscript{82} On the relationship between Marcel’s philosophy and Christian faith, Marcel told Paul Ricoeur that his work was ‘a generalization of his Christian faith and thus available to all humans, whatever their peculiar religious or non-religious commitment’. Wood, ‘The Dialogical Principle and the Mystery of Being’, 83. For the complete discussion between Gabriel Marcel and Paul Ricoeur see Gabriel Marcel, \textit{Tragic Wisdom and Beyond}, trans. Stephen Jolin & Peter McCormick (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 217-56.

\textsuperscript{83} Marcel, \textit{Creative Fidelity}, 20.

\textsuperscript{84} Marcel, \textit{Metaphysical Journal}, 199.


\textsuperscript{86} Allen, \textit{Existentialism from Within}, 162.
existential situation within the ontological horizon and in this way ‘the status of incarnation can be taken as the central core of all metaphysics’. However, there is another dimension to Marcel’s notion of incarnation that exceeds traditional metaphysical concerns. He posits ‘the body’, the incarnate state, as that which ‘establishes the human existent as an opening to the other person’. This aspect of being incarnate reveals that the philosopher is always ‘embedded in a society and a civilization for which he has a share of responsibility and all his work must be done against this backdrop’. This condition Marcel describes as the ‘inter-subjective nexus’, which is where the universal dimension of Being is encountered within the existential setting. This emphasis upon particularity that is entailed by the inter-subjective nexus, however, presents a variety of challenges. For example, if individual experience is afforded a legitimacy over and above objective/empirical/verifiable knowledge, ‘what reason is there to think that the philosophy which grows out of this situation has value for anyone other than the one who is actually philosophizing’. This is the type of question implied by the close of the *Tractatus*, and which led, in Wittgenstein’s case, not to the dismissal of the primacy of individual experience, but rather the dismissal of philosophy (metaphysics) as such. The emphasis Wittgenstein placed on the ‘second unwritten part’ of the *Tractatus* testifies to his commitment to experience over abstraction. Marcel refuses to relinquish either the universal or the particular, but rather persists within an irreducible tension (though Marcel, like Wittgenstein, ‘recognises music, poetry, and even the concrete lives of certain exemplary witnesses as appropriate vehicles for the expression of the universal’).

In his discussion of *value*, a matter that underpinned the *Tractatus*, Marcel writes, from an abstract point of view . . . it may seem ridiculous to speak of a situation of values: and if values are considered as ideas there is no sense in saying they are situated. It is quite otherwise if one admits, as I do not hesitate to do, that a value is nothing if it is not incarnated.

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88 Gerber, ‘Marcel and the Experiential Road to Metaphysics’, 271.
90 Allen, *Existentialism from Within*, 162.
92 Marcel, *Tragic Wisdom and Beyond*, xxvii.
In this regard, both Marcel and Wittgenstein point to a kind of interface between the universal and the particular that can be recognised in the individual human being.⁹⁴ For Wittgenstein, art, ethics and religious commitment are the modes in which the individual encounters the mystical. For Marcel, the individual, considered in the fullness of his/her personhood (that is, where their ontological, existential and relational dimensions are integrated), and by way of secondary reflection, is the point at which the universal and the particular meet, and where neither is compromised by abstraction or subjectivism.

The emphasis upon the validity of personal engagement for both Wittgenstein and Marcel means that ‘the search is not only for an understanding of reality but for ‘my door’ to reality. Or, stated differently, the search is for an understanding of reality which does not exclude my personal participation in the real’⁹⁵.

The concrete situation in which the individual hears and responds to the call to be is where one realises one’s ontological, existential and relational identity. Within this framework, ‘incarnation can be taken as the central core of all metaphysics’.⁹⁶ Thus, the universal cannot be reduced to the particular, nor the particular abstracted into the universal, for both at once stand apart and are bridged in the forms that emerge from genuine human freedom. This is the kind of universality Marcel is interested in; that is, one that entails, rather than precludes, personal experience. Instead of the traditional emphasis upon the ‘generality of the universal’, Marcel is concerned with the universality that is ‘represented in “unalterable’ values to be discovered in experiential encounter’.⁹⁷

This approach can imply, as it does for Marcel, that ‘the universal is to be found especially in the “existential assurances” encountered in experiences of love, hope, fidelity, and other related ones such as belonging’.⁹⁸ This rendering of the ‘universal’ may appear strange when considered within the context of the Platonic framework of traditional Western philosophy. However, Marcel is not claiming that the universal is equivalent to love, hope, fidelity or belonging, but rather that the universal is encountered

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⁹⁴ This is the key claim of the thesis so far.
⁹⁵ Pax, An Existential Approach to God, 9.
⁹⁶ Gerber, ‘Marcel and the Experiential Road to Metaphysics’, 271.
⁹⁷ Marcel, Tragic Wisdom and Beyond, xxvi.
⁹⁸ Marcel, Tragic Wisdom and Beyond, xxvii.
and accessed through these experiences. This is the form of the Real. This position is one that seeks the universal Presence in and through the particular presence of individual existence. Marcel’s refusal to perpetuate the traditional metaphysical oppositions renders him a strange figure in the shadowlands of Plato’s Cave.

It was argued above that Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*, analogously speaking, affirmed the reality of Plato’s realm of shadows (which, in the language of the *Tractatus*, would be considered ‘the world’) as well as the Sun (the ‘mystical’, the source of ‘values/sense/meaning) that lies outside the cave and which animates and defines the fuzzy and ambiguous features of human existence. It was further argued that Plato’s Analogy of the Cave, placed over the *Tractatus* in the way of a template, would reveal that Wittgenstein’s call to silence begins at the brink of the Cave, at the rim of the fly-bottle. Nothing beyond the Cave can be spoken of and hence all metaphysical questions of value and meaning are nonsense. Applying the Platonic template to Marcel’s philosophy, a different reading of the analogy of the cave is suggested.

Like Wittgenstein, Marcel refuses to speak of the world of forms or of the perfect, immutable, absolute and universal – the Real, the allegorical Sun. As argued above, Being, according to Marcel, cannot be grasped apart from its manifestation in individual human beings. Thus, Marcel admits that the seeker or inquirer cannot exceed the boundaries of the Cave. For Marcel, as for Wittgenstein, the shifting and sliding world of shadows is our world, our existential point of departure and the salvific place of arrival. The call to be is heard within the cave and is followed or ignored within the cave and, if it is followed, is realised within the cave. However, the distinctiveness of Marcel’s philosophy is to be found in his understanding of the ‘shadows’. As suggested earlier, the shadows, as much as they are distortions of the pure light, are affirmations and evidence of the light, for without the light there can be no shadows. By the consistency of the analogy, the existence of the shadows is evidence of the sun. The shadows do not merely imply the existence of light as a point of logical necessity, the shadows, as silhouettes,

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99 Marcel rejects the possibility that one can exceed the boundaries of the cave. Speaking within the context and qualification of ‘mystery’ could be seen as equivalent to preceding every metaphysical utterance with, ‘Speaking from within the Cave . . .’
provide the outline, or form, that enable identification of the light (in the paradoxical sense that the power of the sun is recognised most acutely in the moment of eclipse). Figuratively speaking, the light of pure being is made manifest by the shadows of individual existence, by their intersubjectivity.

The relational component of Marcel’s philosophy (in terms of love, fidelity, hope, and belonging) implies a mutuality that, within the analogy, arises through full engagement with one’s ‘fellow-shadows’. Unlike Plato, who characterises the seeker of truth as a solitary figure who breaks the shackles, and proceeds alone towards the mouth of the cave and the pure light, Marcel’s philosophy identifies the genuine seeker among the shadows, always among the shadows, for the shadows are where one finds the light, where being is disclosed through engagement with individuals, where the universal exists within the particular, and where, to extend this vision into the theological domain, God is with humankind.

This thesis seeks to challenge the assumptions of an empirical scientific notion of evidence where it is misapplied to questions of religious truth. It has been argued that personal experience is not merely valid but integral to a notion of truth understood in its fullness. In other words, truth in its fullness encompasses and reveals most fully, rather than eliminates, the multifariousness of human existence.

Because this discussion seeks to avoid subjectivist or solipsistic conclusions, classical questions of truth must be acknowledged and given due consideration. At the same time, the validity of individual existence and personal experience has, through an exploration of Marcel’s writings, been located at the heart of authentic philosophical reflection. To draw from these traditional rivals a fruitful and authentic philosophical reflection, the notion of ethico-religious truth must be considered with all seriousness. If truth is understood as the terminus of inquiry, this discussion of the *Tractatus* and Marcel’s generalised notion of incarnation identifies the terminus in the ethical, relational, religious – existential – orientation and practice of the individual. Emerging from this
background, the discussion will now turn to the existential structure of Kierkegaard's notion of subjective truth.
Part II

Chapter IV - Subjective Truth and Objective Uncertainty

If God held all truth concealed in his right hand, and in his left hand the persistent striving for the truth, and while warning me against eternal error, should say: Choose! I should firmly bow down before his left hand, and say, “Father, give thy gift; the pure truth is for thee alone”

The overall aim of this thesis is to explore and affirm the existential and relational identity of Christian faith when it is whole-heartedly grounded upon, and defined by, a christological notion of truth. In terms of overall structure, this chapter will seek to chart a course from the implicitly incarnational flavour of the existential philosophy so far considered, to the explicitly Incarnational character of Kierkegaard’s writings. This will be done by considering Kierkegaard’s existential notion of truth, expressed in terms of being in the truth.

An inquiry of this kind is aroused by the existential restlessness and ontological yearning that can be recognised in the early Wittgenstein’s ‘silent participation’, and in Marcel’s conviction that the ‘status of incarnation . . . [is] the central core of all metaphysics’.

The possibility that one may stand in a personal relation to ‘truth’, and not merely grasp it ‘with the tentacles of cold, prying thought’, will form the central thesis of this chapter

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1 Lessing, Werke, Vol. X, p. 53, in Søren Kierkegaard, Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments, ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, 2 vols., vol. 1 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 129,562. This comment by Lessing establishes, in literary terms, the framework of my inquiry into truth; that is to say, it points to the humanity of truth, the partiality and on-going-ness of understanding and the priority of experience over abstraction. Thus it points to the connection between an existential and religious understanding of truth.

2 The capital ‘I’ Incarnation and the lower case ‘i’ incarnation will hereon denote the distinction between, respectively, the Christian notion of Incarnation – specific and exclusive to Jesus of Nazareth – and the concept of ‘general incarnation’ that can be found in the writings of, among others, Marcel and Jaspers.


4 Friedrich Nietzsche. ‘It makes the most material difference whether a thinker stands personally related to his own problems, having his fate, his needs and even his highest happiness therein; or merely impersonally, that is to say, if he can only feel and grasp them with the tentacles of cold, prying thought’, in H.J. Blackham, Six Existentialist Thinkers (New York: Routledge, 1997), 23-24.
and will lead the inquiry to the more radical and, and in the Kierkegaardian sense, ‘offensive’ proposition of Christian faith: that a particular person, in history and in eternity, is \textit{the} truth; that truth could pitch his tent among us.

Certainly this chapter is not so foolishly ambitious as to attempt a thorough-going analysis of the term \textit{truth} in all its varying instantiations. Rather, consistent with the existential emphasis of the earlier discussion, this chapter will attempt to generate an understanding of truth that is not divorced from its particular expressions or manifestations, but which, equally, cannot be collapsed solipsistically into them. This will introduce, by way of Kierkegaard’s philosophy, an understanding of truth that is eternal and temporal; in christological terms, a truth that is as divine as it is human. It will, accordingly, be argued that a purely logical or linguistic notion of truth is deeply unsatisfactory and that such a notion of truth does not fail through inconsistency or inaccuracy but rather, as Wittgenstein said in the \textit{Tractatus Logico-Philosophus}, leaves ‘the problems of life completely untouched’ (6.52). Although the ‘truths’ of analytic philosophy may appear to solve many philosophical problems, such solutions are little more than testimonies to ‘how little is achieved when these problems are solved’.\footnote{Ludwig Wittgenstein, \textit{Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus}, trans. D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness (London: Routledge, 2001), 4.}

After providing a brief outline of some alternative models of truth, this chapter will take, as its ‘star of Bethlehem’, the ethico-religious notion of truth that emerged from the preceding existential reading of Wittgenstein’s \textit{Tractatus}. This notion of truth (6.41) exceeds strictly cognitive boundaries, and therefore demands more from its adherents than verbal assent; it implies \textit{participation} and therefore one must speak of being \textit{in} the truth, as one speaks of being \textit{in} love.
Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard

The way into the heart of Kierkegaard’s understanding of truth will be by way of Wittgenstein’s notion of ‘that which lies outside the world’ and yet which is manifest in aesthetics, ethics and religious belief. The connection between these two philosophers can be seen here in the ‘mystical’ categories of the Tractatus which bear a striking resemblance to Kierkegaard’s Stages of the ‘aesthetic, ethical and religious’. Though traditionally regarded as engaged in fundamentally different enterprises, for ‘both of them the issues of ethics and the religious life are closely involved with the need for clarity and for health’. Furthermore, Wittgenstein was well acquainted with Kierkegaard’s writings, citing, endorsing and drawing parallels between Kierkegaard’s notion of ‘paradox’ and his own idea of running ‘up against the boundaries of language’, an affinity that has ‘become increasingly known in recent years’. In reviewing Kierkegaard as Religious Thinker, Westphal makes this further point: ‘the philosophical partner for reading Kierkegaard is neither the existentialist nor the postmodernist who often play this role, but Wittgenstein’.

The movement from Wittgenstein to Kierkegaard via Marcel’s concern with ‘mystery’, ‘incarnation’, and the primacy of ‘personhood’ ensures that ‘truth’ can never be adequately considered within a framework of abstraction. Rather, it must be recognised as shrouded in the fundamental mystery of existing in which ‘subject and object interpenetrate and cannot be separated [for] they are mutually involved constituents each of the other’. ‘Truth’, in such a framework, can never be regarded as a person’s possession but rather as something in which a person participates; hence the truth is

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8 Wittgenstein writes, ‘I can well understand what Heidegger means by Being 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 has also seen this throwing of oneself and even described it in a very similar way (as throwing oneself against the paradox)’. Cyril Barrett, Wittgenstein on Ethics and Religious Belief (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991), 22.
9 Gouwens, Kierkegaard as Religious Thinker, 17.
11 Blackham, Six Existentialist Thinkers, 69.
never, comprehensively, in a person but rather, one might say, the person is (or is not) in the truth.

Philosophy and Scripture

Underlying the structure of this thesis is the assumption that message and medium, though distinguishable, should never be separated. To separate the fact of existing from the questions of existence represents a rupture at once grand and ridiculous. As Clark says so succinctly, reflecting on Marcel’s notion of personhood, ‘all of us are the persons we are trying to understand’.12 When we forget or forsake this, we are relegating ourselves, with Hegel for company, to Kierkegaard’s ‘dog kennel’ or ‘porter’s lodge’ which sits limp and lonely in the damp cold shadows of a conceptual palace, high-vaulted but hollow.13

As message and medium are mutually penetrating, the experiential and relational dimension of Christian truth will invite into the conversation narrative and poetry, for we can encounter by ‘hint and metaphor and symbol . . . a realm in which we participate and which we do not merely survey’.14 For this reason a brief reflection upon the Gospel of John will be attempted; its Prologue and one of the key narratives. However, it will not be the aim of this discussion to attempt an exegetical exposition of various passages of Scripture, which would exceed the scope and expertise of this fundamentally concept-driven dissertation.

A Brief Survey of the History of the Notion of Truth

A Post-modern Conception of Truth

Every inquiry into truth is problematic from the outset for it seeks as its object that which must be assumed to be the condition of the inquiry. It is therefore at once the most elusive

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13 The fullness of Kierkegaard’s image is this: ‘A thinker erects an immense building, a system, a system which embraces the whole of existence and world history, etc. – and if we contemplate his personal life, we discover to our astonishment this terrible and ludicrous fact, that he himself personally does not live in this immense high-vaulted palace, but in a barn alongside of it, or in a dog kennel, or at the most a porter’s lodge’. Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, trans. Walter Lowrie (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1938), 68.
and most concrete of all philosophical categories. Paradoxically, the notion of truth is, one might say, so familiar as to be utterly foreign, so necessary as to appear almost irrelevant. However, to look again, in wonder and awe, at the foundations of life is the charge of philosophical inquiry. This preoccupation with fundamentals can be found in Heidegger’s seminal text, *Being and Time*, in which he addresses the question of being, understood as something so raw and simple as to have been both assumed and forgotten by the Western metaphysical tradition.\(^\text{15}\)

However, the positing of truth, in any objective and comprehensive sense, has perhaps never been more unpopular within the Western intellectual tradition than it is today.\(^\text{16}\) We live in a culture that is infused by ‘post(s)’; post-modernism, post-structuralism, post-colonialism; an intellectual climate that, in other words, may be characterised in terms of denials and refutations, rather than affirmations. One of the most eloquent expressions of this, prior to its popularisation in ‘post-modernism’, can be found in Nietzsche’s classic parable of ‘The Madman’. The madman proclaims the death of God, the demise of an objective point of reference, and proceeds to characterise this condition – post-God – manipulating and inverting, with striking delicacy, Job’s confession of faith:

How ‘did we do this? How could we drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continually? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there still any up or down? Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing? Do we not feel the breath of any space? Has it not become colder? Is not night continually closing in on us? Do we not need lanterns in the morning?’\(^\text{17}\)

\(^{15}\) Heidegger begins, ‘For manifestly you have long been aware of what you mean when you use the expression “being”. We, however, who used to think we understood it, have now become perplexed’. ‘Do we in our time have an answer to the question of what we really mean by the word “being”? Not at all. So it is fitting that we should raise anew the question of the meaning of Being’. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie & Edward Robinson (London: Basil Blackwell, 1962), 199.

\(^{16}\) The characterization of this period as a post-modern one in which truth is relativised is not intended to suggest that such an understanding is novel but only that it has never before been as popular and all-pervasive as it is today. Indeed, the post-modern tendency to relativise truth could be read as little more than the development of the claim of the pre-Socratic philosopher, Parmenides, that ‘of all things the measure is man, of things that are, that they are, and of the things that are not, that they are not’. Richard Campbell, *Truth and Historicity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 40.

\(^{17}\) I cite this as an example of what Peter Vardy describes as a ‘Nietzschean version of post-modernism’ that brings us to the ‘end of the road of objective inquiry’. Peter Vardy, *What Is Truth* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 1999), 103.
The human condition characterised in such terms could suggest that any inquiry into truth, other than equivalent to unbridled subjectivism, is impossible. To inquire after truth where there is no horizon, no night and day, enveloped instead within an infinite nothing could sound like little more than a quaint and sentimental recollection of yesterday’s happy illusion. And if one attempted to speak of truth, in definite and costly terms, perhaps one would resemble Kafka’s couriers, ‘who hurry about the world, shouting to each other . . . messages that have become meaningless’ for there are no kings to infuse the message with meaning.  

Though written over one hundred years ago, Kafka’s depiction is not without resonance in today’s culture which can be characterised by a ‘widespread sense of disillusion about the very possibility of attaining truth, and whether it [truth] is very important. Perhaps what we call truth is, as Nietzsche cynically alleged, just today’s convenient fiction’. If we are living within a period of sceptical relativism, where every truth begins and ends within the individual, where truth can never be more than, or less than, yours, mine or ours, what does it mean to speak of truth, what are the implications, expectations and demands carried by this term?

If this is a period where sceptical relativism is the dominant philosophical model of truth, the question that must be asked is, what are we sceptical about, what has been relativised? This can be explored most fruitfully by leaping back to Plato where the horizons are in place and the lanterns are lit only at night. In Plato one finds a notion of truth as timeless, unconditioned and ultimate. How can this signifier, truth, straddle this gulf, deep and wide? How can this single term undergird such a diversity of expressions and yet remain meaningful?

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18 Kafka writes, ‘they were offered the choice between becoming kings or the couriers of kings. The way children would, they all wanted to be couriers. Therefore there are only couriers who hurry about the world, shouting to each other – since there are no kings – messages that have become meaningless’. Franz Kafka, Parables and Paradoxes (New York: Schocken Books, 1961), 47. It would be a superficial reading that saw in post-modernism the abandonment of truth altogether, and the writings of Emanuel Levinas and Jaques Derrida testify to that. However, it would be equally unsatisfactory not to recognise that under the sway of post-modernism, truth has been relativised to an unprecedented degree.

19 Campbell, Truth and Historicity, 2-3.
Truth as Ultimate

As was briefly outlined in the earlier discussion, Plato’s notion of truth can be identified in his positing of the Forms and the ultimate Form of the Good. For Plato, the world of sensation is a fallen realm, an imperfect manifestation of the universal and necessary, unchanging and perfect ideas or forms to which they (dis)correspond. Plato’s Analogy of the Cave reveals that his epistemic understanding of truth ‘admits of degrees’, that our condition is one of entrapment within a Cave where we mistake the shadows cast upon the wall for the things themselves. Therefore the truth, the ultimate form of the Good, is not within and among us, but rather above and beyond us, outside the cave, beyond the capacity of sensate experience, though present in the movements of the intellect. Nonetheless, however fallen or obscured our capacity for understanding is, we can be eternally consoled by the existence of a reality that exceeds the fluctuations of our perception. To be in truth, for Plato, is for one’s ideas to correspond to the forms, for existence to correspond to essence. Clearly this is a long way away from the pliability and relativity of post-modern truth which challenges not so much the degrees to which truth can be attained, but whether there are truths at all; whether there is a truth which one can seek.

What is it that truth refers to if it can be the thread that runs from the pre-Socratics to the post-moderns, via the history of western philosophy? In her article titled ‘History of Philosophy and the Critique of Reason’, Genevieve Lloyd encapsulates this dilemma when she writes that ‘the problem is that philosophy takes as its domain eternal truth; but history must recognise the reality of change’.²⁰ So far, truth has been considered as relative and objectively impossible, and as ultimate, fixed and unflinching. Now it will be considered in terms of its existential character.

Truth as Finality

Due to the brevity of this survey, some working definitions of ‘truth’ must now be proposed. What has emerged so far is that, whether truth is posited as ultimate or relative, subjective or objective, transcendent or immanent, its persistent character is one of

finality. That is to say, the truth, in whatever form it takes, represents the terminus of explanation. Michael Gelven observes that the ‘mind is ever restless in its probing until it can find some sort of terminus or satisfaction’. On this basis, whatever the content of truth, its function within language, knowledge and experience is to bring the inquiry to the final point of explanation. Truth is the sharpest expression of the human impulse towards finality. It is therefore also the most experiential dimension of intellectual inquiry. This point is best illustrated by way of an example. If one were to ask why I am writing this chapter I may explain my reason in terms of the importance of this chapter within the overall development of the thesis. If one were to then ask why I am writing this thesis at all, I may explain that God is commanding me to do so. At this point the inquiry can proceed no further. Alternatively, I may explain that I am writing this thesis simply because I enjoy it. Again, explanation comes to an end.\(^{21}\) Certainly there are more shades of explanation available before referring to God, happiness, death or peace; indeed the superficial levels of explanation are the subject matter of all non-philosophical, everyday rational inquiry. However, these existentials are, at some stage, inevitable, and once invoked, cannot be explained any further. Experience is the final unutterable ‘meta-language’.\(^{22}\) Wittgenstein expressed this in the final lines of his *Tractatus*. He argued that ultimate meaning can only be shown, never explained, that his reader must ‘transcend these propositions, and then he/she will see the world aright’ (6.54). Therefore, whether truth is understood as entirely contingent upon the perspective of an individual or whether it is considered objectively verifiable, *its essential characteristic is as the point at which explanation terminates*. This is the underlying and overarching feature of truth that enables it to span the historical and intellectual travail of Western philosophy.


\(^{22}\) Gelven supports and develops this claim by reference to Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, specifying the cases of ‘beauty, pleasure, guilt and fate’ as ‘existential phenomena’ that are ‘the faces of truth’, and thus as ‘ultimate’. Gelven, *Truth and Existence*, 72-73.
Such a rudimentary definition of truth enables one to recognise truth as the meeting point of explanation and experience. Because this is so, truth is always, to some degree, paradoxical. Within the Christian framework, the paradoxical quality of truth is revealed in Kierkegaard’s interpretation of Pilate’s question to Christ, “What is truth?” The tragic irony of this question is precisely that Pilate is standing before the truth and yet cannot see it; while encountering the truth, in a physical and immediate sense, he persists in seeking explanation and in so doing, misses it altogether. Pilate stands on his balcony, and Juliet on hers, but it is as if together they say, “yet I long but for the thing I have”. The need for explanation represented in Pilate’s question carries the same kind of absurdity as when one is told that one is loved, and replies “but why?” Love, as with Truth, does not permit further explanation; it does not stand before one awaiting comprehension but rather one stands within it, comprehended by it.

When truth does not lead to experience but to further explanation it is, at the very least, the most second-rate of truth. In such cases the existential contribution to philosophical inquiry is indispensable, for it heralds the reinstatement of the existing individual, with his or her deepest satisfaction as disclosive, at the heart of the inquiry. Although the relationship between truth and experience has been popularised by the existential writers of the nineteenth and twentieth century in terms of a priority of existence over essence, similar concerns can be found in the writings of the pre-Socratics (see chapter I) and in Augustine’s Confessions. This is indicated when Augustine writes, ‘Grant me, Lord, to know whether a man . . . must know you before he can call you to his aid. If he does not know you, how can he pray to you? For he may call for some other help, mistaking it for yours’. These questions of Augustine’s are the kinds that emerge during the final stages of explanation, where the presence of God, of truth, is pressing down upon him, making it impossible to remain within the realm of explanatory inquiry. Thus Augustine concludes suggestively, perhaps ‘men [are] to pray to you and learn to know you through their

prayers’. In Augustine’s reflection a theistic understanding of truth is presented in which the heart and the mind are integrated, where essence is disclosed through existence and where truth is encountered in the particularity of an individual’s life. Although theistic in its orientation, Augustine’s notion of truth bears striking parallels to an existential understanding of truth; parallels that should not be ignored.

An existential revision of this category results in a consideration of truth in terms of meaning, value and ethics. This poses a direct challenge to the logico-linguistic correspondence theory of truth, in which propositions are the bearers of truth if and only if they correspond to some state of affairs in the world, and false if they do not. When ‘truth’ is released from the straight-jacket of analytic philosophy, the experiential aspects of inquiry are not inhibitors to discovering the truth, as they were for Plato, but are rather the very mettle out of which ‘truth’ is wrought.

An exploration of truth that takes as its point of departure the experiential condition of the inquirer has characterised this thesis so far. In chapter one, Plato’s analogy of the Cave was inverted so that the shining light of ultimate truth is found, not outside the cave, but within the shifting shadowlands of existence. In chapter two, Wittgenstein’s Tractatus was read through the lens of the ‘second unwritten part’ where he sought to enact his doctrine of showing through his austere life teaching elementary school in the villages of lower Austria. The third chapter drew upon Marcel’s conviction that through secondary reflection, through returning to the thinker who thinks the thoughts, the category of incarnation becomes the central core through which authentic philosophical inquiry must pass, and to which it must return if it is to be more than intellectual entertainment. To neglect the incarnational character of all philosophical truth – to shun the fundamentally human impulse towards hope, love and life, in the name of accuracy, precision and comprehensiveness – results in showing ‘how little is achieved when these problems [of technical philosophy] are solved’.

25 Augustine, Confessions, 21.
27 Wittgenstein, Tractatus, 4.
A genuinely existential notion of truth, defined as it is by the dynamic on-goingness of 
human experience, may be recognised by its provisionality and restlessness, by its 
plentitude and inexhaustibility. I have so far argued that this understanding of truth that 
can be found in the writings of Augustine and Wittgenstein, Marcel and Pascal, is a 
notion of truth that goes beyond oneself, beyond all that is the case, and which is 
inextricably bound to questions of meaning and value. It is a truth that has a face and yet 
is always more than what can be seen; it is at once transcendent and immanent.

The Final Rungs of the Philosophical Ladder

The movement from the inadequacy of analytic truth to the plenitude of existential truth, 
from the precision of linguistic theory to the ambiguity of mysticism, can be witnessed in 
the brilliant clarity of the final few pages of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*. Swimming against 
the tide of philosophical fashion, Gordon Bearn, in his aptly titled book, *Waking to 
Wonder, Wittgenstein’s Existential Philosophical Investigations* identifies in the 
*Tractatus* the marriage of truth and meaning; this identification will constitute the final 
feature of a working definition of truth.

Earlier it was argued that the mystical is the beating heart of the *Tractatus*. It is in the 
domain beyond the facts, in the realm of the mystical, that meaning (sense/Sinn) is to be 
found. This kind of reading identifies something beyond the world, and yet which 
manifests itself within the world in the form of aesthetics, ethics and religious faith. 
Wittgenstein’s apparent preoccupation with propositional truth and his supposed identity 
as a logical positivist, have in recent years been more properly recognised as stepping 
stones to the existential heart of philosophical life. From this perspective, the *Tractatus* 
may be recognised as proposing paradoxical yet profound nonsense; that is, the kind of 
‘nonsense that makes ineffable truths manifest’, that through such nonsense ‘a battery of 
 ineffable truths – truths about the nature of ethics, the meaning of life, and the like’ –

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28 ‘Wittgenstein means that philosophy is not interested in the being-so, in the simple event, the “how” for us, but is interested, precisely, in the “meaning of the world”, in the “what”; Carlo Sini, *Images of Truth: From Sign to Symbol*, trans. Massimo Verdicchio (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1985), 78.
may be revealed.\textsuperscript{29} As I have already argued, ‘truth’, at its most minimal, represents the terminus of explanation, for it is the final explanation. In the terms of the \textit{Tractatus}, ‘The solution of the riddle of life in space and time lies \textit{outside} space and time’ (6.4312). This is a brief expression of his earlier point at 6.41 of which Bearn says that there is ‘hardly . . . a more important passage for understanding the \textit{Tractatus’}.\textsuperscript{30} This passage will constitute the springboard from which this inquiry into truth will proceed and so will be cited in full.

The sense of the world must lie outside the world. In the world everything is as it is, and everything happens as it does happen: \textit{in} it no value exists – and if it did exist, it would have no value. If there is any value that does have value, it must lie outside the whole sphere of what happens and is the case. For all that happens and is the case is accidental. What makes it non-accidental cannot lie \textit{within} the world, since if it did it would itself be accidental. It must lie outside the world (6.41).\textsuperscript{31}

This statement introduces the necessity of transcendent meaning, if there is to be meaning at all, and equally, the impossibility that meaning could be self-generated or self-referential. Wittgenstein then develops the character of this mystical ‘value’ that lies outside the world, as unutterable and yet manifests itself in art, ethics and religious belief. This is a rendering that gives expression to the transcendent \textit{and} immanent dimensions of ‘existential truth’, a truth so bountiful and inexhaustible that a ‘silence’ of wonder and awe, seems the only suitable response. Reading the \textit{Tractatus} in this light may reveal more clearly why Wittgenstein had wished to dedicate all his philosophy to the greater glory of God.\textsuperscript{32} This model of truth, developed out of an existential reading of 6.41, will illuminate Kierkegaard’s christological reflections and provide a philosophical structure for engagement with the Incarnate God. But where exactly is the connection between Wittgenstein’s austere expression of existential truth and meaning and Kierkegaard’s Christian philosophy?

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{31} This statement, considered in the context of the \textit{Tractatus}, where Wittgenstein places extremely narrow limits on what is ‘the world’ (i.e. the totality of facts, not things), truth, meaning and value interpenetrate.
\item \textsuperscript{32} Vardy, \textit{What Is Truth?}, 141.
\end{itemize}
Wittgenstein is not a religious writer, much less a theologian, and his religious reflections cannot be formally identified with a Christian, Islamic, Jewish, or any other recognisable religious tradition (although it can be found that Wittgenstein draws upon certain Christian concepts to inform and articulate his position).\textsuperscript{33} However, his ‘religious point of view’ does represent a view from eternity, a reflection upon a human condition where there is present the possibility of God. This brief survey will consider three main features that underlie and define the writings of both, and which draw them into a common discourse.\textsuperscript{34}

The first point of contact may be found in the categories of ‘nonsense’ and ‘paradox’. Wittgenstein drew an explicit connection between his own concept of running-up against the boundaries of language and Kierkegaard’s notion of ‘throwing oneself against the paradox’. The important point is that both speak of a sacrifice of reason in the final stages of philosophical inquiry. In this, both identify in the limitation of rational explanation an invitation to enter more fully into the realm of lived experience. In this regard, their lives represent the sharpest expression of their philosophy for they showed what their philosophy could only try to say.\textsuperscript{35} But why were both unwilling to settle on a final philosophical word, a comprehensive system of thought, a meta-language? It is perhaps on this point, more than any other, Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard stand together in their


affirmation of the reality and *meaningfulness* of mystical realm which must ultimately evade the precise pincers of rational inquiry. This is the second point of contact.

For both Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein, the mystical aspect of existence is not merely the debris of scientific exploration, the unwanted scraps of a philosophical banquet. Rather, it is the very banquet itself. The mystical is not an empty void, not an infinite nothingness, nor the merely psychological impulses of emotion and imagination (though these are indispensable tools in the inquiry). That ‘of which we cannot speak’, or that of which, if we do speak, we must speak of in terms of ‘paradox’, the ‘absurd’, and the ‘passion of inwardness’ in the face of ‘objective uncertainty’, as Kierkegaard describes it, is ontological and existential, the vault of value and meaning in which exists the truth for which one can live and die.\(^\text{36}\) This is, for Wittgenstein and for Kierkegaard, ‘the point outside the world’.\(^\text{37}\) Furthermore, it is discovered only at the end of a propositional inquiry, for ‘propositions can express nothing that is higher’ (6.42), just as ‘one does not begin fasting at dawn but at sunset’.\(^\text{38}\) The mystical, though it manifests itself (in aesthetics, ethics and religious belief), will not admit of explanation. This leads to the third point of contact, namely that the methodological similarities between these two philosophers show the way to the existential dimension of ultimate or transcendent truth.

Kierkegaard identifies the ineffable within the context of Christian faith. He writes,

> faith is quite correctly ‘the point outside the world’ which therefore 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 . . . The negating of all concepts forces one outside the world, to the absurd – and here is faith.\(^\text{39}\)

The connection between this comment of Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein’s statement at 6.41 that ‘the sense of the world must lie outside the world’ is self evident. However, this

\(^{36}\) Kierkegaard writes, ‘the thing to do is to find a truth which is true for me, to find the idea for which I can live and die’. Søren Kierkegaard, *The Journals*, trans. Alexander Dru (London: Oxford University Press, 1951), 22.

\(^{37}\) Ferreira, ‘The Point Outside the World: Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein on Nonsense, Paradox and Religion’.

\(^{38}\) The sentiment, in full, reads - ‘One does not begin feasting at dawn but at sunset. And so too in the spiritual world it is first necessary to work for some time before the light bursts through and the sun shines forth in all its glory’. Kierkegaard, *The Journals*, 22.

\(^{39}\) Howard V. Hong & Edna H. Hong, ed., *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, vol. 3 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1975), 236.
comment further reveals that both clung to a concept of ultimate truth and believed that it could only be revealed by way of a negation (for Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus*) and by the methods of indirect communication (for Kierkegaard). This establishes ‘an important core of *de facto* methodological agreement’ between Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard.\(^\text{40}\)

The methodologies described above arise in response to the paradoxical character of God’s revelation. Wittgenstein’s response to the possibility of divine revelation centered upon a notion of truth and value that lay outside the world, and therefore could never be spoken of with the reliability or clarity of the things of the world. Yet, at the same time, he could not remain absolutely silent, for it is precisely the ineffable that is the most important of all matters.\(^\text{41}\) It is the ‘unutterable joy’ that demands, as if by its own nature, some partial, provisional, even muffled utterance; it is the second, unwritten part of the *Tractatus* that is the most important, Wittgenstein tells us. Such a notion, as Kierkegaard says, ‘has an essential relationship to the existence of the knower’, and yet which cannot be reduced to the knower.\(^\text{42}\)

**An Ethico-Religious Notion of Truth**

One of the most significant contributions made by existential thinkers is the restoration of individual experience to the category of truth. The problem of existing, with all the attendant joys, fears, hopes and desires that constitute life is not avoided as an unwelcome intrusion into the ‘pure idea’ but the very thing that ensures authenticity in the philosophical quest. The recognition of, and concern with, the experiential data of individual experience can easily tempt one into privileging or prioritising the existential over the essential. This is a tendency that can be generally recognised in French secular existentialists such as Jean-Paul Sartre, and can be described as a position where


\(^{\text{41}}\) ‘Don’t *for heaven’s sake*, be afraid of talking nonsense! Only don’t fail to pay attention to your nonsense’. Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, 64.

\(^{\text{42}}\) ‘That essential knowing is essentially related to existence does not . . . signify that the knowledge is objectively related to something existent as its object, but it means that the knowledge is related to the knower, who is essentially an existing person, and that all essential knowing is therefore related to existence and to existing. Therefore, only ethical and ethical-religious knowing is essential knowing. But all ethical and ethical-religious knowing is essentially a relating to the existing of the knower’. Kierkegaard, *Postscript*, 178.
essential truth is ultimately subordinate to existential truth, since the former represents only certain universalizable dimensions of the being and activity of various existents and cannot in principle attain to the unique particularity of the existents in question. Kierkegaard, however, through a very particular religious notion of essential truth, dissolves the hierarchical structure described above and shows that to speak of being in the truth cannot be reduced to the attitude of the individual alone; there is, for Kierkegaard, the most significant difference between Abraham and a madman. This crucial difference can be identified by considering the depth and breadth of an ethico-religious notion of truth.

The earlier discussion of the Tractatus may be described as an ethico-religious reading; it sought to bring into prominence its ethical and mystical dimensions. A similar focus can be found throughout Marcel’s writings. The philosophical problems generated out of these readings indicate a classical tension between ontology and epistemology: how can what is be known? The common thread that runs through these accounts is that any vision of existence that is enveloped within ultimate mystery can never find adequate expression within thought alone, but seeks expression in a way of living. Of Kierkegaard’s notion of existential truth it can be said ‘that truth is not a matter of thinking alone, but exists only in the “existential dialectic” – the double reflection – in the dialectical tension of thought and action within the subject himself’. Wittgenstein identifies this structure in Christianity which, he says, ‘is not a doctrine, not I mean a theory about what has happened and will happen to the human soul, but a description of something that actually takes place in human life’.

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44 I have chosen to apply the term ‘ethico-religious’ as the most succinct way of identifying a category of truth that takes with utmost seriousness the mystical and experiential dimensions of individual existence while at the same time not descending into unbridled subjectivism. Kierkegaard himself uses the term in the title of his book, Søren Kierkegaard, On Authority and Revelation: The Book on Adler, or a Cycle of Ethico-Religious Essays, trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1955). Furthermore, the term has been applied by commentators seeking to highlight the existential and religious dimensions in Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard, and thus lends a certain terminological continuity to my discussion. For examples see Hudson, Wittgenstein and Religious Belief. Also, Christopher Hamilton, ‘Kierkegaard on Truth as Subjectivity: Christianity, Ethics and Asceticism’, Religious Studies 34 (1998).
46 Wittgenstein, Culture and Value, 32e.
In the context of philosophical problems, Christian life is an ineffable riddle that can only be ‘solved’ through ethical commitment. Ethics, aesthetics and religious belief are the lanterns that delineate the presence of the mystical, God. This function can be attributed to Abraham, who stands for Islam, Judaism and Christianity as the embodiment of life lived in passionate faith. Like the lives of the Saints, Abraham and many others in the Scriptures show us where God manifests Godself and what form God takes in the world. This is a rendering that Kierkegaard develops in both Fear and Trembling and, even more explicitly by way of his three ways of existing (aesthetic, ethical and religious), in Either/Or.

This presentation of the positions of Wittgenstein, Marcel and Kierkegaard generates one further either/or: either the question of truth simply does not pertain to the existential dimension of life (and is the exclusive responsibility of the empirical sciences and of technical philosophy) or the category of truth must be seen as something that encompasses and, if we are to be more than utilitarian, exceeds life itself. If this position is held, then it is possible to speak with ‘ethico-religious authority’. This notion of truth had no place to rest its head in the Tractatus, and thus Wittgenstein, perhaps out of reverence for the mystical dimension of life, chose silence and a prolonged hiatus from academic philosophy.

However, twelve years later Wittgenstein returned to investigate further, to explore, rather than find a tract through to the ‘final solutions of philosophy’ (as he did in his earlier work). Similarly, Kierkegaard’s prolific authorship does not represent a foolish attempt to express the inexpressible. Rather, he ‘seeks to show us in his work how in the case of one particular kind of life religious belief can arise and how this belief can deepen that life . . . [and that] we must be able to see that such a belief deepens that life and that the person in question has earned the right to speak in this way . . .’. If Hamilton is right on this point, and it is my understanding that he is, then Kierkegaard’s famous dictum

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47 This is the framework, according to Hamilton, within which Kierkegaard speaks. Hamilton, ‘Kierkegaard on Truth as Subjectivity: Christianity, Ethics and Asceticism’, 61.
48 Wittgenstein, Tractatus, 4.
49 Hamilton, ‘Kierkegaard on Truth as Subjectivity: Christianity, Ethics and Asceticism’, 70.
‘truth is subjectivity’ cannot be taken alongside postmodernist assumptions of radical relativism, for to speak of life as *deepening* in a way that can be *recognised*, invokes the objective dimension of an ethico-religious conception of truth. It is to this strange and challenging side of existential truth that the discussion will now turn, exploring, in some detail, how Kierkegaard finds in a Christian notion of truth the paradigm for his existential philosophy.

**Kierkegaard and Subjective Truth**

**Philosophical Systems and Individual Existence**

In charting the implications of Lessing’s comment on the choice between ‘pure truth’ and ‘the persistent striving for the truth’, Kierkegaard distinguishes between objective and subjective truth, claiming that ‘becoming subjective’ is ‘the highest task assigned to every human being’. The basis of this claim can be identified in two central features or presuppositions of his philosophy: (i) that the philosophical inquiry into ‘existence’ is forever shrouded in the phenomena, or ‘sheer givenness’, of individual existence and (ii) that truth is finally identifiable with God, revealed in the Son of God, Son of Man, Jesus Christ. The second feature will be addressed later in this chapter. First it is necessary to explore this Kierkegaardian notion of existential truth that takes with utmost seriousness the condition of the individual knower.

On this side of Kant, and post-modernism, it would seem easy to accept the thesis that we can never remove the lens of perception, that our world is in fact yours and mine distinctly, that it is a world of phenomena grasping after the eternally elusive noumena. However, the emphasis Kierkegaard places on this condition should not be underestimated for it forms the backbone of his existential philosophy, and equally his understanding of the Christian faith. The condition of the existing individual can be conceived in terms of ‘continual striving’. Kierkegaard writes,

> the continued striving is the expression of the existing subject’s ethical life view. . . [it is] the consciousness of being an existing individual, and the continued

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50 Kierkegaard, *Postscript*, 129.
learning the expression of the perpetual actualisation, which at no moment is finished as long as the subject is existing; the subject is aware of this and is therefore not deluded.\textsuperscript{51}

Like Wittgenstein, Kierkegaard is concerned with clarity and liberation, freedom from the philosophical ‘fly-bottle’, and yet he knows that the only clarity and certainty that can be achieved, as human beings, must be incomplete and ongoing. It must, furthermore, be a way of life, an ethic, for ‘ethics’ \textsuperscript{52} are the very home of existence’. Here Kierkegaard is not employing ‘ethics’ in the sense generally adopted by moral philosophers but rather as the ultimate volitional category that impinges upon existence itself, just as Wittgenstein’s conviction in the ‘transcendence of ethics’ lead him to a different way of life. This is ethics understood as existential orientation, as distinct from conceptual exposition. This framework provides indicators to Kierkegaard’s understanding of ‘incarnate truth’, in the general sense of the term.\textsuperscript{53} That is, truth is not something that can remain outside a person, remote and indifferent, but is something that comes into existence in the act of appropriation, in the event of being taken up into one’s life. ‘Truth only \textit{can} exist in and by the individual’s apprehension of it. Truth may well be general, but it can only be understood in particular’.\textsuperscript{54}

This echoes Marcel who, by way of secondary reflection, returns to the particularity out of which the abstraction arises. This inclination, to ‘lie down where all ladders start, in the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart’, as W. B. Yeats so evocatively puts it, is indeed the enduring characteristic of existential writers and philosophers. The acceptance that ‘my concrete historical existence as a thinker will always and necessarily transcend how I think of myself’ is the place out of which Kierkegaard’s philosophical reflections arise.\textsuperscript{55}

The condition of \textit{becoming} is held to be the central datum for all philosophical inquiry, and ‘truth’, arguably the most sovereign of all philosophical categories, is no exception:

\begin{quote}

if ‘being is understood as empirical being, then truth itself is transformed into a \textit{desideratum} [something wanted] and everything is placed in the process of
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{51} Kierkegaard, \textit{Postscript}, 121-22.
\textsuperscript{52} Kierkegaard, \textit{Postscript}, 121.
\textsuperscript{53} This application of the general of Marcelian notion of incarnation is my own. Kierkegaard uses the term ‘Incarnation’ almost exclusively to refer to the Incarnation of God in Jesus Christ.
\textsuperscript{54} Mackey, ‘Kierkegaard and the Problem of Existential Philosophy’, 570.
\textsuperscript{55} Campbell, \textit{Truth and Historicity}, 298.
becoming, because the empirical object is not finished, and the existing spirit is itself in the process of becoming.\textsuperscript{56}

Movement is so fundamental to being human that Lessing, in choosing the ‘continual striving after truth’, could be said to have simply chosen to remain human. Embracing the human state of becoming, one is called to ‘humbly fall down to Him at his left hand and say[s]: Father, give! Pure truth is indeed only for you alone’.\textsuperscript{57} This, one might say, is the foundation stone of Kierkegaard’s understanding of truth, that any truth that may be said to be properly existential, to have some relevance or bearing upon life itself, can only be known and ‘verified’ when it is taken up into life itself.\textsuperscript{58} This process, as Campbell describes it, is the ‘existential appropriation of truth’.\textsuperscript{59}

\textbf{The Existential Appropriation of Truth}

For Kierkegaard, individual existence is the primary philosophical category. Therefore his notion of truth cannot be adequately expressed without reference to its subjective appropriation. Having conceded that objective reflection is impossible in matters pertaining directly to existence itself, Kierkegaard proceeds to shift the emphasis from the ‘what’ of truth to the ‘how’ of truth. He writes, ‘\textit{objectively the emphasis is on what is said; subjectively the emphasis is on the how it is said}’.\textsuperscript{60} Thus, the recognition and manifestation of truth, in part, rests upon it being appropriated by the existing individual. This is closely related to Kierkegaard’s (in)famous slogan ‘truth is subjectivity’, which will be considered in the following section. For now it is sufficient to note that existential truth is maintained or compromised in the process of appropriation for, as I have argued above, this condition of becoming that characterises existence is the inescapable and necessary condition in which the question of truth arises.

The failure of objective reflection, and the objective truth it attempts to construct, is that it has ‘no relation to the existing subjectivity’.\textsuperscript{61} As objective thinking succeeds in producing the pure idea, ‘existing subjectivity evaporates more and more’.\textsuperscript{62}

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{56} Kierkegaard, \textit{Postscript}, 189.
\item \textsuperscript{57} Kierkegaard, \textit{Postscript}, 106.
\item \textsuperscript{58} This does not imply that Kierkegaard’s conception of truth can be equated to a pragmatic model. The religious dimension of his notion of truth makes this kind of reduction impossible.
\item \textsuperscript{59} Campbell, \textit{Truth and Historicity}, 297.
\item \textsuperscript{60} Kierkegaard, \textit{Postscript}, 202.
\item \textsuperscript{61} Kierkegaard, \textit{Postscript}, 123.
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The final point is where the ‘thinker’ is abstracted from the ‘thinking person’, which resembles, as Kierkegaard describes it, a dancer who, not content to ‘leap’, ‘wanted to give the impression that he could fly’. 63 ‘Leaping means to belong essentially to the earth and to respect the law of gravity so that the leap is merely the momentary, but flying means to be set free from telluric conditions, something that is reserved exclusively for winged creatures . . .’. 64 Analogously speaking, to attempt to think the pure objective thought, is to attempt to fly when leaping is our proper condition; such an attempt will surely result in a situation both ridiculous and fatal.

The essential point is that existential philosophy places the greatest importance upon the subject’s relationship to truth. This position has an unmistakable resonance in everyday experience, where it is discovered over and over again that what something is or who someone is is determined by one’s relationship to that thing or person. For a drowning man, water is something quite different from what it is to one who is dying of thirst. The woman who is your secretary is a different woman from the one who is my wife. In anyone’s eyes, but God’s, this variance is the very substance of our existence. But could one go as far as saying that the how determines the what? This is the position taken by those who have read Kierkegaard’s claim, ‘truth is subjectivity’, uncritically.

**Truth is Subjectivity**

Even among philosophers, Kierkegaard’s writing is notoriously difficult to understand. The smoke and mirrors of his pseudonymous authorship, his polemic temperament and his method of indirect communication, enshroud the meaning of his work. On his discussion of subjectivity, there are many remarks that seem to equate ‘subjectivity’ with ‘truth’. Perhaps this is one of the most famous examples: ‘an objective uncertainty, held fast through appropriation with the most passionate inwardness, is the truth, the highest truth there is for an existing person’. 65 The content of the truth appropriated, or the object of belief would appear to have little bearing on whether a person can be said to be in the truth or not. The entire measure of truth, its scope and meaning, would seem to be

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62 Kierkegaard, *Postscript*, 123.
64 Kierkegaard, *Postscript*, 124.
determined by the degree of ‘passionate inwardness’ with which one assents. This position appears reinforced by this further comment:

When the question about truth is asked subjectively, the individual’s relation is reflected upon subjectively. If only the how of this relation is in truth, the individual is in truth, even if he in this way were to relate himself to untruth’. 66

And again, in the parable of the two worshippers, Kierkegaard writes,

If someone who lives in the midst of Christianity enters, with knowledge of the true idea of God, the house of God, the house of the true God, and prays, but prays in untruth, and if someone lives in an idolatrous land but prays with all the passion of infinity, although his eyes are resting upon the image of an idol – where then is there more truth? The one prays in truth to God though he is worshipping an idol; the other prays in untruth to the true God and is therefore in truth worshipping an idol. 67

Indeed, these statements would appear to identify Kierkegaard’s position with the secular existentialism of Sartre, emphasising choice made in freedom and with commitment, over and above what is actually chosen. This is not, however, Kierkegaard’s position. Such a reading represents a distortion that can only be committed by viewing his work through a secular-atheistic lens. As Mackey writes,

subjectivity for Kierkegaard does not mean the angularity that attaches to every man, the quirks of temperament to which we are all subject and have to do our best to live with. Nor does it mean the capriciousness of wish and will that intermittently inclines us to one or another folly. To call this kind of subjectivity truth, and to speak in this sense of the “subjective thinker”, would be the most blatant self-contradiction and would make nonsense out of truth and thinking both. 68

Kierkegaard’s claim, that truth is subjectivity is not, in my opinion, nonsense but rather assumes a very specific, albeit objectively uncertain, reference. However, Kierkegaard’s notion of truth, and the subjectivity that is demanded of one who is in truth, cannot be properly understood apart from a Christian framework.

A survey of commentators on Kierkegaard’s concept of truth suggests a division between those who recognise an objective (though uncertain) reference for truth and those who

66 Kierkegaard, Postscript, 199.
67 Kierkegaard, Postscript, 202.
68 Mackey, ‘Kierkegaard and the Problem of Existential Philosophy’, 571.
claim a total absence of objective reference. It is not my task here to comment on the
commentators, though it is worth noting Matthew Jacoby’s accusation that
few philosophers have been so distorted through secondary literature as
Kierkegaard, who, in spite of the overtly Christian agenda expressed throughout
his authorship, has been read largely to the point where it has even been
questioned whether he was atheist. 69

Although the isolated quotation presented above suggests a kind of radical subjectivity
where truth becomes almost entirely self-referential, one need not look far before
discovering a range of Christian-Theistic suppositions or reference points. For example,
immediately following his comment on the ‘objective uncertainty held fast . . . with
‘passionate inwardness’, Kierkegaard admits that the ‘definition of truth stated above is a
paraphrasing of faith’. 70 In fact, the entire discussion of subjective truth arises within a
context that assumes God as the ‘objective uncertainty’. It would be naïve to read
Kierkegaard as postulating ‘God’ as merely an example of an ‘objective uncertainty’, one
that could be substituted for a variety of others. In a world brimming over with objective
uncertainties, his actual choice must be acknowledged as meaningful and informing his
existential philosophy. The objective uncertainty is God, who is held fast to with all the
passion of the infinite. As the passion for justice arises out of a conviction about the
ultimate prevailing of justice, and the passion of hope from the belief in its fulfillment,
the passion of infinity arises from a conviction about the infinity of God. But the
epistemology for this knowledge is peculiar, for God is the teacher who gives to the
learner not merely understanding, but the pre-conditions for understanding 71. This is
how he can speak of this state of infinite passion holding fast to objective uncertainty
as the condition of faith. Faith is ‘the contradiction between the infinite passion of
inwardness and the objective uncertainty’. 72

Some may argue that Kierkegaard’s recurring reference to the Greeks, and in particular
Socrates, allows his philosophy to stand independent of its Christian framework. And to a
certain degree it does, for he states clearly that ‘the thesis that subjectivity, inwardness, is

70 Kierkegaard, Postscript, 204.
71 Kierkegaard, Practice in Christianity, 56-67.
72 Kierkegaard, Postscript, 204.
truth contains the Socratic wisdom, the underlying merit of which is to have paid attention to the essential meaning of existing, of the knower’s being an existing person’ (my emphasis).  

However, the relationship is one of overlap rather than equivalence. Kierkegaard’s writings are not a contemporary re-writing of Greek philosophy. The fundamental impetus for his entire authorship is the basic question of Christian life: ‘what does it mean to be Christian?’

Although Kierkegaard’s writings should not be regarded as a theological treatise, they are the outpourings of a man deeply consumed by religious questions. Indeed Kierkegaard, the ‘grandfather’ of existentialism, bore many grandchildren, all of whom displayed some resemblance to the grandfather, though none of whom, without Christian faith as the starting-point, could properly be said to be the fruit of his loins. Any reader who sees in Kierkegaard’s subjectivity a call to ‘develop inwardness first [and let] the object of religious affection [remain] entirely secondary and even quite arbitrary’ has, to put it bluntly, missed the point. Kierkegaard is not saying, ‘find something that is objectively uncertain, anything that is objectively uncertain, hold fast to it with the passion of inwardness, and there you will find truth’. However unfashionable it might be, the failure to recognise a Christian notion of truth is equivalent to neglecting the most important dimension of his work: ‘Christianity has itself proclaimed itself to be the eternal, essential truth that has come into existence in time . . . the eternal, essential truth is itself not at all a paradox, but it is a paradox by being related to an existing person’.

From this brief analysis two main points emerge concerning Kierkegaard’s concept of subjective truth. The first is that his reference to God is not an incidental example to the point he is attempting to make. Truth, the objective uncertainty, the passionate inwardness, and the very meaning of subjectivity are inseparable from the Christian

73 Kierkegaard, Postscript, 204.
75 Jacoby, ‘Kierkegaard on Truth’, 27.
76 Kierkegaard, Postscript, 205, 13.
conception of God. Second, Kierkegaardian subjectivity does not abandon Socratic wisdom in favour of the Platonism that came, through Augustine, to characterise Christian theology, but rather, represents the fullness of the Socratic ‘ignorance’ and the Socratic maxim, ‘know thyself’. The Christian conception of truth entails, for Kierkegaard, the implementation of the Socratic wisdom with its focus upon the existing individual, to the end of encountering Christ, as distinct from confronting doctrinal formulations about Christ.

In the earlier, apparently subjectivist position suggested by Kierkegaard’s comment, ‘if only the how of this relation is in truth, the individual is in truth, even if he in this were to relate himself to untruth’ - one may now recognise the use of an ‘impossible hypothetical’. That is to say, Kierkegaard’s notion of truth is so permeated by a Christian conception of God that the passion of ‘infinity’ arises only when one ‘holds fast’ to that particular ‘objective uncertainty’, who is God; ‘if only that to which he relates himself is the truth, the true, then the subject is in the truth.’ Described later in explicitly Christian terms, Kierkegaard writes, ‘being a Christian is defined not by the “what” of Christianity but by the “how” of the Christian. This “how” can fit only one thing, the absolute paradox [i.e. the Christ]. This is the key to understanding Kierkegaard’s notion of subjectivity and truth, and should shine some light into the labyrinthine parable of the two worshippers.

To ‘pray in untruth’, according to Kierkegaard, is what occurs when the

77 Subjectivity, in its fullness, is nothing less than a religious condition.
78 Kierkegaard draws the parallel when he writes, ‘the Socratic ignorance was thus the expression, firmly maintained with all the passion of inwardness, of the relation of the eternal truth to an existing person, and therefore it must remain for him a paradox as long as he exists’. Kierkegaard, Postscript, 202.
79 Jacoby, ”Kierkegaard on Truth,” 6. Kierkegaard, Postscript, 199. ‘Truth is subjectivity is an ambiguous phrase. It is often taken to mean that whatever someone believes in passionately becomes truth for them. This was Sartre’s understanding and led to the importance he attached to personal authenticity. It is a reasonable but superficial reading of ‘truth as subjectivity’. After all the very word ‘subjectivity’ seems to imply personal opinion and is a denial of the objective certainty on which any claim to ‘objective’ truth rests. If truth is, indeed, subjectivity then it seems that all Kierkegaard is calling people to do is to live out whatever they see to be the Truth. If this is the case the very idea of truth collapses into personal opinion. However, this is not Kierkegaard’s meaning’. Vardy, What Is Truth?, 138-39.
80 Kierkegaard, Postscript, 205
81 Kierkegaard, Postscript, 610-611
82 Kierkegaard, Postscript, 202.
existing person . . . chooses the objective way [and] enters upon all approximating deliberation intended to bring forth God objectively [This, however] is not achieved in all eternity because God is a subject and hence only for subjectivity inwardness.  

Therefore it is simply not possible to pray to the true God if the mode of prayer is untrue (that is, objectively structured). Put simply, one cannot call the attention of Peter by shouting the name Paul, no matter the height of the rooftop. This is to say, if one calls for Paul, even without any conception of who he is, one will eventually discover Paul, however objectively uncertain his existence, for it is (speaking within the constraints of the analogy) the existence of ‘Paul’ that enables one to use the name ‘Paul’ meaningfully. By contrast, however passionately one may call ‘Pegasus’ no winged horse will appear and the seeker is left with only the diminishing echo of the word itself. But if one calls with the passion of infinity, He who is infinite will enter subjectively into the inward experience of the existing person.

Because Kierkegaard conceives of subjectivity in relation to God, his position can never be regarded as a form of subjectivism. Authentic subjectivity is not possible unless God is the object to whom one relates (who is, if related to in the mode of subjective appropriation, not object but supreme subject). If one relates with true subjectivity, with the passion of inwardness (the how), then the what one relates to is necessarily true; alternatively, if one relates oneself to the truth (the what), then one has necessarily entered a state of passionate inwardness, of authentic subjectivity (the how).

This subtle and crucially specific relationship between subjective appropriation and objective uncertainty may be approached analogously, for example, in the phenomenon of love. The multiple expressions of love, the act of loving and the implications of that love are determined by that which is loved. Beginning with a lower-order expression of love, someone may claim to love Rembrandt’s Prodigal Son. They may express their love by observing a silent and reverent awe before the masterpiece. Moved towards an act of

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83 Kierkegaard, Postscript, 199-200
84 Kierkegaard develops this point further where he writes that a person cannot ‘indirectly indicate that he is Christian without mentioning Christ’s name . . . With regard to loving (to illustrate the same again), it holds true that a person cannot say what or whom he loves by defining “how”. All lovers have the “how” of erotic love in common, and now the particular individual must add the name of his beloved. [However] with regard to having faith (sensu strictissimo), it holds true that this “how” fits only one object [the’ God-Man’]’. Kierkegaard, Postscript, 613-14.
love for this image, one may attempt to contribute financially to its security and preservation, or petition for it to be rotated from gallery to gallery, sharing its inexhaustible message as the apostles shared the gospel. Further, one may recognise that loving the depiction demands more than artistic, technical and theological respect and may recall the image day and night in an endeavour to enact the image of forgiveness, by the father of the son, in the concrete circumstances of their own life. Therefore, the what of the love (the painting) determines how the love is expressed. Equally however, if one had never heard of Rembrandt but loved that style of painting, was absorbed in images of forgiveness and believed in the transformative power of art, and did all this with the highest passion befitting such a love one would surely, eventually, encounter Rembrandt’s depiction. Therefore, the how of the love can eventually find its object (its what). To be clear, no amount of passion will create the image itself. It can however bring one into relation with the image.

However, where God is the object of the love, the structure is unique. Just as there is a particular mode in which one loves another person, there is a particular mode in which one loves God. And just as there is a particular mode in which one appropriates a mathematical truth, there is a particular mode in which one appropriates God, who is truth. For Kierkegaard, that mode is the ‘infinite passion of inwardness’ – subjectivity.85 If one views the world in logical-linguistic terms, one will find a world of facts, not things. If one considers human beings only in terms of their physical identity, they will find only bodies. Yet if one worships in truth, they will be before the true God, and if one despairs at the objective uncertainty, and yet holds fast with the infinite passion of religious inwardness, one will, in the mode of faith, encounter Christ. This is Kierkegaard’s claim and the promise of the Christian Gospels.

The priority of appropriation means that Kierkegaard’s concept of truth can never be accounted for in purely intellectual terms; nor can it be spoken of in exclusively religious terms, for it is in a constant state of dynamic evolution between God and the existing Individual. This understanding can be found in the Tractatus where the mystical can

85 Kierkegaard, Postscript, 204.
never be spoken of but only shown in ethics, aesthetics and a religious commitment. A certain commonality can also be found in Marcel’s notion of the ‘intersubjective nexus’ - the ‘triadic possibility’ - in which the human agent exists between the objective and subjective poles, manifesting the mystery of being in his or her agency in the world.

This discussion indicates that Kierkegaard’s notion of truth is of the ethico-religious kind, and, furthermore, cannot be properly appreciated without reference to his understanding of Christ as the truth. Wittgenstein’s call to silence at the close of the Tractatus consisted not in a mere everyday silence, when all is quiet, but in a radical and lived silence. Similarly, Kierkegaard’s call to subjectivity represents a challenge to the civic religion of his day, through a passionate and personal reorientation towards God, through ‘contemporaneity with Christ’. His understanding of Christ as the truth forms the paradigm for his understanding of truth as such, and from this the existential character of his philosophy emerges. The existential dimension of Kierkegaard’s notion of truth can find resonance in Socrates, among others, and is therefore not, strictly speaking, a theological or christological category. The particular value of Kierkegaard’s understanding, however, consists in showing the priority of experience, of the conditions of existence, the plight and privilege of the existing individual, and yet this in no way precludes the existence of God. Rather, it is precisely before God, without whom the passion of inwardness can never be infinite, that the individual enters into authentic existence. However, it is in the manifestation in time and place of the Incarnate God that one will find the original well-spring from which Kierkegaard’s existential philosophy flows; for ‘the subjectivity that Kierkegaard defines as truth is entirely conditioned by its relation to a specific revelation of eternal truth’. The ‘specific revelation’ is the absolute paradox of the Word becoming Flesh and dwelling amongst us - ‘the eternal truth has come into existence in time. This is the paradox’. And this is the next crucial dimension of Kierkegaard’s ‘objective uncertainty’.

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86 Kierkegaard, Practice in Christianity, 62.
87 Jacoby, ‘Kierkegaard on Truth’, 27.
88 Kierkegaard, Postscript, 209.
The Incarnate Truth of Christian Faith

In the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* Kierkegaard is clear in identifying his notion of subjectivity with a religious understanding of ‘faith’. This connection reinforces his earlier position (found in *Philosophical Fragments*):

> faith, then, must constantly cling firmly to the teacher. But in order for the teacher to be able to give the condition, he must be the god, and in order to put the learner in possession of it, he must be man. This in turn is the object of faith and is the paradox. 89

The ‘teacher’ who is ‘able to give the condition’ is a divine Saviour. 90 Later in *Practice*, during a discussion of the exchange between Pilate and Christ on the question of truth, Kierkegaard further emphasises the divine and incarnate essence of truth where he writes, ‘Christ is the truth in the sense that to *be* the truth is the only true explanation of what truth is’. 91

Regardless of the ideological expectations that may influence the reading of Kierkegaard’s writings, his notion of truth is simply incompatible with any form of open-slasher subjectivism. Rendering both atheistic and subjectivist understandings of truth untenable, Kierkegaard writes of the intelligibility of experience according to a definition of concepts:

> . . . not every outpouring of religious emotion is a Christian outpouring. That is to say: emotion which is Christian is checked by the definition of concepts, and when emotion is transposed or expressed in words in order to be communicated, this transposition must occur constantly within the definition of the concepts. 92

This reflection arises within one of Kierkegaard’s ‘Ethico-Religious Essays’ and establishes that his notion of experience is not ‘individualistic’ in a post-modern sense of the term, i.e. narcissistically self-referential. Rather, the individual who holds fast with the passion of inwardness holds fast to a definite something which, though objectively uncertain can be delineated through a definition of concepts. Kierkegaard’s notion of the


90 ‘What then should we call such a teacher who gives him [the learner] the condition again and along with it the truth? Let us call him a *saviour*, for he does indeed save the learner from unfreedom, saves him from himself. Let us call him a *deliverer*’ (17). This leads towards Chapter II titled, ‘God as Teacher and Savior’ (23). Kierkegaard, *Fragments*.

91 Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, 205.

passionate seeker is not of one precariously adrift and alone on a sea of infinite possibilities where everything that is could be otherwise. Rather, the image is of a person who, with the passion of inwardness, knowingly and with a critical and reflective singleness of heart, sustained by the grace of infinite faith, swims in 70,000 fathoms of water.

Kierkegaard’s ethico-religious notion of truth consist of two branches, distinguishable and yet as branches bound inseparably to the one trunk; (i) to be in the truth, and (ii) to be the truth.

The first, the idea of being in the truth, could be said to be the properly existential dimension of his philosophy. This is the question of appropriation that has been explored in terms of subjectivity. As Kierkegaard argues, to ‘hold fast’ to the ‘objective uncertainty’ with the ‘passion of inwardness’ is to engage in the mode of ‘subjectivity’, in a very particular sense, which places one in the truth, for to be in this state of passion is to be in right relationship to the truth. However, this mode of being is not a choice made in relative freedom between relatively true alternatives, but a radical “yes” to the eternal truth, revealed in the paradox of the Incarnation. This leads to the second branch of Kierkegaard’s ethico-religious notion of truth: to be the truth.

The feature of Kierkegaard’s notion of truth is the inescapably Christian dimension of his existential philosophy. It is not a teaching, or a correspondence between a word and a fact in the world, or even a gloriously transcendent entity, but a particular man who was in equal measures divine and human, who was born, suffered and died, whom Christians call Jesus ‘the Christ’. Only Jesus Christ himself is the truth, who cannot be contained by categories, and cannot be reached by the strivings of speculative thought, but who can be known in the infinite passion of inwardness, in authentic subjectivity. In this way one may speak intelligibly of absolute truth known most fully in the subjectivity of experience.

In summary, being in the truth arises out of Kierkegaard’s notion of Christ as being the truth. In Christ, Kierkegaard recognised an expression of truth that exceeded the scope of
intellectual assent and demanded, of the inquirer, a lifetime’s work of appropriation; of taking the truth up into one’s life and letting the kind of life lived, be the manifestation of that truth. Although strands of Kierkegaard’s existential philosophy have been incorporated into the atheistic philosophy of Sartre and the religious pluralism of Jaspers among others, it is impossible to ignore the fact that at the heart of his endeavour, Kierkegaard did not so much develop a notion of subjective truth as explore some of the implications that are demanded when one holds fast to Christ as the truth. Indeed, there can be found in his writings the demand to live the truth, to make one’s life a manifestation of truth, aside from its Christian expression (this is a mode of truth identified through an existential reading of Wittgenstein’s Tractatus). However, Kierkegaard’s particular notion of subjectivity, fundamental to his overall philosophical position, cannot be conceived aside from his Christian faith, and to do so would represent an abusive sanitisation of the work for which he lived anxiously and died prematurely.

At this juncture in the discussion, it should be recognised that Kierkegaard’s existential notion of truth, of being ‘in the truth’, leads one to the christological heart of Christian faith, for it is Christ himself who is the well-spring from which Kierkegaard’s subtle form of existential truth has arisen (and therefore can more accurately be understood as ethico-religious truth). In his Journals Kierkegaard writes, ‘what good would it do me if truth stood before me, cold and naked, not caring whether I recognised her or not, and producing in me a shudder of fear rather than a trusting devotion’. If this is the lantern that lights his way, it is no surprise that Kierkegaard’s philosophy illuminates the christological heart of Christian faith. That is, over and above all the symbols and signs, the presentiments and portents that can be found in the Christian story, the man, Jesus of Nazareth, Son of the living God, the pre-existent Logos, looms large, illuminating and transforming irrevocably the parameters of truth itself. Indeed, the limits of truth are not so much broadened as they are narrowed into the literal physical form of a single historical individual. And yet, paradoxically, it is precisely in so doing that the universal

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93 This is the sense in which Kierkegaard speaks of ‘becoming Christian’ as a lifetime’s striving. That is to say, there is no definitive point, or moment, at which one has become Christian in a complete, exhaustive or final sense. Rather, Christian life consists in the on-going struggle to hold fast to the objective uncertainty and to appropriate that uncertainty into the concrete features of one’s own life.

94 Kierkegaard, The Journals, 22.
dimension of truth is revealed and known, not ‘cold and naked’, indifferent to human suffering and hope, but alongside humanity, humanly suffering and humanly hoping. As Dorothy Lee puts it, ‘the symbol of the flesh revealing the divine glory becomes universal because it is first particular: only now, because God has taken on flesh, can all flesh disclose the glory of God’.  

This is the ‘spirit’ that moves Marcel’s philosophy, described by Clyde Pax as a ‘search [that] is not only for an understanding of reality but for “my door” to reality’.  

For both Marcel and Kierkegaard, as for any writer of an existential bent, the category of ‘incarnation’ provides the only reliable point of entry. Therefore, to say only that Christianity is the paradigm for truth is not nearly enough. Rather, it is Christ himself who is the paradigm for an existential notion of truth, for it is in becoming Incarnate that the absolute and universal (divine) and the subjective and personal (human) are integrated. The ‘objective uncertainty’ of which Kierkegaard speaks is in fact the objective scandal of God becoming man: ‘born yet not born, carnal yet spiritual, weak yet strong, dying yet living’.  

In order to elicit the fullness of this ethico-religious notion of truth, a different vantage point will now be adopted. The following reflections upon a few key passages from the Gospel of John will attempt to weave together, with the material of the narrative, the existential heart of Christian discipleship which follows from a notion of truth that has as its centrepiece the Word made Flesh.

The Gospel of John and the Subjectivity of Discipleship

This brief engagement with the theology of John’s Gospel will focus on two main features. The first is the Prologue in which John characterises the identity of Christ as Logos and as Man, as Word and as Flesh, which will provide a scriptural expression of the truth foundational to Kierkegaard’s existential philosophy. The second aspect will be

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the narrative of 4:1-30, in which the woman of Samaria encounters Christ at Jacob’s well, showing the existential conditions that may lead to faith in Christ, to being in the truth.

The Prologue of John ‘dominates the Gospel like a vast, Gothic archway, giving those who enter the sense of what they are to discover’. And what awaits the reader could be no more plausible today than it was when it was written, around 1900 years ago, for what one confronts is the story of ‘the Word who was with God . . . and was God’ (v.1), who brought ‘all things into being’ (v.3), who had within him ‘life’ which was ‘the light of all people’ (v.4) and who ‘gave power to become children of God’ (v.12). But this Word, this logos, this primal origin of creation, did not remain in His heaven, dispensing from the safety of eternity teachings and ideas and laws to which humanity could assent (or not), but ‘became flesh and dwelt among us’ so that we have ‘seen his glory . . . full of grace and truth’ (v.14). And though ‘no one has ever seen God, it is God the only Son who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known’ (v.18).

If the Prologue were rendered as a parable, it could be constructed as the story of a King who, not content to dispatch even his most trustworthy courier armed with the most reliable of messages, steps down off his throne, straps on the ragged shoes of his most lowly servant and runs beyond the safety of his Kingdom to deliver the message himself, for what script can record the message of salvation, when he himself is the message? This may be seen as the figurative expression of the christological claim that, ‘Christ is the truth in such a sense that to be the truth is the only true explanation of what truth is’. If Kierkegaard’s notion of truth is grounded in the christological heart of Christian life, as I have argued it is, a very specific understanding of appropriation will follow from this. Moreover, if Kierkegaard’s notion of truth and its existential appropriation can be traced back to the central convictions of John’s Gospel, by implication one finds in Christian faith and discipleship an intrinsically existential dimension, particularly in terms of individual freedom and responsibility.

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While for Kierkegaard the ‘infinite passion of inwardness’ is foundational to
encountering truth, the Socratic wisdom to ‘know thyself’ paves the way for the existing
individual to know God. However, for Kierkegaard, to know God is not to grasp and
imprison the idea of Him in the cold indifferent categories of objective thought, as one
who captures in a photograph not the moment, but merely a visual record of the moment.
Rather, it means to encounter Him in the infinite passion of subjective experience, in the
plenitude and ambiguity of personal experience. This is a position that would struggle to
find expression in any kind of systematic treatise, for its abundance requires something of
the inexhaustibility of narrative; of time, place and personhood.

In Gilleleje, on August 1, 1835, Søren Kierkegaard entered in his Journal a confession
that brought to a close the rambling explorations of his youth. He ‘put an end to
childish ways’, admitting that he had ‘not drunk from the cup of wisdom, but had fallen
into it’, and that now he must ‘find a truth which is true for [him], the idea for which [he
could] live and die’. Thus it is in this entry, perhaps more than any other, that
Kierkegaard identifies the kind of truth which he sought, namely one that does not ‘stand
before me, cold and naked, not caring whether I recognise her or not’. This rendering
of ‘truth’ suggests the possibility that truth is not something possessed by one or another,
but is something that one is within or without. However, the fullness of this idea is best
illustrated through a brief consideration of some of the main features of the story in John
4:1-39. The story of the Woman of Samaria (or the Woman at the Well), it will be read
with view to eliciting some of the features of a Christian conception of being in the truth.

The entire story is centered upon the existential moment of encounter between Jesus and
a Samaritan woman, who comes to draw water from the well. From the outset of this
encounter, Jesus Christ, who is the truth, does not stand apart from her, cold and
impersonal, but in fact initiates the exchange, by asking her to draw water for him (v.7).

100 By the ‘rambling explorations of youth’ I refer to the entry in which he writes ‘I have looked in vain for
an anchorage in the boundless sea of pleasure and in the depth of understanding; I have felt the almost
irresistible power with which one pleasure reaches out to the next; I have felt the kind of meretricious
ecstasy that it is capable of producing, but also the ennui and distracted state of mind that succeeds it. I
have tasted the fruit of the tree of knowledge and often delighted in its taste. But the pleasure did not outlast
the moment of understanding and left no profound mark upon me’. Kierkegaard, The Journals, 22.
101 Kierkegaard, The Journals, 22.
The narrative seems to suggest that he does not so much thirst for the water she draws from the earthly well but thirsts to be in communion with her, inviting her to draw water from the eternal well of his being. As the image of water fills the symbolic vessels of John’s narrative, Jesus offers the woman the ultimate either/or; the earthly water of Jacob’s well for which she will thirst again, or the ‘living water’ of ‘spirit and truth’ (v. 10,23), which He gives.

At this point the woman begins to enter into the existential moment of encounter, for the water Jesus offers her is not elsewhere, reserved in some kind of abstract, encrypted, metaphysical vault, but is standing before her, for he himself is the living water of eternal life; he does not bring a message concealed in his right hand awaiting her acceptance, for he himself is the message and waits only for her to step forth and embrace him. He is not a doctor who prescribes medicine, for he is the medicine; he prescribes himself. Thus the woman, in that very moment, stands on the banks of the Rubicon and must decide for herself, with all the passionate subjectivity of inwardness, whether to make that irrevocable crossing, whether to seek the other side and thus become a child of God for whom the only signposts are objective uncertainty, paradox and passion.

From this point, an exchange occurs between Jesus and the woman regarding her marital status. This discussion, quite aside from any prescriptive moral position that may be read into Jesus’ comments, reveals that being in the truth consists in more than intellectual agreement or assent. The woman asks Jesus, ‘Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water’ (v. 15). Immediately Jesus invokes the lived ethical dimension of truth by asking after the woman’s husband. Here we see that the water of eternal life, the truth, is not something that can be simply given and received. It must be taken-up into one’s life and allowed to express itself in the ethical orientation of the individual existence.

The final two aspects of this narrative complete the existential dimensions of the encounter. The woman’s way of life is revealed not by the woman but by Jesus himself. He tells her that she has ‘no husband’, that she has had ‘five husbands’ and that the man
she is living with now is not her husband (v. 17-18). Again one finds that the truth of Christ is not of the kind that can be comprehended but the kind that comprehends. The exchange carries echoes of the Psalmist who writes,

   O Lord, you have searched me and known me.  
   You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away.  
   You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways.  
   Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, you know it completely (139:1-4).

The Truth reveals us to ourselves. As Kierkegaard writes in reference to the Socratic maxim, ‘it is useless for a man to determine first of all the outside and afterwards fundamentals. One must know oneself before knowing anything else’.102 Returning to her city the woman recounts the encounter, saying “Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?” (4:29). This recognition heralds the woman’s entry into the truth, placing in an inseparable union the relational character of truth in which one knows and is known. By verse 39, the reason that many Samaritans believe is the woman’s testimony that “He told me everything I have ever done” (v. 39). The final movement into passionate subjectivity is the dethroning of the woman’s testimony by the Samaritans in favour of their own personal encounter: ‘they said to the woman, “It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world’ (v. 42). Indeed, each one had to ‘sew it for themselves’.103 Here truth does not stand and proclaim itself from afar, by way of third parties and carbon copies, but must be ‘held fast through appropriation with the most passionate inwardness’ by the individual; this is the only way one may be in the truth.104 As I have argued throughout this chapter, Kierkegaard’s notion of truth as subjectivity does not allow for any ‘objective uncertainty’ to be the object of passionate inwardness, but consists in a particular kind of uncertainty, that of the Incarnate truth, the Word made Flesh. This is the truth which he describes as the ‘objective uncertainty’. To encounter this objective uncertainty in the infinite passion of

102 Kierkegaard, The Journals, 22.
104 Kierkegaard, Postscript, 203.
subjectivity is to be in the truth, to be in the condition of faith. A portent to his later ethico-religious notion of truth can be recognised in his Journals, where he writes: ‘I still recognise an imperative of understanding and that through it one can work upon men, but it must be taken up into my life, and that is what I now recognise as the most important thing’. 105

In concluding, a connection may briefly be made between the christological existentialism of Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein’s understanding that aesthetics, ethics and religious commitment are the channels through which the mystical manifests itself. This connection rests upon seeing the life lived out of Christian faith as a form of art. 106 That is to say, like art, the practice and form of Christian life does not arise within a vacuum, within a post-modern void of meaning where truth is whatever one clings to passionately. Rather, it emerges out of and into the realm of concrete experience and can be recognised through the delineation of concepts. There is, in other words, a technique which can be sought out and enacted in one’s life. Indeed Kierkegaard’s writings are not remembered only as an evocative expression of one person’s experience. Rather, they show us a technique, a method through which one can enter into relationship with the objective uncertainty who is Christ, and in so doing discover the truth that liberates. Integral to that method or technique is the primacy of personal experience, and thus each one must sew the fabric of faith for him/herself. There is a point at which technique must be laid aside and the mystical allowed to manifest itself upon the canvas of one’s life, where after wading into the deep, one must launch out on the 70,000 fathoms and there find God. To read Kierkegaard properly, that is passionately, one must ultimately abandon his testimony and, like the Samaritans, hear for oneself, and in so doing know that He is truly the Savior of the world (John 4:42).

105 Kierkegaard, The Journals, 22.
106 This is an association, or a way of understanding Christian life, for which there is, I believe, a strong though untapped frame of support. The dynamism of faith over and above the moralizing tendencies of religion would suggest that being Christian is an art, rather than a science. As an example, the concept of the life of faith as entailing and representing something akin to art can be found in various expositions of the Shaker and Amish Christian communities. In these communities, Christian art and Christian living arise out of, and are integrated into, a sacred whole. See June Larkin and David Sprigg, Shaker: Life, Work, and Art (London: Cassell, 1987).
From this discussion a trail of questions follows; questions that, hopefully, will lead to a reflection upon the kind of truth Christ is. Who this man was and is is the profound and problematic heart of Christian faith. What kind of truth can be known as absolute, universal and eternal in the subjective temporality of experience? What kind of a truth can be both the source and object of the inquiry, certainly objective and yet objectively uncertain? What kind of truth was it that stood before Pilate and yet tragically eluded him? What kind of truth can reveal us to ourselves, give meaning to suffering, and hope in the face of death? What kind of truth did Dietrich Bonhoeffer testify to when, during the moments before his execution, he remarked with an unsettling serenity, ‘this is the end, and yet for me just the beginning’. What kind of truth, despite the absence of objective, pragmatic certainty, can implore its adherent to not merely forgive, but rather to love one’s enemies? What kind of truth is nailed upon a cross, condemned and forsaken, on the outskirts of city, in a place called Golgotha, and yet turns in love towards humanity and utters the promise that echoes through two thousand years of human struggle, ‘Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise’? This is a kind of truth that cannot be assimilated into any kind of intellectual school of thought, philosophical fashion, religious doctrine or dogma, but perhaps only finds a place to lay its head in the hearts of humanity. And thus the question, ‘what kind of truth . . . ?’ must ultimately be laid aside in order to make room for this unsettling individual, Jesus of Nazareth, to enter our lives.

Chapter V - Christ and Truth: Paradox, Offence and Contemporaneity

This chapter will consist of two parts, separated by an excursus that will examine the crucial shift in Kierkegaard’s writings from ‘objective uncertainty’ to ‘objective absurdity’. The Christian notion of the Incarnation in the context of existential philosophy arrives like ‘a blow, a kiss’, to borrow from one of Tim Winton’s short stories; at once a blow to objective certainty, and yet a kiss upon the parched lips of human yearning. The Word becoming flesh is the Absolute Paradox of Kierkegaard’s

philosophy and represents an illuminating and significant shift from the broad subjectivity of Socratic faith to the specific subjectivity of Christian faith.

After considering Kierkegaard’s notion of ‘objective absurdity’, the discussion will move towards exploring the content of the Incarnation. That is to say, where the first part explored the concept of the event, the second part will engage with the character of the event: with its particular form and features. This chapter will argue that recognition of Jesus Christ as Absolute Paradox provides the essential permissive condition for personal encounter with Christ – that is contemporaneity – in whom Christian hope and salvation rests. In short, Kierkegaard’s philosophy shows that paradox is the crucial step on the path to contemporaneity – the existential encounter.

This chapter will draw upon three main works of Kierkegaard’s: Philosophical Fragments, Concluding Unscientific Postscript and Practice in Christianity. These works will provide the basic philosophical or conceptual material for reflection. Consistent with the closing passages of the previous chapter, some reference will continue to be made to biblical sources.

Regarding other sources of christology, this exploration will not engage directly with ecclesiastical and doctrinal material. The christological confession of the Church – ‘one Lord Jesus Christ, eternally begotten of the Father, begotten not made, of one being with the Father, through whom all things were made’ – will be taken as the point of departure. It is within this understanding of Jesus Christ that Kierkegaard wrote. This fact reveals that Kierkegaard’s christology, though in many ways radical, is not

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108 The shift may be described (somewhat awkwardly) in terms of a movement from the philosophical to the christological dimensions of the Incarnation.

109 These three works are regarded as a chronological and conceptual trilogy. For a discussion of this association see E.D. Miller, ‘At the Centre of Kierkegaard: An Objective Absurdity’, Religious Studies 33 (1997), 432.

110 The Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed

111 This discussion will therefore proceed from basic christological assumptions. I have no interest in giving extended expression to the ‘human imprudence about why and wherefore Christianity came into the world – it is and shall remain the absolute’. Søren Kierkegaard, Practice in Christianity, ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, trans. Howard V. Hong (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1991), 62. In other words, attempting to discuss in a philosophical paper questions that, as Wittgenstein might say, are ‘nonsensical’.
unorthodox (it is thus ‘radical’ in the sense of fundamental, rather than radical in the sense of deviant). In short, the aim of this discussion is to reveal some of the fundamental features of a christologically grounded notion of truth, that are at once intellectually reputable and existentially grounded.

**A Christology of Paradox**

‘In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God’ (John 1:1)

The paradoxical character of the Incarnation cannot be avoided. If it is avoided, or subsumed into a comprehensive structure of thought, which is arguably what Hegel attempted, the foundation stone of the Christian faith is not so much compromised as shattered. If it is shattered, the spiritual and salvific force is lost as the great thinkers of the age trample the fragments into the soil of popular thought. The scandal of the cross, which in fact has its basis in the scandal of the stable, was one that thinkers like Tertullian or Kierkegaard would not dilute. In his Treatise on the Incarnation, Tertullian writes,

> the Son of God died: it is immediately credible – because it is absurd. He was buried, and rose again: it is certain – because it is impossible . . . the official record of both substances represent him as both man and God: born, yet not born, carnal yet spiritual, weak yet strong, dying yet living.

In these terms, paradox becomes the tightrope upon which christology is developed. It is a familiar and to that extent understandable inclination, when faced with apparent oppositions, to dismiss one as false, and extol the other as true; one profane and the other

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112 Indeed, Kierkegaard’s passionate conflicts with the Lutheran Church of Denmark were not because his beliefs were heretical, but rather, and somewhat ironically, because they were too orthodox.  
113 Prior to the ‘scandal of the cross’ is perhaps an even greater scandal – the Incarnation. That God become man, was born on the social and political margins of society, and in that particular stable, at that particular point in history, is arguably a greater scandal than anything that was to follow.  
114 I have introduced Kierkegaard’s thought on paradox by way of these comments by Tertullian for they frame, sharply and concisely, the ‘scandal’ we encounter in the Incarnation. Furthermore, they reveal that Kierkegaard’s ‘christology’ does not reject or stand outside theological tradition. Rather, it emphasises a particular aspect of orthodox christology. Regarding the association with Tertullian’s reflections, it ‘is almost impossible to doubt that Tertullian did influence Kierkegaard on his point’. Thomas J. Heywood, *Subjectivity and Paradox* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1957), 105.
holy; one flesh and the other glory.\textsuperscript{115} To overcome the oppositions in the Christian story, to abrogate the paradox through the subjugation or elimination of one antimony in favour of the other, leads us away from a fully incarnational christology to the gnosticism or Arianism that the early Creeds fought emphatically to denounce. However, if one holds fast to the credal claim, one cannot avoid the ontological awkwardness and epistemological ‘offensiveness’ generated by the notion of Jesus Christ, unless one wishes to avoid Christian faith itself.

Before proceeding further, it is crucial that paradox be distinguished from mere contradiction. In a logico-linguistic world where thought and language are dependent upon binary oppositions, the Incarnation may be regarded as beyond the scope of sensible discourse; as that of which ‘we cannot speak’.\textsuperscript{116} Was Jesus divine or human, historical or eternal? The question is, at its heart, ontological: “God or man”, the critics chant, “you cannot have both”. This accusation, however, is founded upon a thoroughly faulty premise, namely that the limits of the terms God and man can be adequately established. Indeed, as Brian Hebblethwaite notes, ‘a square circle is a contradiction in terms . . . [for] the terms square and circle are precisely defined terms and their logical incompatibility is obvious from the definitions . . . [however] ‘God’ and ‘man’ are far from being such tightly defined concepts’.\textsuperscript{117} From this it becomes ‘doubtful whether the God-manhood of Christ is a strict contradiction, e.g. Christ was for a time in Galilee while God is from eternity in Heaven, and Christ is God: does this constitute a contradiction? Only if Heaven and Galilee are both places in the same sense of “place”.’\textsuperscript{118}

A god who merely appears to be a man stands with the Greek gods of the Pantheon, and must quietly take his or her place in the long line of mythological personifications.

\textsuperscript{115} This last expression – ‘flesh and glory’ – has been gratefully borrowed from the title of Dorothy Lee’s significant work \textit{Flesh and Glory: Symbolism, Gender and Theology in the Gospel of John} (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 2002). The title of this work shows the possibility of negotiating the difficult path that neither hides within the paradoxes of Christian faith by saying nothing, nor abrogates the paradoxes by explaining them.


\textsuperscript{118} Baillie, \textit{God Was in Christ}, 4.
Equally, a teacher of ethics and wisdom, however enlightened, must stand with the moral sages of each century. However, if the credal confession of Christ is to be upheld, one must let the paradox be the paradox, and attempt only to ‘understand more and more profoundly what a paradox is . . . by exploring more and more profoundly the conception itself’.  

The Incarnation as Absolute Paradox

The scope of Kierkegaard’s notion of paradox can be revealed by charting its movement from the Paradox of Understanding to the absolute paradox of Christian faith. This absolute paradox actually consists of a double paradox; the mode of appropriation (passionate inwardness) and that which is appropriated (Jesus Christ). Probing this designation of absolute paradox, one finds that for Kierkegaard, ‘viewed absolutely all men are equal, there being only one distinction in the absolute, namely that between man and God’. This absolute difference – the ‘infinite qualitative difference’ between what is means to be God and what it means to be a human being – is the central premise upon which is constructed an understanding of the Incarnation as absolute paradox.

In Fragments an entire chapter is devoted to the scope of the Absolute Paradox, and yet it begins, as it must, with a preliminary paradox, namely, ‘the ultimate paradox of thought’ in which one attempts to ‘discover something that thought itself cannot think’.

The paradox consists of the collision between the rational structures of the mind and the ‘unknown’, which Kierkegaard calls ‘the god’. Yet in colliding, in this ‘unhappy relation’, the understanding enters into a definite relation to it for ‘in its paradoxicalness

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120 Heywood, Subjectivity and Paradox, 107.
121 Although it exceeds the scope of the present discussion, Kierkegaard proposes that the ‘infinite qualitative difference’ is grounded, in part, by an understanding of human beings as ‘sinners’. Sin, according to Kierkegaard, seals us off from God in such a way ‘that the individual’s relation to the eternal truth becomes infinitely more paradoxical than it was in the case of Socrates, the non-Christian’. Søren Kierkegaard, Philosophical Fragments by Johannes Climacus, ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, trans. Howard V. Hong (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1985), 47. For a brief discussion of Kierkegaard’s understanding of sin in relation to the paradox of the Incarnation see E.D. Miller, ‘At the Centre of Kierkegaard: An Objective Absurdity’, Religious Studies 33 (1997), 436.
122 Kierkegaard, Practice in Christianity, 28-29.
the understanding cannot stop reaching [the frontier of understanding] and being engaged in it'. Therefore, the paradox arises not in the mind itself, not in a state of solitude, but in the relation of the mind to the unknown. In the mind’s attempt to grasp this presence of ‘God with us’ the paradox arises.

This kind of paradox is a defining characteristic of all rational inquiry into the divine, and can be identified with Kierkegaard’s category of Religiousness A; it ‘can be present in paganism, and in Christianity it can be the religiousness of everyone who is not decisively Christian, whether baptised or not’. In all knowledge of God, where inwardness and subjectivity are present (as with Socrates), this mode of paradox exists.

While the paradoxical nature of the Incarnation may appear as an affront to reason, it is in the affront itself that Kierkegaard identifies the individual’s point of entry into the divine life of Jesus, for it is when one is offended that confrontation, and therefore personal and direct engagement, is sought. In other words, the impossibility of grasping the meaning of the Incarnation with objective categories of thought creates the permissive conditions for existential engagement or encounter. Therefore, ‘one must not think ill of the paradox, for the paradox is the passion of thought, and the thinker without the paradox is like a lover without passion: a mediocre fellow’. Here one begins to see that according to Kierkegaard, paradox is a category of infinite possibility, for it does not stand back, removed by 2000 years of Christian history, but enters into the present operation of rational inquiry, and brings it to a standstill. In so doing, paradox provides the invitation to go beyond reasoning about Christ to relationship with Christ in a mode that involves

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123 Kierkegaard, Fragments, 44.
124 This kind of reading dispels any accusations brought against Kierkegaard as ‘anti-rational’. In his efforts to elicit the many features of paradox, Kierkegaard is engaging with the Incarnation as ‘an object of thought’, and hence the appropriateness of the term paradox.
125 Although Kierkegaard does not explicitly identify paradox with Religiousness A, he admits a dialectical relationship (555). However, I have claimed this association on the basis of its implicit presence throughout his writings. For example, in Postscript Kierkegaard writes, ‘that truth becomes a paradox is grounded precisely in its relation to an existing subject’ (199) ‘If it is already paradoxical that the eternal truth is related to an existing person, now it is absolutely paradoxical . . . (208). This reading of paradox within Religiousness A is supported by Miller, ‘At the Centre of Kierkegaard: An Objective Absurdity’, 434. Furthermore, a dual application of ‘paradox’ assists in clarifying Kierkegaard’s use of Absolute Paradox. See Kierkegaard, Postscript, 555-8.
126 Kierkegaard, Postscript, 557.
127 Kierkegaard, Postscript, 37.
and implicates the whole person. In Wittgenstein’s terms, where ‘we run up against the bars of our linguistic cage’, we are invited to move from ratio to relationship.

The notion of paradox, considered aside from its expression in the Incarnation can, however, generate alternative responses. For example, Socrates developed his famous ‘ignorance’, by recognising the primacy of his existential condition and resisting the lure of speculative thought that professes an objective viewpoint, as if from ‘eternity’.\textsuperscript{128} This is where ‘the eternal essential truth is not at all paradoxical in itself, but only by being related to an existing person’.\textsuperscript{129} In the Incarnation, however, Socratic ignorance will not suffice, for in Jesus Christ the eternal essential truth is itself paradox: the ‘paradox itself is the paradox’.\textsuperscript{130} The movement from the Socratic paradox, in which the eternal essential truth relates to an existing individual in time, to the Incarnation of God in the man Jesus of Nazareth, in whom the eternal essential truth becomes an existing individual in time, is the cornerstone of Kierkegaard’s existential christology. This is the spring from which the waters of Christian truth flow, the source of the ‘70,000 fathoms’, upon which one must leap out with the passion of faith, or else remain a speculative spectator on the shores of reason and probability. A follower of Christ faces a double paradox, a double offence to reason; in the act of appropriation and in the very object of appropriation, Christ, the eternal essential truth who through becoming an existing individual, is himself the Absolute Paradox.

The Absolute Paradox of Kierkegaard’s philosophy is not so much an alternative to the paradox of understanding but encompasses and eclipses the paradox of understanding.\textsuperscript{131} As Kierkegaard writes,

\begin{quote}
the paradox [of understanding] becomes even more terrible, or the same paradox has the duplexity by which it manifests itself as absolute – negatively, by bringing
\end{quote}

\begin{flushleft}\textsuperscript{128} ‘But let us never forget that the Socratic merit was precisely to emphasise that the knower is existing, because the more difficult the matter becomes, the more one is tempted to rush along the easy road of speculative thought, away from terrors and decisions, to fame, honor, a life of ease, etc.’ Kierkegaard, \textit{Postscripts}, 208.
\textsuperscript{129} Kierkegaard, \textit{Postscript}, 205.
\textsuperscript{130} Kierkegaard, \textit{Postscript}, 209.
\textsuperscript{131} ‘Religiousness A must first be present in the individual before there can be any consideration of becoming aware of the dialectical B [or Religiousness B – the relating of the existing individual to the Absolute Paradox]’. Kierkegaard, \textit{Postscript}, 556.\end{flushleft}
to prominence the absolute difference of sin and, positively, by wanting to annul this absolute difference in the absolute equality.\textsuperscript{132}

That is to say, through this Incarnation, God reveals Godself as absolutely different and yet, at the same time, this act of infinite love, invites human beings to enter in faith into the divine life of God through relationship with the Son, and in so doing to ‘annul this absolute difference in the absolute equality [of the Incarnation]’.\textsuperscript{133} Here the fullness of the absolute paradox begins to emerge: ‘that a historical figure was God . . . that in such and such a year God appeared among us in the humble form of a servant’.\textsuperscript{134} Epistemologically speaking, ‘since the object of faith is a paradox then the attempt to approach this absurdum objectively by the way of approximation is doomed to failure’.\textsuperscript{135}

When the claim that ‘God has existed in human form, was born, grew up, etc.’ is recognised as the beating heart of the Christian confession, there can be no doubt that the theme of paradox runs through the Christian faith like the waters through Venice.\textsuperscript{136}

As was noted earlier, Kierkegaard’s understanding of the Incarnation as Absolute Paradox rests heavily upon the ‘infinite qualitative difference’ between human beings and God.\textsuperscript{137} However, when considered within the broader context of Judeo-Christian history, is there in fact a difference of an ‘infinite qualitative’ kind? And without this difference, can Kierkegaard’s rendering of the Incarnation as Absolute Paradox be maintained?

Against Kierkegaard’s position it could be argued that the ontological difference between human beings and God never existed and therefore does not need to be, and in fact cannot be, bridged. In the very act of creation, man and woman are made in the ‘image and

\textsuperscript{132} Kierkegaard, Fragments, 47. While, there is a fundamentally moral dimension to sin, such that immorality and sin tend to be treated as virtually synonymous, for Kierkegaard, as for the writers of Genesis, ‘sin’ is characterised by the human impulse to be God-like or to be God. This entails a consciousness of God as the supreme other. In The Myth of Sisyphus, Albert Camus describes the existential state of the ‘absurd’ as ‘sin without God’. ‘Sin’ and ‘God’ are so mutually implying that sin can only be experienced standing ‘before God’. To experience the state of ‘sin’, in the absence of God is, in the philosophical sense, absurd. Albert Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus (London: Penguin, 2000), xv.
\textsuperscript{133} Kierkegaard, Fragments, 47.
\textsuperscript{134} Heywood, Subjectivity and Paradox, 110.
\textsuperscript{135} Heywood, Subjectivity and Paradox, 111.
\textsuperscript{136} Kierkegaard, Postscript, 217.
\textsuperscript{137} Kierkegaard, Practice in Christianity, 28-29.
likeness of God’ (Genesis 1:26). Indeed, the general notion of incarnation, as presented in Marcel’s philosophy, can be found within most of the major religious traditions. If this is the background to the Christian Incarnation, then wherein lies the absolute paradox, the scandal, the basis of the offence? Jack Miles, in his provoking work, *Christ: a crisis in the life of God*, tempers any unprecedented expression of paradox when he describes the Incarnation as ‘Christianity’s breathtaking addition to Judaism’s already long list of divine self-contradictions’. However, as Miles swiftly notes, ‘what staggers the imagination and gives the Christian myth its power . . . is that Yahweh should have become Jesus’. In other words, it is not that a god became (in some sense) a human being but that this God became (in a full and uncompromised sense) this particular man, Jesus of Nazareth. This is the context in which the paradox of the Incarnation achieves its fullest expression, in the manifestation of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the carpenter, Jesus of Nazareth. As the ‘devil is in the details’, so is the divine; for it is in the identity of God proclaimed through the history of Israel, made manifest in the life and teachings of Jesus Christ, that we find the paradoxical heart of Christian faith.

In John’s Gospel, from the prologue to Thomas’ final confession of faith (Jn. 20:28), the theme of *paradox* may be seen as the underground channel through which God, in the person of Jesus Christ, enters into human life. The man who is of divine and human parentage confronts a humanity torn between divine and human inclinations and offers himself to the lost and forsaken as the way back to God the Father. Although full of intellectual obstacles, this is the daily bread of Christian faith. And it is this daily bread that promises admission into the heart of Christian truth. If we stand with ‘the other disciple’ who ‘went inside the empty tomb, saw and believed’ (John 20:8), we know that we are facing mystery and paradox, for which there can be no solution, no exhaustive, comprehensive and final account, but only the sacred foolishness of faith. From this standpoint the very emptiness of the tomb where Christ was laid, ‘paradoxically

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139 Miles, *Christ*, 305.
140 In terms of narrative structure, Lee notes that the ‘ending of the Gospel will return to its beginnings, particularly in Thomas’ declaration of the risen Christ as “my Lord and my God”.’ Lee, *Flesh and Glory*, 32.
announces the plenitude of God’s presence’,\textsuperscript{141} where ‘death itself is transformed to yield life, [where] the dark tomb becomes the womb of life’.\textsuperscript{142}

The Jesus of History and the Christ of Faith

‘The Word became Flesh and dwelt amongst us’ (1:14)

In and through the Incarnation, in this act of infinite mercy, the rags of the peasant are recast forever as the robes of royalty; the flesh of humanity has become the form of the eternal word. But what does this actually mean? Has God, in becoming human, ceased to be Lord? Has the Father in heaven now transformed Himself entirely into a brother on earth? Has God’s self-revelation in Christ brought God into the finite light of human vision, such that He is not only known but seen with the clarity of these printed words? If so, wherein lies the paradox, the need for faith, the struggle for inward conversion? The fact that no such clarity can be obtained for recognising the Incarnate God leads one to the distinction between the Jesus of History and the Christ of Faith. This distinction provides a way of exploring the utterly confounding: that God, who is ‘infinite, eternal, immortal’, became a human being who ‘is finite, temporal, and mortal’,\textsuperscript{143} yet who, despite this, was compromised in neither his divinity nor his humanity.\textsuperscript{144}

The span of Christian history, from the first church councils to the most recent christology, has charted meaningful pathways into the dual natures of Christ. To these, nothing from this discussion can be added. Therefore, accepting the christology of the Nicene Creed – ‘begotten not made, one in being with the Father’, ‘by the power of the Holy Spirit he was born of the Virgin Mary, and became man’ – this discussion will consider the epistemological implications that attend profession of the dual nature of Christ.

\textsuperscript{141} Lee, \textit{Flesh and Glory}, 28.
\textsuperscript{142} Lee, \textit{Flesh and Glory}, 229.
\textsuperscript{143} John Macquarrie, \textit{Jesus Christ in Modern Thought} (London: SCM Press, 1990), 117.
\textsuperscript{144} To prioritise one aspect of Christ’s identity or even to deny one aspect (either the human or the divine) is the basis of the classical heresies, in particular Arianism, Appollinarianism, Docetism and Gnosticism. These christological schools may be interpreted as a resistance of the paradoxical identity of Christ. ‘In the first period of Christendom, when even aberrations bore an unmistakable mark of one’s nevertheless knowing what the issue was, the fallacy with respect to the God-man was either that in one way of another the term “God” was taken away (Ebonitism and the like) or the term “man” was taken away (Gnosticism)’. Kierkegaard, \textit{Practice in Christianity}, 123.
If empirical evidence could support the miracles reportedly performed by Jesus, there can be no substantive evidence drawn from the life of this obscure preacher from Nazareth to show that he was and is ‘the Christ’. On this basis, the ‘Jesus of history’ must be considered in relation to the ‘Christ of faith’. And here lies the conundrum: who is the Christ of faith aside from the Jesus of history? There can be no such God if there were no such person, and equally, no such person if he were not God.

For Kierkegaard, the Christ of faith is fundamental to the meaning of the Jesus of history: ‘history makes Christ into someone else than he is in truth, and thus from history we come to know much about – Christ? No, not about Christ, for about him nothing can be known; he can only be believed’. ¹⁴⁵

Despite placing such emphatic significance on the Christ of faith, Kierkegaard is not neglectful of the Jesus of history (upon which, after all, the paradox depends) but is certain that knowledge, in the profane sense, cannot lead us to the Son of God.¹⁴⁶ In short, there is no ‘Christ of history’ as history and knowledge, the ‘demonstration of eighteen hundred years’ ‘at most . . . can demonstrate that Jesus Christ was a great man, perhaps the greatest of all. But that he was – God – no, stop; with the help of God that conclusion will surely miscarry’. ¹⁴⁷

But how can this be so? Surely it is only reasonable to begin with a historical analysis of a particular man’s life in order to discover, for example, that he is this man’s father? Indeed in this case there is an objective criterion against which one can measure the events of a man’s life in order to know whether he is a father, and to whom is he a father. But in the case of Jesus, what possible criteria could exist that would show that he was God? At this point one faces a gulf over which the empirical/historical criteria cannot be carried. Again, because God and humanity are separated ‘by an infinite qualitative difference . . . anyone [who] starts with the assumption that [Jesus Christ] was a human

¹⁴⁶ It should be noted however, that these comments by Kierkegaard were written at a time when the ‘Jesus of History’ school of theology was beginning to gather force and so it can be reasonably assumed that they were written against its tendency to dwarf or neglect the Christ of Faith. The sentiments are therefore polemical in both substance and expression.
¹⁴⁷ Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, 27.
being, can never in all eternity be shown that [Jesus Christ] was God’. The inquirer ‘will believe what he [Christ] claimed to be, that he was God, or he will not believe’. This is the epistemological impasse illuminated by Kierkegaard’s christology.

At the doorway of Kierkegaard’s ‘christology’, as with John’s Gospel, one is confronted by the paradox of the Incarnation. The failure to dissolve the paradox of the Incarnation by empirical-scientific argument invites the seeker to engage with knowledge of the ‘ethico-religious’ kind. The fruitfulness of this approach would reveal that a christological notion of truth is itself of the ethico-religious/existential-religious order. Therefore, a christological notion of truth can only be verified in the mode of experience; in the personal reality of encounter. The distinction between the ‘Jesus of history’ and the ‘Christ of faith’, though useful in revealing what is at stake in the Christian affirmation of Christ, does not in any way abrogate the paradox. In this discussion the distinction between faith and history has only revealed more fully the paradox as paradox. But does the fundamental mystery of the Incarnation, upon which Christian faith is based, make redundant authentic theological inquiry? This discussion has so far established that theological inquiry is at its most authentic precisely when it takes with utter seriousness the subjectivity of individual existence and the ultimate unknowability of God. It is therefore the full recognition of a limited form of knowledge that ensures the authenticity and relevance of critical inquiry. This position, however, is not ‘anti-rational’; it rests on the ratio of Christian faith. A reflection upon Kierkegaard’s notion of objective absurdity will assist in elaborating this position.

**Objective Uncertainty and Objective Absurdity**

Having now wandered the shores of ‘objective uncertainty’, and looked from the banks upon the 70,000 fathoms, it is time to consider directly what is suggested by an epistemology of encounter in the context of the Incarnation. To this end it should prove helpful to reflect upon Kierkegaard’s distinction between the objective uncertainty of Socratic faith and the objective absurdity of Christian faith. In this Kierkegaard stresses

'truthfulness' or earnestness of the believer’s relation to the object of belief. In the earlier discussion of Kierkegaardian subjectivity, reference was made to the parable of the ‘Two Worshippers’. The first worshipper prays in untruth to the true God, and the second prays in truth to an idol. In this case the one who prays in truth to an idol is portrayed as the one in whom there is ‘more truth’. Indeed the entire emphasis would seem to fall upon the how of worship to the complete disregard of the question of the object of one’s worship.150

In revealing the meaning of this parable, one must begin by recognising that it is deployed by Kierkegaard within a discussion of paganism or pre-Christian history. More specifically, it is within the context of Socratic philosophy that Kierkegaard says, ‘objectively the emphasis is on what is said; subjectively the emphasis is on how it is said’. Further he writes, ‘the Socratic ignorance was thus the expression, firmly maintained with all the passion of inwardness, of the relation of the eternal truth to an existing person, and therefore it must remain for him a paradox as long as he exists’.151

This paradox is of the second-order kind, in which the paradox exists in the nature of the relation between an existing individual and eternity, rather than within eternity itself.152

Kierkegaard’s upholding of and respect for Socratic philosophy153 can be attributed to the fact that Socrates continually placed the emphasis upon his own state of existing, never forgetting that he (like every person) is ‘only a poor existing human being who neither eternally nor divinely nor theocentrically is able to observe the eternal but must be content with existing’.154 Socrates, so to speak, chose Lessing’s ‘left hand; the persistent

150 Kierkegaard, Postscript, 201. For a detailed exposition and analysis of this ‘parable’, please refer to Chapter Four above.
151 Kierkegaard, Postscript, 202.
152 ‘The Socratic paradox consisted in this, that the eternal truth was related to an existing person’. Kierkegaard, Postscript, 207.
153 ‘Without these [a new presupposition: the consciousness of sin; and a new decision: the moment; and a new teacher: the god in time] I really would not have dared to present myself for inspection before that ironist who has been admired for millennia, whom I approach with as much enthusiasm as anyone. But to go beyond Socrates when one nevertheless says essentially the same as he, only not nearly so well – that, at least, is not Socratic’. Kierkegaard, Fragments, 111.
154 Kierkegaard, Postscript, 212.
striving after truth’. Therefore, as far as it can be expected of a person who lived many years before the Incarnation, Socrates was *in truth*. The definition of truth that Socrates lived was, for his time, complete.

But, according to Kierkegaard, this no longer holds; the ‘highest possibilities’ have been recast on this side of the Incarnation. In the Christian notion of truth a new category of truth altogether has emerged, and ‘now it is otherwise’. Thus, the Socratic notion of faith in which all emphasis falls upon the passion of appropriation is the ‘conclusion of the first part of the story, the culmination of talk about immanent Socratic subjectivity, subjectivity ‘at the first power’. The second part begins in the belief that ‘God has existed in human form, was born, grew up, etc. [for this] is certainly the paradox *sensu strictissimo*, the absolute paradox’.  

This notion of the Incarnation as Absolute Paradox is the basis of the shift from the objective uncertainty of Socratic faith to the objective absurdity of Christian faith: ‘existence has accentuated the existing person a second time; a change so essential has taken place in him that he in no way can take himself back to eternity by Socratic recollecting’.  

‘Now it is otherwise’. These words can be read as the philosophical echo of Jesus’ proclamation where he says, “You have heard it said . . . But I tell you . . .”, for they represent a philosophical expression of the same radical departure from all previous

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155 For an exposition and discussion of this notion of truth, and Lessing’s contribution to Kierkegaard’s understanding of ‘persistent striving’ see Chapter IV above.
159 Kierkegaard, *Postscript*, 207-08. This point is repeated for emphasis, and the distinction in question here is made explicit: Kierkegaard writes, ‘when the retreat out of existence into eternity by way of recollection has been made impossible, then, with the truth facing one as the paradox, in the anxiety of sin and its pain, with the tremendous risk of objectivity, there is no stronger expression for inwardness than – to have faith. But without risk, no faith, not even Socratic faith, *to say nothing of the kind we are discussion here* (my emphasis)’. Kierkegaard, *Postscript*, 209-10.
religious reference points. The expression does not represent a dismissal of all that has
gone before but rather says,

yes, I know what has gone before, and I am not contradicting it, or forsaking it;
my vision is not so much an alternative, but an extension. But it is one that
exceeds in humility and majesty the most distant corners of our religious
imagination which will, by comparison, seem “parochial”. Where the essence of
truth in the case of ‘Socratic faith . . . was the individual’s relation to God, an
objective uncertainty . . . now it is the individual’s relation to the God-Man, an
objective absurdity.

The shift from objective uncertainty to objective absurdity is demanded by the
Incarnation, for

viewed objectively [the Incarnation] is the absurd, and this absurdity, held fast in
the passion of inwardness, is faith. Compared with the earnestness of the absurd,
the Socratic ignorance is like a witty jest, and compared with the strenuousness of
faith, the Socratic existential inwardness resembles Greek nonchalance.

The shift from Socratic faith to Christian faith is born out of the object of faith. Christian
faith, according to Kierkegaard,

indisputably goes beyond the Socratic, as is apparent at every point. Whether it is
therefore more true than the Socratic is an altogether different question, one that
cannot be decided in the same breath, inasmuch as a new organ has been assumed
here: faith, and a new presupposition: the consciousness of sin; and a new
decision: the moment; and a new teacher: the god in time.

To elaborate, the absurd is the conceptual contradiction ‘that the eternal truth has come
into existence in time . . . indistinguishable from any other human being’, made
scandalous on the authority of faith, because it has happened. This statement indicates
the precise role played by Kierkegaard’s notion of objective absurdity within his
Christian-existential philosophy. While the Incarnation of God in Jesus Christ is always
an absolute paradox (given the infinite qualitative difference between humankind and
God), the conviction that the Incarnation has occurred raises it to the status of objective
absurdity. That is, where the absolute paradox is a conceptual contradiction, the objective

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161 Some of the sharpest rendering of this ‘departure’ can be recognised in the Beatitudes of Matthew’s
Gospel 5:1-20, 34 and 38, 43 and 44.
162 Miller, ‘At the Centre of Kierkegaard: An Objective Absurdity’, 437.
164 Kierkegaard, Fragments, 111.
absurdity refers to the positive affirmation that this has actually occurred.\textsuperscript{166} The ‘contradiction is the absurd, which can only be believed’.\textsuperscript{167} Finally, the relationship of the follower to Christ, the relationship of the ‘poor existing human being’\textsuperscript{168} to the God-Man ‘cannot be expressed more definitely than this: it is the absurd, adhered to firmly with the passion of inwardness’.\textsuperscript{169} The primacy and ultimate supremacy of faith, of the existential encounter and the personal appropriation of truth, are the fruits of Kierkegaard’s philosophy, and it is in this light that his apparently extreme comments should be read.

If the fact of the Incarnation is objective absurdity, in what does it consist? Does the gulf between God and human beings exist within the God-man? This discussion will now consider, in his particularity, the person of Jesus Christ who is the heart of Christian truth, the ‘Son who has made the Father known’ (1:18).

\textbf{Truth Incarnate}

\textbf{Teaching Salvation}

A christological notion of truth that is revealed, not in transcendent mystical union, but in the concreteness of existential encounter, must consider questions of recognition. This is to ask: what is the form of the Son who enters into our midst? What does the ‘tent’ look like that He pitches amongst us? If creatureliness is the fundamental mode of existential inquiry, this discussion must begin from the point of view of the follower or seeker; the existing individual who thirsts for ‘the living water’,\textsuperscript{170} for the truth that liberates. From this position Kierkegaard begins his inquiry, asking, ‘can the truth be learned?’\textsuperscript{171} In response, Kierkegaard proposes the crucial distinction between Teacher and Saviour, as it is presented in his ‘Parable of the King and the Maiden’. This will assist in revealing the uniqueness of a christological notion of truth.

\textsuperscript{166} Kierkegaard, \textit{Postscript}, 211.
\textsuperscript{167} Kierkegaard, \textit{Postscript}, 211.
\textsuperscript{168} Kierkegaard, \textit{Postscript}, 212.
\textsuperscript{169} Kierkegaard, \textit{Postscript}, 212.
\textsuperscript{170} John 4:10
\textsuperscript{171} Kierkegaard, \textit{Fragments}, 9.
In the broadest possible terms, one who intentionally makes something known to another may be regarded as a teacher. In this sense, is the designation of ‘teacher’ most appropriate to Jesus Christ, who made God known? Does Jesus Christ stand alongside Socrates and Plato, Mohammed and Moses, as one teacher among many, even the teacher *par excellence*? To affirm this would equate to the lowest of kind of christology, one that ignores his *Sonship* altogether. Such a position is untenable within the credal context of this discussion for it ignores the basic Christian confession of faith in an understanding of Jesus Christ as ‘begotten not made, of one being with the Father’.

If Kierkegaard and the Christian creeds are right, the Christian vision can never be understood as a perpetuation of Socratic recollection in which truth has rested quietly within each person, awaiting the arrival of the ‘mid-wife’ to deliver it from the dark womb within.\(^\text{172}\) If the truth must be introduced from ‘without’, in order that

the learner . . . obtain the truth, [then] the teacher must bring it to him . . . [but] not only that . . . along with it, he must provide him with the condition for understanding it, for if the learner were himself the condition for understanding the truth, then he merely needs to recollect.\(^\text{173}\)

But if the truth is brought to the learner and along with it the condition for learning, the teacher has surely exceeded the role of teacher? This is the implication that follows from Kierkegaard’s notion of Christian truth, for the one who not only gives the learner the truth but provides the condition is not a teacher . . . [for] no human being is capable of doing this; if it is to take place, it must be done by the god himself”.\(^\text{174}\) And so, ‘what then should we call such a teacher who gives the condition again and along with it the truth? Let us call him a *saviour*, for he does indeed save the learner from un-freedom, saves him from himself.\(^\text{175}\)

From an existential point of view, this kind of epistemology is the most persuasive, for it holds that Christ’s identity is revealed (or not) precisely in the subjectivity of personal encounter. In this context the Son enters into our midst in the mode of a *Saviour*.

\(^{172}\) For an exposition of Kierkegaard’s notion of the Socratic ‘mid-wife’ delivering the truth, see Kierkegaard, *Fragments*, 9-12.


\(^{175}\) Kierkegaard, *Fragments*, 17.
However, because of the passionate subjectivity of encounter, the earnest seeker is compelled to ask what kind of a saviour He is. Moses saved the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, and a similar kind of salvation was effected through Jacob and Joseph. Upon what footholds does this particular saviour stand if he steps forth from the line of saviours who have provided the dot points of sacred history? At this point it will prove helpful to consider Christ’s salvific identity by way of metaphor and analogy.

**The Physician Who Prescribes Himself**

Having considered the objective absurdity of the Incarnation, the discussion will now explore the *particularity* of Christ’s identity and the personal and inward expression of christological salvation. The salvation promised by Christ is not primarily political or material. The reign of the Kingdom of God (*Basileia*) inaugurated by the Incarnation of God promises liberation from sin, and thus freedom from the oppressors that dwell in the corridors of the human heart. But the personal demons are defeated by the personal God (whom they *recognise*) and it is therefore in the mode of personal encounter that Christ’s salvific force is realised. This rendering further reveals the radical particularity of Christian truth, incarnate in Jesus Christ, and the existential imperative towards encounter that is demanded by this.

As if capturing the middle point of Jesus’ earthly ministry, as well as the collective earthly pilgrimage of humanity in its journey to God, the ‘Parable of the Wicked Tenants’ (Matthew 21:33-45) reaches back to the prophets who have come before Christ, and reaches forward to an eschatological future where ‘the wolf will live with the lamb, and the leopard will lie down with the goat’ (Isaiah 11:6), where the fullness of the Beatitudes is realised. This ‘time after time’ will be one in which ‘the last will be first and the first will be last’ (Matthew 20:16). Without engaging the vast and complex exegetical questions, this parable alerts the reader to the fundamental christological claim that, in Jesus Christ, God does not send a representative, or a servant, to invite human beings into right relationship with Him; He sends Himself, in the person of the Son. The landlord sends his very own flesh and blood, his ‘heir’ to the eternal throne, in whom the fullness of his identity is carried and revealed. In Jesus Christ, according to Christian faith,
humanity greets a particular kind of saviour, a *divine saviour*, not in the sense of a prophet or teacher who *points* to the divine, but in the sense of *God himself* who points not to teachings or something latent within the far corners of Socratic recollection, but to himself, to the very flesh and blood who stands before the seeker. This is where the truth is not behind in some dusty recess, nor ahead in some disembodied state of transcendence, but in the immediacy of faith in the person of Jesus Christ.

**The Beggar-King**

The salvation that is announced in the embodied revelation of divine being is the subject matter of Kierkegaard’s parable, ‘The King and the Maiden’. In the unrolling of this tapestry, it becomes clear that despite Kierkegaard’s absolutist, either/or sentiments referred to earlier in this discussion, historical research can generate a richer and fuller image of the Incarnation (in terms of its earthly form) and in this way create more favourable conditions for existential encounter.

According to Kierkegaard’s parable, the King, lofty and distant in the royal court of kingly thought and action, loves ‘a maiden of lowly station in life’. And here the Christian drama begins, for ‘only in love is the different made equal, and only in equality or in unity is there understanding’. Driven by the necessity of love to seek out the beloved, the King contemplates how to approach the maiden who is so utterly different, so other. The King recognises that he ‘could have appeared before the lowly maiden in all his splendour, could have let the sun of his glory rise over the hut, shine on the spot where he appeared to her, and let her forget herself in adoring admiration’. But if he were to do so, equality will be rendered forever impossible, and with it, understanding, and with it, authentic reconciliation; so he resolves to appear ‘as the lowliest of persons. But the lowliest of all is one who must serve others – consequently the god will appear in

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177 For example, ‘history makes Christ into someone else than he is in truth, and thus from history we come to know much about – Christ? No, not about Christ, for about him nothing can be known; he can only be believed’. Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, 26.
the form of a servant.\(^{181}\) At this point the analogy is suspended by the objective absurdity of Christian faith. This King, this Lord of all, does not merely take the guise of a servant, but becomes one, while never for a moment abandoning his kingship.\(^{182}\) This ‘form of a servant is not something put on like the king’s plebeian cloak, which just by flapping open would betray the king, it is not something put on like the light Socratic summer cloak . . . but it is his true form’.\(^{183}\) In this way the King enters, by way of a descent, into the short and brutal world of the Maiden. He does not beckon from the safety of eternity, from outside the vineyard, but freely opens the gate and takes those infinite steps towards the tenants, with arms spread wide, to draw them to himself (John 12:32).

Therefore, the form of the one who is the saviour, who is God, is one like us. To see God, in the Christian sense, means to see a man of quite unremarkable form; who struggles to open the gate of our doubts and disbelief. This ‘vagabond who is rapping at your door’\(^{184}\) arrives without the sound of horns and beating drums; there is no chorus of jubilation. Where is the divine King who, approaching from far away, can be seen lighting the path into hearts of darkness by the glow of his other-worldly presence? Perhaps no greater contrast can be made than this, and no comparison more ironic than with a king, for we only hear, if we dare to incline our ears to the footpaths of sorrow and servitude, the sound of a carpenter’s sandals, gently and persistently unsettling the dust of human folly. If this is the form of God’s revelation of God’s self, then truly the benchmarks and precedents of holiness have been irrevocably altered; now the paths of fringe-dwellers have become the prophetic rails that carry the sound of the approaching train – the ‘train’, as one traditional Negro spiritual says, ‘to Jordan’.\(^{185}\)

The Incarnation, in both its essence (as the God who becomes human) and its historical manifestation (as Beggar-King), represents an affront to both rational and culturally normative frameworks for understanding. The impossibility of resolving the logical

\(^{181}\) Kierkegaard, *Fragments*, 31.

\(^{182}\) In the face of this ultimate and irresolvable paradoxical claim, perhaps one can only fall at His feet and say ‘yes. For men this is impossible but for God everything is possible’. Or else walk away (Matthew 19:26).

\(^{183}\) Kierkegaard, *Fragments*, 31-32.

\(^{184}\) Bob Dylan, ‘It’s All Over Now Baby Blue’.

\(^{185}\) Blind Boys of Alabama, ‘Freedom Train’
contradiction of the Incarnation of God reveals the necessity of an alternative epistemology. This thesis proposes an epistemology of encounter, which is not antirational but rather depends upon the failure of reason – the ‘objective absurdity’ – to generate the subjectively decisive encounter with truth. In this way the negative facts of the Incarnation (i.e. its not being rational, not culturally normative) generates the possibility of positive revelation, in the mode of encounter (i.e. of mercy, of love). In other words, the offence caused to reason by the absolute paradox of the Incarnation leads the earnest disciple to existential encounter with the one who is the truth.

Revealing the Offence

‘Who do people say I am?’ (Mark 8:27)

The possibility of offence to the form of Jesus Christ is the next step in evoking the existential aspect of Christian truth. To overcome the offence is the perilous and sacred threshold over which one must pass if one is to say, with all the passionate inwardness of faith, “Yes Lord, you know that I love you” (John 21:15).

In Kierkegaard’s Practice ‘offence’ is ‘an altogether distinguishably Christian term relating to faith’:

offence, in the strictest sense, relates to the God-man and has two forms. It is either in relation to the loftiness that one is offended, that an individual human being claims to be God, acts or speaks in a manner that manifests God, or the offence is in relation to the lowliness, that the one who is God is this lowly human being, suffering as a lowly human being.

The overcoming of the offence, not its abrogation, is the precondition for an authentic recognition of a Christian notion of truth.

The assumption of any full-Incarnational christology is that, unlike Socrates, in Christ the teacher is pre-eminent over the teaching, for the message of salvation He brings is

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186 This is an epistemology that can be recognised in Zen Buddhism. For an excellent discussion of this approach to knowledge see ‘The Reason of Unreason: the Koan Exercise’ in D. T. Suzuki, Zen Buddhism, ed. William Barrett (New York: Doubleday, 1956), 134-56.
187 Kierkegaard, Practice in Christianity, 81.
188 Kierkegaard, Practice in Christianity, 82.
Himself. Christ is the teacher who is more important than His teaching’. Another way of seeing this relationship between teacher and teaching is that in Christ a separation between the two is impossible; he is present within his teaching. Regardless of how these two aspects of the salvific message are represented, the primacy of the person of Jesus Christ needs to be upheld. From this two main points follow: First, because He is the paradox ‘direct communication is impossible’. Second, the truth resides in Him. If this is so, wherein lies the offence? The offence lies precisely in the gravity of the matter when ‘the most earnest of all matters, the salvation of mankind’, is coupled with the imprecision of the revelation, the ‘impossibility of direct communication’.

The impossibility of direct communication may also be described as the offence of indirect communication. On this Kierkegaard says,

if someone says directly: I am God; the Father and I are one, this is direct communication. But if the person who says it, the communicator, is this individual human being, an individual human being just like others . . . the communication contains a contradiction, it becomes indirect communication.

This contradiction arises from the particular combination of the telos of the revelation and its form. The restoration of all human beings to God through a second Adam (telos) is effected through a Jewish carpenter from Nazareth. What God is understood to be seeking to do, when considered in relation to the means God chooses, generates the contradiction, and the offence that arises in turn.

**The Possibilities of Offence**

*‘But the God-man, the sign of contradiction, denies direct communication – and calls for faith’.*

Christianity is made into a teaching; this teaching is then proclaimed to a person, and he believes that it is as this teaching says. Then the next stage is to “comprehend” this teaching, and this philosophy does. All of this would be

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190 Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, 133.
192 Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, 133.
194 Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, 141.
entirely proper if Christianity were a teaching, but since it is not, all this is totally wrong.\textsuperscript{195}

The process by which the unreasonable is made reasonable and the incredible made probable domesticates the Incarnation into something that, if not inevitable, could certainly have been reasonably expected.\textsuperscript{196} Where Christ has been stripped, not of his clothes and his dignity, but of his essential unreasonableness, the passion of faith is dissolved. It is as if the purple rags are lifted from Christ’s frail shoulders and replaced with a clean white robe, offering protection and the appearance of sanctity; ‘how could anyone be offended by glory attired in glory’.\textsuperscript{197} The crown of thorns no longer pierces His scalp, but rubber-tipped barbs neither wound nor heal and:

take away the possibility of offence, as has been done in Christendom, and all Christianity becomes direct communication, and then Christianity is abolished, has become something easy, a superficial something that neither wounds nor heals deeply enough; it has become the false invention of purely human compassion that forgets the infinite qualitative difference between God and man.\textsuperscript{198}

‘The possibility of offence . . . is in the most profound sense the expression for “making aware” . . . with respect to the decision to become a believer’, for where there is offence, ‘a very specific kind of reception is required – that of faith’.\textsuperscript{199}

Kierkegaard illustrates the relationship between indirect communication and faith with an image of two lovers, in which the lover seeks to know whether the beloved believes that she loves him. On the first account, he may simply ask his beloved, “Do you believe that I love you” And the beloved answers, “Yes, I do believe it”.\textsuperscript{200} This would be an instance of direct communication. However, where the lover changes his behaviour, ‘cuts off all direct communication, changes himself into a duplicity’ and makes himself ‘a riddle’, he enables the beloved ‘to disclose herself in a choice’; that is, out of the duplicity she must choose which character she believes is the true one. If she chooses the good character, it is disclosed she believes him.\textsuperscript{201} The relationship between these two lovers is comparable,

\textsuperscript{195} Kierkegaard, \textit{Practice in Christianity}, 141.
\textsuperscript{196} In the style, perhaps, of \textit{thesis} and \textit{antithesis} finally giving way to \textit{synthesis}.
\textsuperscript{197} Kierkegaard, \textit{Practice in Christianity}, 65.
\textsuperscript{198} Kierkegaard, \textit{Practice in Christianity}, 140.
\textsuperscript{199} Kierkegaard, \textit{Practice in Christianity}, 140-41.
\textsuperscript{200} Kierkegaard, \textit{Practice in Christianity}, 141.
\textsuperscript{201} Kierkegaard, \textit{Practice in Christianity}, 141-42.
Kierkegaard thinks, to the relationship between the follower and Christ. The God-man, by denying the follower or disciple direct communication (which follows necessarily because He is Himself the absolute paradox or sign of contradiction) demands the follower choose who He is, in the mode of faith, by virtue of passion rather than probability. Thus, ‘the God-man must require faith and in order to require faith must deny direct communication’. 202

But why does the Son require faith? Why must He, if He is indeed God, reveal Himself indirectly? Why not spare his creatures the anxiety and dread that attends indirect communication? The necessity of indirect communication follows from the infinite qualitative difference between God and humankind, and the overcoming of this in Jesus Christ. 203 In Kierkegaard’s thought, only an idol (or a fellow human being) can offer direct communication, for an idol *does not* bear the authentic imprint of divinity *and* humanity and therefore is not composed of a contradiction. Direct communication is only possible where there exists a qualitative commonality. 204 Therefore,

God-man cannot do otherwise [than communicate indirectly] and, as qualitatively different from man, must insist upon being the object of faith. If he does not become this, he becomes an idol – and therefore he must deny direct communication because he must require faith. 205

**Offence as the Condition Of Faith**

*So inseparable is the possibility of offence from faith that if the God-man were not the possibility of offence he could not be the object of faith, either.* 206

The offence, that is the essential offence, is that ‘eighteen hundred years have not contributed a jot to demonstrating the truth of Christianity’, and yet nor has its persuasive

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202 Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, 142.
203 See ‘The Incarnation as Absolute Paradox’ above. For further discussion of this claim see Baillie, *God was in Christ*, 3ff.
204 ‘If Christ is true God, then he also must be unrecognizable, attired in unrecognizability, which is the denial of all straight-forwardness. Direct recognizability is specifically characteristic of an idol’. Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, 136.
205 Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, 143. For Kierkegaard, in the matter of direct and indirect communication Christ’s divinity and therefore human salvation is at stake. ‘If he [Christ] does not become the object of faith, he is not true God; and if he is not true God, then he does not save people either’. Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, 137-38.
206 For the seventh offence see Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, 143.
force been diminished by nearly two millennium. This dramatic claim, unpersuasive in itself, reveals the necessity of recognising the existential imperative contained within Kierkegaard’s christology.

[The] possibility of offence . . . is present at every moment, confirming at every moment the chasmic abyss between the single individual and the God-man over which faith and faith alone reaches . . . [offence and faith are] not . . . an accidental relation, so that some perceive the possibility of offence and others not; no, the possibility of offence is the stumbling block for all, whether they choose to believe or they are offended.

Therefore, it is the offence itself and not two thousand years that separate us from Jesus Christ, for it is faith, not the demonstration of Christendom, that places us in a state of intimate relationship with God, contemporaneous with Christ. In ‘order to believe, the person who believes must have passed through the possibility of offence’ and in so doing, ‘he will have to untie the knot [of indirect communication] himself’. Doing this one will be confronted, in the passion of authentic subjectivity, ‘with a choice: whether [one] will believe him or not’. The pain and struggle of this decision are the ‘death throes’ of inauthentic Christianity (the constructs of Christendom) which are ‘the birth pangs of faith’.

This understanding of faith provides the framework for introducing Kierkegaard’s notion of contemporaneity. The challenge to accept and overcome the offence, to believe, is the invitation to encounter Christ personally in the mode of faith. This possibility of encounter can be understood as becoming contemporary with Christ. Kierkegaard’s notion of contemporaneity, like most of his religious writing, is polemical in its expression, suggesting the complete absence of hermeneutical distance. The earnest disciple may encounter Christ with the same or greater intimacy, than the historical disciples of the Gospels, which implies that two thousand years do not separate one from Jesus Christ any more than a single month, for Jesus Christ is the object of faith, and faith is the realm in which time recedes and the eternal present prevails. In that perpetual

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207 Kierkegaard, Practice in Christianity, 144.
208 Kierkegaard, Practice in Christianity, 139.
209 Kierkegaard, Practice in Christianity, 101.
210 Kierkegaard, Practice in Christianity, 134.
211 Kierkegaard, Practice in Christianity, 135.
present one may encounter not the son of a carpenter who lived in Nazareth in the time of 
King Herod, but the Son of God who reigned with the Father in the time before time, and 
yet lived with us under the reign of King Herod, was put to death and rose on the third 
day, and lives among us today as the ‘risen Christ’, sovereign Lord and God. This is the 
existential-mystical heart of Christian faith; contemporaneous with Christ; the existential-
mystical place, that is at once never a place but is every place, even a Jutland heath in 
Denmark, in which we ‘behold the man’ (Jn19:5).

As I have already argued, Kierkegaard’s writings are thoroughly contextual and therefore 
need to make reference to the religious situation of nineteenth century Denmark. Writing 
out of this practically religious state, where nationality virtually entailed religious 
identity, Kierkegaard proposed a variety of life-lines, so to speak, to rescue authentic 
faith from the vacuum of Christendom. To this end, his understanding of 
contemporaneity provides a way of seeing the dynamic reality of being Christian as a 
living relationship with the risen Christ.  

**Contemporaneity with Christ**

‘Who do you say that I am?’ (Mk.8:28)

The notion of *contemporaneity* represents the heart of Kierkegaard’s existential 
Christianity. Contemporaneity neither domesticates nor abrogates the paradox of the 
Incarnation but provides the framework for existential encounter.

**Historical Proximity**

By the principle of analogy, the conditions for knowing the personal God may be first 
considered in terms of the conditions for knowing another human being. For example, in 
order to know someone, one may begin by attempting to meet that person, to talk with 
them directly, to sit with them on the same bench, to share a table, a meal, a conversation.

212 Although it is beyond the scope of this present discussion, the notion of contemporaneity could be 
further explored by a historical and exegetical exploration of the shift in understanding that occurred among 
the historical disciples after the resurrection. Hermeneutical distance may be given an ironic twist if it can 
be shown that the fullness of Jesus’ christological identity is revealed more and more deeply as one moves 
further and further away from the historical person, Jesus, and closer and closer towards the eschatological 
consummation.
When that is not possible, one might seek out a person who is or has been close to that one. And by the authority of their first hand exposure, the mediator or representative or messenger may provide a reliable account of the individual. Indeed, if one desired to know the character, habits, beliefs and values of a distant relative, one would probably seek the accounts of those who knew that person most intimately, physically, emotionally, and psychologically. Having heard all the accounts, having processed them and contrasted one with the other, one would gain an understanding of who this person is. Then one day meeting this distant relative, one might exclaim, “I feel as if I know you already!” And indeed, in a sense, one does.

In the Christian life, in a life given over to knowing Christ, a similar process is possible. We look for the identity of Christ in the writings of the Gospels, we compare them with letters of Paul and perhaps finally contrast these accounts with the anticipations of Israel. And though it is contentious whether the writers of the sacred scriptures knew Jesus personally, their authority may be maintained or challenged by degrees of approximation. The closer they were to the historical event, the historical man, the greater their authority. This position, as Kierkegaard says, ‘seems natural’, for ‘why should we not, humanly speaking, regard the contemporaries as fortunate – that is, those contemporaries who saw and heard and touched, for otherwise what is the good of being contemporary?’

Indeed, historical privilege holds for historical knowledge. However, as argued throughout this thesis, Christ is the fullest expression of ethico-religious truth. About Christ one is speaking neither of the purely historical, nor of the purely a-historical. One is speaking of the paradox, sensu strictissimo, that cannot be overcome by reason or historical proximity.

213 These sources may then be enlightened by a further source: the Church. In most cases the sacred scriptures will be read within an ecclesiological tradition; the scriptural accounts explored and deepened through the community of believers.

214 Similarly, a point of ecclesiological contention attends to the authority of the church in the interpretation of Holy Scripture.

215 Kierkegaard, Fragments, 66.

216 ‘We do not say that he is supposed to understand the paradox but is only to understand that this is the paradox’. Kierkegaard, Fragments, 59.
The implications that follow from rejecting the authority of historical proximity changes irrevocably the landscape of discipleship. With the spirit of revolution that Jesus revealed as he changed the landscape of His Father’s Temple, overturning the weighing-scales of the money-lenders, Kierkegaard over turns the empirical-scientific assumptions that shackle Christian discipleship:

> it is easy enough for the contemporary learner to acquire detailed historical information. But let us not forget that in regard to the birth of god he will be in the very same situation as the follower at second hand [because] knowing all the historical facts with the trustworthiness of an eye-witness by no means makes the eyewitness a follower . . . it is at once apparent here that the historical in the more concrete sense is inconsequential.\(^{217}\)

If the historical disciple and the contemporary disciple are in the same position with regards to recognising the full identity of Jesus Christ (as Son-of-God and Son-of-Man), the conditions for recognition must consist in something fundamentally unique to knowledge of Christ. If not by historical proximity, or at least by proximity to those who did possess historical proximity, or even by proximity to those who have more historical proximity than others, then how can one know Him? The unique element in this epistemology of encounter has been introduced earlier in the discussion of Christian subjectivity.\(^{218}\) This form of subjectivity leads to contemporaneity only when it consists in clinging with the passion of inwardness to Christ. It is not the subjectivity of personal preference, but the subjectivity of passionate inwardness which arises ‘when the understanding is discharged’.\(^{219}\) When this occurs the two thousand years that separate the contemporary disciple from the historical follower are dissolved in the eternal present of faith.

This description of the matter is logically consistent within the ratio of faith. But is it unique to faith or is it something common to the very structure of all processes of knowing? For example, in order to see the colour blue, the condition of sight must be present, as well as the ability to distinguish primary colours. Again, in order to feel

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\(^{217}\) Kierkegaard, *Fragments*, 59.

\(^{218}\) See chapter IV above.

\(^{219}\) Kierkegaard, *Fragments*, 64.
another person’s pain, the condition of empathy must be present. To each type of
knowledge must correspond a condition, a suitable organ of receptivity. If these
comparisons are persuasive, wherein lies the difficulty? Why would one consign three
years’ work to the ‘bleeding obvious’ (pun intended)? The reason for the line of
argument pursued above is not simply to show that a Christian notion of truth requires a
particular condition of receptivity; this is a principle that applies to almost any object of
knowledge. The intention here is to reveal that a Christian notion of truth is unique
among objects of knowledge because it occurs precisely in the interpenetration of the
object and subject. In this it summons the existential and intellectual dimensions of the
individual person who, in the context of faith, overcomes the problem and privilege of
historical proximity. In this way the contemporary follower can be said to be
contemporaneous with Christ. In this supreme exertion of trust, for 70,000 fathoms is
no toddler’s wading pool, no roadside puddle over which a coat can be laid, one
encounters Jesus the Christ, God made Man.

An epistemology of encounter does not attempt to contain the 70,000 fathoms within a
conceptual dam, which could be said to arise from the same source as King Canute
ordering the tide to halt. Rather, such an approach suggests a way that one must always
choose for oneself, if one is to become truly contemporary. In this discussion, the
distinctly paradoxical notion of Christian truth is given positive expression in
Kierkegaard’s notion of contemporaneity. It says that ‘one can be contemporary without
being contemporary, that one can be contemporary and yet, although using this
advantage, be a noncontemporary’. Thus the ‘real contemporary is not one by virtue of
immediate contemporaneity but by virtue of something else’ (the condition). In other
words, a follower becomes contemporary with Christ not through physical proximity but
by the passion of faith.

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220 Kierkegaard, Fragments, 67. Conversely, ‘despite being his contemporary, a contemporary can be a
noncontemporary; the genuine contemporary is the genuine contemporary not by virtue of immediate
contemporaneity’. Kierkegaard, Fragments, 67.
221 Kierkegaard, Fragments, 67.
This rendering shows that the notion of contemporaneity is one that most naturally stands on its head, or perhaps more accurately, lies on its back, feet thrust into the historical contemporaneity of the first disciples, head resting with every follower who, in the moment of faith, in the passion of inwardness, given the condition, says with Peter, “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God” (Mat.16:16). In the passionate moment of faith we may recognise that the span of Christ’s truth (He who is truth) reaches over the two thousand years that separate Matthew, Mark, Luke and John from contemporary disciples. And with each generation, with every moment of every century, He spreads his outstretched arms a little further so as to ‘draw all to Himself’ (Jn. 12:32), meeting each generation, in every place, in the darkest most removed corners of each individual life.

The intermediate conclusion of this discussion is rather simple: the object of knowledge itself determines the nature of the relationship between the knower and the known. For example, the condition of being a new born baby, toddler, young child, adolescent, and adult each determine the kind of relationship that is possible between parent and progeny. When a father remarks despondently of his son, “I just don’t know him any more” it can be recognised that the organ of receptivity has been lost or not yet found. Just as a mother may soothe her distressed child through a gentle rocking motion, this is not, in anything resembling a healthy relationship, how she soothes her distressed husband! Similarly, because Jesus Christ is the paradox, He cannot be encountered in the annals of history, with world-historical figures such as Martin Luther and John Henry Newman for company. By such a method one will never be more than, as Kierkegaard puts it, a ‘learner’ of the historical Christ.  

While this flattening-out of historical hierarchy – the dismantling of two thousand years – may appear unnecessarily minimalist (particularly when considered against the fruits of two thousand years of Christian thought and life), echoes of this position seem unavoidable in certain Gospel passages. Without claiming any kind of exegetical

authority, Kierkegaard reads Luke 13:25-27 as suggesting the priority of the mode of existential encounter with Christ.

Once the owner of the house gets up and closes the door, you will stand outside knocking and pleading, ‘Sir, open the door for us’. But he will answer, ‘I don’t know you or where you come from’. Then you will say, ‘We ate and drank with you, and you taught in our streets’. But he will reply, ‘I don’t know you or where you come’ (Luke 13:25-27)

This passage is drawn upon by Kierkegaard to illustrate the inward imperative in Christian life, the *primacy* of the inner state. Read through a Kierkegaardian lens, this passage proclaims the elimination of physical or historical privilege in an existentially grounded relationship with Christ. No amount of knocking and pleading, no amount of eating and drinking and teaching, will open this sacred narrow door. If not eating and drinking, or even receiving the teaching; if not actual physical proximity, familiarity and attraction, what on earth *can* bring one into that intimate unity with Christ?

The ‘fullness of life’ that John speaks of in his Gospel\(^{223}\) is not an esoteric article of knowledge that, once received, can be neatly folded and placed in a shirt pocket for later reference or saved to the hard-drive, backed-up on disc. Christian salvation is found in the intimacy of a relationship with Jesus Christ, in whom there is ‘life’, ‘the ‘life that’ is ‘the light of all people’. For genuine intimacy to arise, one cannot merely *know* the other but must also be *known* by the other. In vulnerability, fear and trembling, one must dare to know and be known.\(^{224}\) But to know, as has already been said, requires that we be granted the condition which can only be bestowed by Christ himself. The person who ‘received the condition received it from the teacher himself, and consequently that teacher must know everyone who knows him, and the individual can know the teacher only by being oneself known by the teacher’.\(^{225}\) It is the implications that follow from this which render all notions of being Christian, once removed, meaningless.

\(^{223}\) Jesus says, ‘I have come so that you may have life, and have it to the full’. John 10:10.

\(^{224}\) This is the one of the main theological claims of the story of the ‘Woman at the Well’, as discussed in Chapter Four above.

\(^{225}\) Kierkegaard, *Fragments*, 68-69.
Becoming Contemporary

To know Christ is to encounter Him. Therefore, ‘if the one who comes later receives the condition from the god himself, then he is a contemporary, a genuine contemporary – which indeed only the believer is and which every believer is’. 226 The reception of the condition, however, is not the conclusion of the Christian life. There is always an ongoing process of becoming, and ‘becoming a Christian truly comes to mean becoming contemporary with Christ’. 227

Kierkegaard’s notion of contemporaneity carries with it important existential implications. The domain in which the contemporaneous state arises most authentically for the ‘poor existing human being’, is ‘the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart’, where ‘all ladders are gone’ 228 This point may be described as the subjectivity of the present moment.

In relation to the absolute, there is only one time, the present; for the person who is not contemporary with the absolute, it does not exist at all. And since Christ is the absolute it is easy to see that in relation to him there is only one situation, the situation of contemporaneity; the three, the seven, the fifteen, the seventeen, the eighteen hundred years make no difference at all; for they do not change him, but neither do they reveal who he was, for who he is is revealed only to faith. 229 And in truth, the eighteen hundred years have not contributed a jot to demonstrating the truth of Christianity. 230

This description by Kierkegaard indicates that the existing individual is the domain in which authentic encounter with Christ occurs. That is to say, because human existence is always in time, the ‘present moment’ is constantly in a state of flux. Further, because human existence is always individual existence, the present moment is always bound to the experience of a particular person. This is the subjectivity of the present moment, where Christ is known in the particularity and partiality of individual existence.

226 Kierkegaard, Fragments, 69.
227 Kierkegaard, Fragments, 63.
229 Kierkegaard, Practice in Christianity, 63.
230 Kierkegaard, Practice in Christianity, 144.
To further illustrate Kierkegaard’s notion of contemporaneity, a comparison may be made with what some traditions call the ‘mysticism of the historical moment’ (which is mystical and therefore exceeds history). In this experience one may enter into the experience of standing on the shores of the lake, finding one’s hands cut by the strain of full nets, and one’s heart enlivened by the simple, radical words of this itinerant preacher, the Son of God who could be ‘mistaken for the gardener’. He meets us on this shore of this lake on this morning, a particular morning with its particular qualities. It may be a little misty though certainly this will clear later in the day as the sun burns away the clouds, and His love dissolves the coldness of our hearts.

If an epistemology of this kind is adopted, one sees that what happened in Galilee two thousand years ago happens today in the subjectivity of the present moment. What happened on a grassy patch on the outskirts of Judea might happen today in a shopping centre, on a freeway, in some fast-food restaurant on some road that takes these people to some place. In short, an epistemology of encounter proposes a way of knowing that is grounded in the recognition of the Incarnate Word who dwells among us today.

As distinct from a set of teachings, Christian truth is spoken of by way of narrative. It is defined by the concreteness of particularity: a child who was born in a stable, the Lord whose mother stood at the foot of His cross, a man who rose from the dead and stood among Simon and Peter on the road to Damascus. This particularity pervades the Gospel stories but is accentuated at certain points. For example, in Luke 15, Jesus relates three parables that contribute to revealing who Christ is and how we may enter into relationship with Him. In The Parable of the Lost Sheep, the Good Shepherd ‘leaves the ninety-nine to go in search of the one’, and in finding the one, he gathers ‘friends and neighbours together and says, “Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep” (Luke 15:1-7). A ‘woman who has ten silver coins and loses one’ will not let the presence of nine fill the space left by the one lost; ‘she lights a lamp, and sweeps the house and searches carefully until she finds it’(15:8-10). Perhaps the penultimate expression of this can be found in the parable of the Lost Son. Too famous and too sublime for recounting, the spirit of particularity is the lynch-pin of the story in which the presence of the remaining
brother does not diminish the sense of loss suffered by the father. The story suggests that
everyday the father wanders the perimeter of his property, scanning the horizon for that
single silhouette upon which so much of His suffering love rests. These gospel accounts,
with their emphasis on the particular, reveal the character, nature and spirit of Christ and
Christian life. This is the sense in which a Christian notion of truth is intrinsically
existential, for it is most fully present where the God-Man is encountered in the
contemporaneity of discipleship.\textsuperscript{231}

Where there is a philosophy or theology or a way of living that dwarfs Christ himself (as
was the case in the Lutheran Church of Denmark in Kierkegaard’s day) the call to
existential encounter is heard most compellingly. The possibility of encounter is
fundamental to the claims of this thesis: ‘His life on earth accompanies the human race
and accompanies each particular generation as the eternal history’.\textsuperscript{232} This means that
God no less sends a representative today than when Mary was called by the archangel
Gabriel, and demands no less from everyone who identifies themselves as Christian than
Christ demanded of Peter when he turned to him, and said ‘Who do you say I am?’
(Mt.16:14). This question echoes through Jesus’ earthly existence and through the earthly
existence of every generation. In matters of religious history, the question, “Who do they
say I am?” may be sustained, but in the realm of faith there are no proxies. And if He is
with us and we are with Him, the divine impress has been placed indelibly upon the foul-
rag-and-bone shop of the heart.

\textsuperscript{231} Kierkegaard uses the term ‘poetry’ to reveal the subtle meaning of ‘contemporaneity’ when he writes
‘the difference between poetry and actuality: contemporaneity’. Kierkegaard, \textit{Practice in Christianity}, 63.
The condition required to recognise Jesus Christ is contemporaneity such that ‘becoming a Christian truly
comes to mean becoming contemporary with Christ’. Kierkegaard, \textit{Practice in Christianity}, 63.
\textsuperscript{232} Kierkegaard, \textit{Practice in Christianity}, 64.
Part III

Chapter VI - The Existential Grammar of the Good News: Questions of Recognition

‘... you think it’s good architecturally?’
‘One of the most beautiful houses I know.’
‘Can’t see it. I’ve always thought it rather ugly. Perhaps your pictures will make me see it differently.’

How may Jesus Christ be recognised as the Truth? The difficulties that attend recognition of ethico-religious truth will be the first step towards proposing a concrete methodology for existential inquiry into Christian truth. Just as certain techniques, approaches, experience, and understanding are required to see, for example, Jackson Pollock’s famous Blue Poles as a manifestation of the increasingly fluid values of the modern world, or as the eternal presence of the forces of chaos and the harnessing of that chaos into the upright poles of order, so too certain approaches, perspectives and ideas may be helpful and even necessary in order to see Jesus the Christ as ‘the way, the truth and the life’ (John 14:6).

In Method in Theology Bernard Lonergan writes, ‘method is not a set of rules to be followed meticulously by a dolt. It is a framework for collaborative creativity’. This ‘collaboration’ occurs first, between the reader and the writer. The reader appropriates the propositions of the writer, and by appropriating them moulds and modifies them, giving inflexion and intonation to the meaning, as actors give to their lines. In its mildest form, methodology may be understood as ‘something worth keeping in mind when one confronts a situation or tackles a job’ (xii). Clearly, this is a minimal understanding of theological method. If a particular methodology ‘is worth keeping in mind when one

2 Bernard J. F. Lonergan, Method in Theology (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1975), xi. At this preliminary stage no clear distinction is being made between ‘method’ and ‘methodology’; the distinctions will become apparent as the discussion proceeds to focus upon ways of approaching the matter of Christian truth.
3 Lonergan, Method in Theology, xii.
confronts a situation or tackles a job’, it actually demands considerably more from its practitioner than this statement suggests. By Lonergan’s own account, while a methodology is a ‘framework’ and therefore possesses elements of rigidity, it is above all a framework for creative collaboration and therefore is necessarily dynamic and open-ended. This characterisation of theological method is broad and opposed to dogmatism, and yet is more rigorous and exacting (for those who accept the invitation to creative collaboration) than the most legalistic of precepts. Such a methodology makes serious demands upon the individual person’s capacity for engagement, discernment and personal responsibility because it invites one to engage existentially, that is with one’s whole self – intellectual, emotional, gendered, situational, etc.

Paul F. Knitter, in a recent article, proposes a theological methodology that overlaps with the kind proposed in this thesis. The overlap can be identified in a characterisation of methodology as a ‘complex but creative task of balancing two, apparently contradicting, and fundamental options: commitment and openness’. This kind of methodology cannot be reduced to the whims of personal preference, for it must bear something of a native or teleological relationship to that to which it is applied, as a scythe is to wheat. Accordingly, this discussion will argue that a methodology of encounter – one that invites and encourages the reader to confront or recognise, for him/herself, Christ as the Truth – is in fact demanded by any orthodox christology. In other words, the ontology of Christian truth requires an existential epistemology of encounter, if the fullness of understanding is to be possible. Within this existential methodology, encounter may be

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4 Lonergan, Method in Theology, xii.
5 This kind of methodology can be understood as Wittgensteinian in spirit, for it attempts to bring the whole self to bear on philosophical problems which are always more than an intellectual riddle. In Investigations Wittgenstein writes, ‘There is not a philosophical method, though there are indeed methods, like different therapies’. Ludwig Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 44e.
6 Paul F. Knitter, ‘Christian Theology in the Post-Modern Era’, Pacifica 18, no. 3 (2005), 326. This overlap between Knitter’s methodology and the one proposed in this thesis is just that, an overlap. While Knitter’s article presents a pluralistic christology, my effort aims at revealing what is distinctive and essential within an orthodox christology, and how an existential epistemology may reveal the Christ of the Creeds most fully.
characterised as a ‘full, personal, existential giving over of ourselves to truth that we know only partially, incompletely, fragmentarily’.

For exploring the notion of recognition within a Christian-existential context, two main resources will prove particularly useful. First, an analogy with some features of aesthetic criticism (with its imperative to invite the viewer to see anew); and second, Wittgenstein’s notion of ‘language-games’ which assists in revealing that there is a distinctive conceptual framework within which the meaning of a Christian notion of truth exists. As aids to understanding, aesthetic criticism and the idea of language-games will be set up as ‘objects of comparison which are meant to throw light . . . [on the notion of Christian truth] . . . by way not only of similarities, but also of dissimilarities’. These objects of comparison – aesthetic criticism and the notion of language games - will be used as counterweights that set into equilibrium, so to speak, the idea of Christian recognition. This process of analogy and contrast is a method of exposition that Wittgenstein himself applied to temper and make concrete the abstract assertions of philosophy: ‘we can avoid ineptness or emptiness in our assertions only by presenting the model as what it is, as an object of comparison – as, so to speak, a measuring-rod; not as a preconceived idea to which reality must correspond.’

This discussion of aesthetic criticism will focus upon its existential dimension, in terms of the role of the critic, and the imperative to see the work for oneself.

As the colour of a frame accentuates different visual elements within an image, so the notion of language-games will draw the reader’s attention to the possibility that the Christian notion of truth bears within it an existential imperative.

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7 Knitter, ‘Christian Theology in the Post-Modern Era’, 334. The position proposed in this thesis may prove particularly useful for engaging with post-modern sensibilities, for it attempts to show that the Christian notion of truth is neither subjective romanticism nor scientific certainty but rather an authentic ‘inner process [which] stands in need of outward criteria’. Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations, 129e. The recognition of Christ as the Truth requires a methodology of encounter.

8 The problem of recognition within the christological context achieves one of its highest poetic expressions in Pilate’s question to Jesus, “What is truth?” Pilate’s failure to grasp (both cognitively and physically) the truth that stood before him in Jesus the Christ provides the symbolic expression of the problem of recognition in a specifically Christian context. For a direct discussion of this exchange see below the section titled ‘The Existential Grammar of Christian Truth’.

9 Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations, 43e.

10 Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations, 43e.
This chapter will conclude with some reflections on the scope and role of recognition in a (theological) methodology of encounter, and consider whether a Christian notion of truth, if some fraction of its infinite harvest is to be reaped, demands more than ‘seeing’, or rather that something is entailed by ‘seeing’; at which point the analogy with aesthetics and ‘language-games’ must be laid aside and some more suitable instrument chosen from the tool chest of theological inquiry.

**Aesthetic Criticism**

In attempting a definition of aesthetic criticism, one is confronted by a similar fundamental problem to the one that arises when attempting to define ‘existentialism’; namely, the intrinsically imprecise and pluralistic meaning of the term. Conceding this, at least two alternatives arise: one either conducts a historical survey of the term, hoping to identify an underlying commonality, or one might focus on a particular meaning that is held to encapsulate the distinctive character of the term, a representative definition of sorts. The second of these two approaches will be taken in this discussion, which begins by considering to what end aesthetic criticism is practiced. In *Aesthetics: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Art* (1987), Anne Sheppard begins by describing first what art criticism should not attempt to do: ‘uncover one single meaning which a work must have’. Instead it should ‘present us with justifiable ways of reading the work and so help us to appreciate it’.  

This understanding of aesthetic criticism contains three features that will contribute to forming an existential notion of recognition: the role of criteria and authority in aesthetic judgments, the misleading form of aesthetic arguments, and the essential aim of aesthetic criticism.

Beginning with the role of criteria and authority, Sheppard’s description forces one to confront the possibility that dispute concerning the meaning of a piece of art may remain irresolvable. If a single meaning cannot be attributed to a particular work, the possibility of a definitive interpretation is forever out of reach. If this is so, how can one speak of justifiable ways of reading a work? This ancient problem was considered by Socrates and

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by Aristotle in *Oedipus Rex*. However, these difficulties were accentuated by the inclination of modernity towards binary oppositions, in which Hume and Kant forced their readers to consider whether aesthetic criticism can be regarded as a ‘scientific’ or objective activity at all, or of whether the judgments made by aesthetic criticism are purely a matter of personal taste. In contrast, Sheppard’s description attempts to hold together traditional oppositions; she rejects singular and definitive definitions, yet upholds the notion that there are justifiable ways of reading a work.

Sheppard’s description of aesthetic criticism shows that, despite similarities in the form of the arguments, aesthetic arguments must be altogether different from those of the empirical sciences. In his famous article, ‘Does Traditional Aesthetics Rest on a Mistake?’ William E. Kennick draws the reader’s attention to the fact that despite the similarity in the *form* of the questions, ‘What is Helium?’, and ‘What is Art?’ their substance is of a fundamentally different kind. While ‘helium’ can be defined in terms of its essence (for it has an essence), art cannot. While attempts to define art in abstract metaphysical terms – as beauty, truth and goodness – have been attempted, the conversation continues, for each attempt to generate an answer results only in further questions. Therefore, the similarity in the form of aesthetic questions and those of the empirical sciences (for example) must not lead to the erroneous assumption that this similarity extends to the content of the questions, or the structure of the ‘answers’. The inability of eminent philosophers to answer an apparently simple question such as ‘What is art?’ or ‘What is beauty?’ alerts one to the deeper problems and opportunities that are entailed within these subjects. ‘It is the compulsion to reduce the complexity of aesthetic concepts to simplicity, neatness, and order that moves the aesthetcian to make his/her

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13 This line of argument is adopted by Roger Scruton: ‘art history might similarly be taken to stand to economic history much as biology stands to organic chemistry, and organic chemistry to physics . . . [this] suggestion is far too narrow. For it is based on the false assumption that, in the human realm, as in the realm of nature, explanation is always one kind of thing. Explanation is the production of an answer to the question ‘why?’ Traditional Aristotelian philosophy distinguished four kinds of answer to that question . . .’ Roger Scruton, *The Aesthetic Understanding: Essays in the Philosophy of Art and Culture* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1983), 170.
first mistake, viz. to ask “What is art?” and to expect to find an answer like the answer that can be given to “What is helium?”

St. Augustine famously admitted in his *Confessions* that when asked ‘What is Time?’ he was unable to answer: ‘If I am not asked, I know; if I am asked, I know not’. Although Kennick claims that the question, ‘what is art?’ is nonsensical, I argue that he is misusing the question, limiting its scope and content according to its seemingly limited form. It is far from clear that the question ‘what is art?’ is seeking an answer of the kind sought by the question ‘what is helium?’ There are, I argue, greater opportunities within this linguistic confusion than a mere dismissal of the question. Despite the similar form of aesthetic questions and those of the empirical sciences, rejecting the question because such confusion arises, or assuming a straightforward answer, represents a failure to grasp the ‘depth grammar’ (Wittgenstein) of the question. This is well illustrated in *Culture and Value* where he writes, ‘Someone may say for instance that it’s a very grave matter that such and such a man should have died before he could complete a certain piece of work; and yet in another sense, this is not what matters. At this point one uses the words “in a deeper sense”.

One way of recognizing the infinite depth of aesthetic questions is by considering the end to which the question is asked. Many and various reasons might, for example, prompt one to ask a curator, “when will the Pissaro exhibition be held?” It may be asked in order that the exhibition not be missed, or precisely in order to miss it (if one particularly disliked Pissarro’s work); it may be to avoid the gallery during this time due to possible crowdedness; it may be to find out what importance is attached to this artist by knowing where in the yearly calendar the exhibition is placed, etc. Similarly, the question – ‘what

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14 Kennick, ‘Does Traditional Aesthetics Rest on a Mistake?’, 320.
is art?’ – invites a variety of responses, no one of which can be said to answer the question exhaustively. 17

In Sheppard’s description of aesthetic criticism cited above – ‘to present us with justifiable ways of reading the work and so help us to appreciate it’ – it seems that the cluster of questions, invitations and provocations that constitute the vocabulary of aesthetic criticism may be carefully applied to enable another to see the work anew, to appreciate it. By inference, the role of the art critic is not ‘to prove their judgments . . . but to help the audience perceive features of the work of art, and understand [the audience’s] role in the work’. 18 While Kennick seems to suggest that the question, ‘what is art?’ requires a traditional kind of definition, he does admit that the purpose of aesthetic criticism is to provide a new way of looking at pictures, one that the viewer must see for him or herself. Therefore, arguments of an aesthetic kind cannot be persuasive, let alone convincing, for one who has no direct contact with the work itself. Aesthetic arguments work in conjunction with individual experience and, though they are not experiential arguments (i.e. arguments from experience), they are ultimately dependent for their persuasive force on whether, in the experience of encountering the work itself, one sees the beauty, horror, or truth of the work for him or herself or not.

**Aesthetics Viewed From a Wittgensteinian Perspective**

This way of approaching aesthetic criticism is Wittgensteinian in spirit, for Wittgenstein himself was no more a philosopher of art than he was a theologian, and the scattered remarks throughout his writings and the four lectures he gave on the topic of aesthetics are preserved in the lecture notes of his students only. 19 This discussion will consider three aspects of a Wittgensteinian notion of aesthetics: the impossibility of providing answers to aesthetic questions, the possibility that aesthetic questions operate as invitations to personal encounter and appreciation of the work, and that aesthetic

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17 This style of inquiry is made explicit when one considers such questions as ‘what kind of a person do you desire to become?’ which is often used to invoke, among other things, a reflective attitude and a reappraisal of ambitions.
19 See ‘Lectures on Aesthetics’ in Barrett, ed., *Wittgenstein: Lectures and Conversations*. 

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criticism is not ‘irrational’ but rather demands that notions of evidence are discourse-dependent and therefore must be freed from empirical-scientific assumptions and expectations. Aesthetic judgments can only be fully appreciated within an aesthetic discourse.

The search for abstract essences is precisely what renders absurd the traditional questions of aesthetics. ‘Beautiful’ is an adjective, so you are inclined to say: “This has a certain quality, that of being beautiful”.20 Drawing this kind of inference is perhaps what motivated Kennick’s criticism of ‘traditional aesthetics’. Questions such as ‘What is beauty?’ may be seen as comparable to the questions ‘What is fear?’, or ‘What is love?’, the meaning of which are revealed not by abstract definition but through descriptions and usage. If the validity of aesthetic claims is dependent upon quasi-scientific criteria, aesthetics becomes the most dubious of disciplines. If ‘Aesthetics is a science telling us what’s beautiful – [it is] almost too ridiculous for words. I suppose it ought to include also what coffee tastes well’.21 Does this mean that the traditional questions of aesthetics are illegitimate? Does this close the doors on aesthetic inquiry altogether? Certainly not. These challenges reveal that the way in which a question is understood is a ‘grammatical’ issue and therefore must be considered within the relevant lexicon or framework. Thus, questions of aesthetics must be subject to the ‘grammar’ of aesthetics. For example, ‘the use of such a word as ‘beautiful’ is . . . apt to be misunderstood if you [do not] look at the linguistic form of sentences in which it occurs’22

If one were to agree with Kennick that ‘traditional aesthetics does rest on a mistake’, there is no reason why aesthetics should not be reconsidered beyond its ‘traditional’ formulations. Certainly one can and does say which coffee tastes good, and one does judge whether or not Picasso’s Weeping Woman is beautiful, or whether Melville’s Moby-Dick is a timeless work of art, or merely an indulgent fishing story. Failure to do this is not merely a rejection of the practice of aesthetic criticism, but a rejection of the works themselves; for if art presents visions of life, it demands on-going, evolving

reflection, that is at once critical and provisional. It is precisely through reconsidering the scope of aesthetic claims, and the process by which aesthetic judgments are made, that the existential fruits of the aesthetic domain are brought to fullness.

In order to emphasise the priority of personal encounter in aesthetic criticism, Wittgenstein is critical of the term ‘aesthetics’ (because of its scientific connotations) and instead applies the term ‘artistic appreciation’. The value of this revised terminology is that it alerts one to the fact that at the heart of all aesthetic judgments is the personal, existential engagement and response of the subject. Artistic appreciation thus refutes theories of beauty, for example, in favour of the actual appreciation experienced by the one who experiences the work of art for him/herself. But how does this come about, if not by some theory? It would seem that ‘appreciation’, in Wittgensteinian terms, arises from a technique; a way of looking. But the technique is not a theory, for it is always based upon and directed towards the immediacy of personal encounter.

In discussing an experience of reading the eighteenth-century poet Klopstock, Wittgenstein remarks,

the way to read him was to stress his meter abnormally . . . when I read his poems in this new way . . . I smiled, [and] said: “This is grand”, etc. . . . The important thing was that I read the poems entirely differently, more intensely, and said to others: “Look! This is how they should be read.”

In this example, one might reasonably ask, ‘why was this poetry ‘grand?’ Wittgenstein’s account offers little or nothing in the way of a formal answer. Whether Klopstock’s poetry is grand or not, I have no idea. There is nothing in Wittgenstein’s account that persuades me one way or another. Having not read Klopstock, I cannot say. However, if I were to read it, Wittgenstein’s account offers another way of approaching it, so that I may also recognise it as ‘grand’, or something similar. This method of appreciation is one that consists in applying different techniques which may or may not succeed in facilitating the

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23 From this point onwards, when speaking of ‘aesthetics’ I will be presuming a Wittgensteinian understanding unless otherwise stated. Accordingly, these terms will now be used interchangeably.

24 If this is not so, one will ‘resemble tourists who read Baedeker while they stand before a building and through reading about the building’s history, origins and so on are kept from seeing it’. Wittgenstein, Culture and Value, 46e.

experience of encounter. In this case the traditional questions of aesthetic inquiry – ‘What is beauty?’ and ‘Is this work beautiful?’ – are surpassed by a method for appreciation followed by the potential moment of appreciation. Appreciation of this kind does not depend on a verbal assent to the beauty of a particular work. It is not primarily a statement, but an experience. Because of the fundamentally personal and experiential character of artistic appreciation, ‘to describe what [appreciation] consists in we would have to describe the whole environment’. What will count as evidence in an aesthetic explanation will consist of a complex web of elements, grounded in the situation of the individual person.

The ‘sort of explanation one is looking for when one is puzzled by an aesthetic impression is not a causal explanation’. Within this understanding of aesthetic judgments, causal explanation is surpassed by a method of description that seeks to enable one to encounter the work for oneself. As Ray Monk says,

> [the] sort of explanation that one wants in aesthetics [is not] one that establishes a cause for something’s being beautiful, or for our regarding something as beautiful, but rather that, by showing connections we had not thought of previously, shows what is beautiful about it – shows why, for example, a certain piece of music or a certain play, poem etc. is correctly regarded as a great work.

This approach to aesthetic criticism demands a revision of what constitutes ‘evidence’ in the aesthetic domain. Without a ‘theory of beauty’, one is precariously dependent upon a variety of methods, on the successful application of those methods and, ultimately, on some level of agreement in experience. In a case where a ‘theory of beauty’ held, for example, that ‘trees are beautiful’, by inference one could confidently assert that a painting is beautiful because it contains an image of a tree.

By appealing to a theory, an explanation of why the painting is beautiful can be offered. Within a Wittgensteinian notion of aesthetics, this is not possible. Instead of an ‘explanation’, an appropriate response will consist in a variety of techniques of looking, and the utilisation of these techniques to the end of seeing the feature under

consideration. After the application of all techniques the discussion is exhausted until alternative techniques emerge.

This discussion brings into focus two central features of authentic aesthetic judgment. First, it is by way of a different technique (a different method or ‘guideline’ of sorts) that one is able to appreciate the meaning or quality of the work (in the case of Klopstock’s poetry, the ‘grandeur’). Second, the particular quality is revealed in the existential moment, in which all the contingencies of personality and selfhood, of being here and not there is brought to bear. This is the matrix out of which authentic appreciation arises, where subject and object are interpenetrating; truly present and encountered.

A Personal Point of Departure: Existential Aspects of Aesthetic Judgments

Two features of aesthetic judgments exhibit most clearly an existential character. First, the priority of personal encounter, without which an aesthetic judgment or claim cannot stand; second is the necessity of particularity and subjectivity in the formation of the judgment. The partiality of the critic or observer does not compromise the authority or persuasiveness of the judgment. Rather, the subjective dimension of the one who makes an aesthetic claim is foundational to the claim itself, without which the judgment becomes utterly absurd (i.e. aiming at pure objectivity).

In the case of aesthetic judgments, the personal condition of the observer is not irrelevant to the judgment (this is perhaps why a computer program, despite its sophistication, cannot form aesthetic judgments, ‘Artificial Intelligence’ cannot extend to ‘Artificial Creativity’ or ‘Artificial Appreciation’). In aesthetic and existential judgment autonomy is surpassed by participation; understanding from within always takes precedence over an understanding from without. In fact, from a Wittgensteinian

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29 In this context, the term ‘subjectivity’ is not being used in the very unique Kierkegaardian sense proposed in Chapter V above. Subjectivity here refers to that realm of knowledge and knowing that is most closely and exclusively related to the individual person.

30 By contrast, the method of the empirical sciences allows one to ‘describe a pattern in the development of someone’s scientific thought, without mentioning the different but in all probability related patterns exhibited by his emotional life, his taste in flowers, or his understanding of the opposite sex’. Scruton, The Aesthetic Understanding: Essays in the Philosophy of Art and Culture, 172.
perspective on aesthetics, there is no such thing as understanding from without. Rather, an authentic inquiry into aesthetics will be characterised by an imperative to *personal encounter* as the foundation of judgment, and by human *particularity* as the framework for articulating the judgment, for ‘in order to get clear about aesthetic words you have to describe ways of living’.31 Therefore, aesthetic judgments are not born of theories that state what is beautiful, but arise out of a lived situation, out of the personal, existential identity of the one who encounters the work. Arising from this encounter, one forms a judgment.

An imperative towards ‘encountering the truth’, with the ‘receptive spirit of the participant’ and the importance of ‘particularity’ in philosophical inquiry (where it explores questions of meaning, value, ethics and religion) has been fundamental to this discussion from the very beginning.32 This is to bring to the fore of philosophical inquiry the categories of ‘encounter’ and ‘particularity’. The historical overview of existential thought that opened this discussion has revealed that from the time of Heraclitus there has been the call to draw from both wells, the experiential and the intellectual.

The epistemology of encounter proposed in this discussion (which takes its lead from an existential mode of philosophising) is intended to provide a suitable response to a christologically grounded notion of truth. However, it will do well to consider some of the methodological features of aesthetic inquiry, for there exist in aesthetics certain parallels of striking relevance. For example, both can and must be subjected to logical criticism for both can be deemed logically coherent or not; these ways of knowing are neither illogical nor beyond the conditions of logic. And yet ultimately, an existential mode of philosophizing and the persuasiveness of aesthetic claims can never be satisfactorily accounted for without the requirement of personal encounter. The qualitative features of which aesthetic criticism attempts to speak – beauty, value, truth, meaning – are not, contra the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophus*, ‘unspeakable’ or detached from legitimate conditions of use. However, the fullness of an aesthetic claim cannot be

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adequately expressed if it is divorced from one’s personal encounter with the work itself. Therefore, it does occur within a range of permissible conditions which can be specified and yet never exhaustively defined. Aesthetics provides the example *par excellence* of how the personal and intellectual faculties must be integrated if an authentic judgment is to be formed.

The next element in the existential dimension of aesthetic claims concerns the conditions of application. When the judgment of a work of art is not shared by two people no amount of logical argument by the one can persuade the other that the image is beautiful. ‘Suppose the landlady says: “This is hideous”, and you say: “This is lovely” – all right, that’s that’. 33 If it is possible to influence one another beyond this impasse, each must develop arguments that show or point to some hitherto overlooked aspect of the work that enables the other to see the beauty for him or her self. If one takes, as an analogy, the process of delivering a syllogistic argument, in the case of aesthetic arguments, the ‘inference’ and ‘conclusion’ must be drawn by the one to whom the argument is directed. That is to say, the inference and conclusion can never be made for another. Finally, conclusions of the existential-aesthetic kind will never ‘follow necessarily’, yet at the same time not just any conclusion will do.

The common thread that binds the aesthetic and existential domains of philosophy consists essentially in the aspiration to uphold the experiential dimensions of the individual person (emotional, psychological, spiritual, historical, etc.), while not compromising an attitude of intellectual rigour. It is the integration of these modes of knowing that form a suitable epistemology for recognizing a Christian notion of truth. A brief overview of the previous discussion on the methodological differences between the early Wittgenstein and Marcel will bring out most clearly the contextual significance of religious discourse.

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In the earlier discussion, Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* brought into association the subject matter of aesthetics, and ethico-religious inquiry.\(^{34}\) Although it is the later Wittgenstein’s writings on aesthetics that are most relevant to this discussion, the *Tractatus* establishes ‘aesthetics, ethics and religious belief’ as related loci through which ‘the mystical manifests’ itself.\(^{35}\) Most importantly, aesthetics, ethics and religious belief, according to Wittgenstein, can only be known through personal encounter.\(^{36}\) These encounters are beyond the scope of language and can be expressed, at most, as gesticulations in the realm of nonsense.\(^{37}\)

In the *Tractatus*, the *communal* nature of meaning is overlooked. Instead, the encounter with existential value and meaning occurs in a solitary moment alone, inexplicable and unintelligible. This is a difficult position to maintain, as Wittgenstein’s own later shift towards a deeply communal notion of meaning attests.\(^{38}\) The domain of aesthetics, ethics and religious belief are intrinsically relational and communal; almost by definition, they entail ‘the other’. Gabriel Marcel offers an approach that seeks to integrate the experiential dimensions of the *Tractatus* into a more holistic and communal model of intellectual reflection.\(^{39}\) Unlike Wittgenstein, Marcel takes a more generous view of the contribution that can be made by language and critical thought to enriching and deepening the fundamentally existential category of ‘mystery’.\(^{40}\) To this end, Marcel

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\(^{34}\) See Chapter Two above.


\(^{37}\) These two ways of reading the *Tractatus* raise the further issue, beyond the scope of the present discussion, as to whether the *Tractatus* in fact consists in a critique of language, or a critique of philosophy. The narrow parameters set by Wittgenstein for language are perhaps more appropriately understood as the narrow limits of philosophy. His respect for, and encouragement of, ‘nonsense’ raises the possibility that the domain of aesthetics, ethics and religious belief can be spoken of, though not within the restrictive rigours of philosophy. This possibility is strengthened in light of Wittgenstein’s comment in CV where he writes, ‘Don’t *for heaven’s sake*, be afraid of talking nonsense! But you must pay attention to your nonsense’. Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, 64e. It seems hard to avoid reading the italicised words as a kind of pun.

\(^{38}\) His later ‘meaning-as-use’ principle and the very notion of ‘language-games’ (which are always played with another) and the impossibility of a ‘private language’, indicate a shift towards something like an ‘inter-subjective’ approach to linguistic and existential meaning.

\(^{39}\) See Chapter Three above.

proposes the notion of ‘intersubjectivity’, which establishes a matrix in which judgment is formed and which establishes judgment as something inseparable from the personal condition of the one who forms the judgment. Such judgment, as something that emerges in a ‘matrix’, is revealed as deeply communal.

While the *Tractatus* claims that the subjectivity of aesthetics, ethics and religious belief require that they be ‘passed over in silence’, Marcel acknowledges and then embraces the logical imprecision of existential judgments. By way of his notion of ‘intersubjectivity’, Marcel shows that the tension within existential philosophy between the experiential and the intellectually critical, can and must be maintained. In short, the implication of the one who makes a philosophical-existential claim is not to the detriment of the claim; rather, it is the evidence of its authenticity.

The writings of Marcel and the early Wittgenstein show that the nature of aesthetics, ethics, religious belief, the mystical, and the realm of value and meaning are known most fully through personal encounter. Just as the nature of a painting is to reveal itself through being seen, it is the nature of existential value and meaning to be revealed through personal encounter. While a formal theory of beauty may produce general agreement, there is no authentic expression until one transcends the theory and encounters the quality for oneself, standing before the image. Similarly, while doctrine and dogma may sustain obedience and assent to a religious belief, these ‘ways of knowing’ will never sustain faith of the kind Kierkegaard sought to save from the objectifying forces of state religion.

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41 Marcel, *Mystery of Being: Reflection and Mystery*, 207.
43 This understanding may be further explicated by considering an analogy from art history, in which a distinction can be drawn between *history* and *chronology*. Where chronology can, in general, be understood with certainty, *history* will always be an on-going, provisional conversation. Unlike ‘chronology’, a range of influences and perspectives contribute to (the academic discipline of) *history* that are ultimately unquantifiable. While chronology is something that can be inquired into from ‘without’, history is always engaged with from within. Similarly, aesthetic judgments that claim to be ‘critically neutral or value-free’ must, at the very least, arouse deep suspicion. See Scruton, *The Aesthetic Understanding: Essays in the Philosophy of Art and Culture*, 178.
However, any kind of genuine existential approach to these problems must recognise that ‘encounter’ is always embodied or incarnate. Encounter loses all its force, and arguably its very meaning, when it becomes an abstract or theoretical concept. Encounter assumes that there is someone who is encountering something, somewhere at some time. Understood thus, the imperative to encounter entails a commitment to participation in the communal inter-subjective particularity of existence. This is a notion of encounter that is formed out of an epistemology in which methods, structures and conditions for interpretation co-operate with seeing the work anew. These are some of the lessons one can take from aesthetics; they also provide a framework for embracing a christological notion of truth.

**A Religious Frame of Reference**

The understanding of Christianity emphasised through the analogy with aesthetics shows Christian faith to be an existential orientation within the world, rather than a rational or super-rational account of creation. It is ‘a passionate commitment to a system of reference. Hence, although it’s belief, it’s really a way of living, or a way of assessing life’. Accordingly,

religious controversies look quite different from any normal controversies. Reasons look entirely different from normal reasons. They are, in a way, quite inconclusive . . . anything I would normally call evidence wouldn’t in the slightest influence me.

These comments suggest that religious belief requires a different frame of reference altogether. The vessels for empirical understanding will not hold; what is required is new wineskins for new wine

As D.Z. Phillips observes, ‘many philosophers crudely impose the grammar of another mode of discourse on religion, namely that appropriate to the existence of physical

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44 This is a position comparable to Wittgenstein’s when he writes (somewhat generously) ‘Amongst other things Christianity says, I believe, that sound doctrines are all useless. That you have to change your life (Or the direction of your life)’. Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, 61e. It will be assumed within this discussion that where Wittgenstein uses the term ‘religion’ he refers to Christianity, unless stated otherwise.

45 Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, 73e.

objects’.

The reason for this confusion or misapplication can be seen to arise from the fundamental problem of recognition, of not seeing what is before one, or seeing something other than what is before one (a Pilate-ian problem, so to speak). Wittgenstein’s conviction is that the task of philosophy is to remove confusion. To this end, before philosophical or theological questions can be asked, one must have some appreciation of what constitutes evidence within a given domain; what kind of answers are being sought; and what will constitute an ‘answer’. This cluster of problems may be located under the heading of ‘recognition’. Aesthetics constitutes one way of approaching a Christian notion of truth. It is a method or technique. It says, “try looking at it this way, try standing over here, and try recalling this claim about the man Jesus. Now, do you see Him? Perhaps some part of the obscurity has been removed?” Like a person recovering from memory-loss, one begins with the familiar and employs a variety of suggestion and ‘jolts’ that aim to stimulate the memory so that he or she may say,”ahh, now I recognise that this man standing here is my Father”.

**Recognizing the Language-Game**

To explore the problem of recognition, Wittgenstein’s proposal of ‘language-games’ should prove to be illuminating. Consistent with the application of his understanding of aesthetics, this discussion is not interested in speculating how Wittgenstein himself intended his idea of language-games to be used. Rather, the approach will be comparable to that of a workman, who picks up a tool at hand, applies it to a task, and if it proves to be genuinely helpful in the execution of that task, deems the tool suitable to that particular task.

In *Investigations*, Wittgenstein provides an indicative list of the variety of ‘language-games’ which include ‘giving orders, and obeying them – Describing the appearance of

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48 ‘Some people’s taste is to an educated taste as is the visual impression received by a purblind eye to that of a normal eye. Where a normal eye will see something clearly articulated, a weak eye will see a blurred patch of colour’. Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, 73e.

49 It is not certain that Wittgenstein ever intended his idea to be applied in the fashion in which it is being applied here. Indeed, it is both an exasperating and liberating fact that Wittgenstein’s writings on almost any topic do not constitute a systematic treatise (with the exception of the *Tractatus*) and do not establish the limits of application.
an object, or giving its measurements – Reporting an event – Speculating about the event’, etc.\(^{50}\) In short, the list suggests that language-games are ‘quite small-scale units of language-usage which occur in various human contexts’.\(^{51}\) However, this is not the kind of reading that will be assumed here.\(^{52}\) Rather, it will be understood that much of what was intended when the term [language-games] was employed – the distinctive character of religious discourse, the manner in which the meaning of language is context-dependent and rooted in activity – is essential for a fruitful understanding of religious belief and practice.\(^{53}\)

Consistent with Wittgenstein’s opposition to doctrinal and dogmatic philosophy, the idea of language-games will be applied liberally to delineate one possible way of identifying what is at stake in a Christian notion of truth. This approach begins by considering how any given frame of reference acts upon the attendant religious claims. The value of the idea of ‘language-games’ is that it shows how the meaning of terms is significantly defined, understood and misunderstood in relation to an appropriate or inappropriate frame of reference.

In *Lectures and Conversations*, this illuminating scenario is proposed:

> If you suddenly wrote numbers on a blackboard, and then said: “Now, I’m going to add”, and then said: “2 and 21 is 13,” etc. I’d say: “This is no blunder” . . . In order to see what the explanation is [for using numbers in this way] I should have to see the sum . . . [and] the different circumstances under which he does it, etc.\(^{54}\)

The point of this illustration is to show that what may appear as a ‘blunder’ may in fact not be a blunder at all, and that, most importantly this will be determined by contextual factors. One particularly important point is that the error, in a sense, is too great to be merely ‘a blunder’. In contrast, if one said, for example, “2 and 21 is 24”, there is nothing here to suggest that anything other than a straightforward error is occurring. However,

\(^{50}\) Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 10e.


\(^{53}\) Clack, *An Introduction to Wittgenstein’s Philosophy of Religion*, 89. The ‘principal function of language-games in Wittgenstein’s later philosophy is less to designate extant social and linguistic phenomena and more to contribute to a philosophical methodology seeking to address the confusions arising from puzzlement over certain elements of language-use’. Clack, *An Introduction to Wittgenstein’s Philosophy of Religion*, 87.

such a significant discrepancy between how addition usually works, and how it is being used here, becomes an aid for recognizing that something else altogether is going on.

The next illustration by Wittgenstein brings the points in question into a directly religious context:

Suppose someone dreamt of the Last Judgment, and said he now knew what it would be like. Suppose someone said: “This is poor evidence”. I would say: “If you want to compare it with the evidence for it’s raining to-morrow it is no evidence at all . . . if you compare it with anything in Science which we call evidence, you can’t credit that anyone could soberly argue: “Well, I had this dream . . . therefore . . . Last Judgment”. You might say: “For a blunder, that’s too big”.  

Paradoxically, it is the absurdity of religious claims (by the standards of empirical science) that may enable one to recognise that there is something altogether different going on in religious utterances, and in this sense, ‘Grammar tells us what kind of object anything is. (Theology as grammar)’. It is recognition of this kind that resolves the apparent conflict between the Creation narrative found in Genesis, and Darwin’s *Origin of Species*. As ‘distinct language-games with different concerns and objectives, there should be no (theoretical) conflict between science and religion’, for the frames of reference within which the claims of each are made are not opposed to one another but rather are fundamentally distinct. In hindsight, the famous controversies between these distinct accounts of human identity must be seen as arising from an impoverished and imprecise understanding of both. Unfortunately, the struggle of Christianity to be heard again within the context of a post-modern culture suggests that many of the broader lessons taught by the controversies surrounding Darwin’s work have been forgotten and need to be heard again.

If this analogy from language-games is persuasive, then one begins to see that the first task of theology is to be clear and open about its own methodology. If a claim is challenged on the basis of a lack of evidence, or unreliable evidence, it is first necessary

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57 Clack, *An Introduction to Wittgenstein's Philosophy of Religion*, 82.
to establish what constitutes ‘evidence’; to demarcate between sense and nonsense.\textsuperscript{58} This is perhaps nowhere more crucial than within a religious discourse, which utilises the language of the world to describe that which is beyond the world. The necessity of identifying the scope of religious discourse is that, contra the \textit{Tractatus}, the meaning of a word or a discourse cannot be satisfactorily accounted for by pointing to an object in the world to which the term or terms refer. If meaningful language depended on a kind of correspondence theory of truth, then all those domains that form the foundation of meaning and life (ethics, aesthetics and religious belief) one ‘must pass over in silence’.\textsuperscript{59} However, as Wittgenstein himself discovered in the ‘silent years’ after writing the \textit{Tractatus} – and as has been the conviction of this thesis to argue and defend – there is a way of speaking of aesthetics, ethics and religious belief; a way that relies on the principle that ‘how words are understood is not told by words alone (Theology)’.\textsuperscript{60}

This reference to ‘theology’, while left characteristically unexplained, nonetheless makes a strong suggestion that, among all the language-games, this context-dependence is perhaps most acute in theology: ‘Grammar tells us what kind of object anything is. (Theology as grammar)’.\textsuperscript{61} This suggests that religious claims in particular can only be properly understood within their existential context. In this way ‘theology’ operates as a kind of grammar to the extent that it provides structures and guidelines that facilitate understanding of religious claims, and again like grammar, allows for its rules or normative principles to be influenced by an overarching imperative towards meaning (i.e. poetry).\textsuperscript{62}

In discussing the problems that accompany recognition of a Christian notion of truth, Wittgenstein’s notions of aesthetics and language-games have been selected to show that the fullness of a christologically grounded notion of truth cannot be authentically

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\textsuperscript{59} Wittgenstein, \textit{Tractatus}, 7.


\textsuperscript{61} Wittgenstein, \textit{Philosophical Investigations}, 99e.

\textsuperscript{62} For further discussion of this see Keightley, \textit{Wittgenstein, Grammar and God}, Chapter II.
recognised if its is divorced from an existential context. The claims of aesthetics become absurd if they are not grounded in an experiential epistemology, and the notion of language games shows that ‘only in the stream of thought and life do words have meaning’. Understanding, therefore, arises through personal participation and engagement, incorporating both intellectual and experiential modes of knowing. Torn out of the context of a Christian life, and stuck into a secular-humanist field of reference, or a scientific field, or a rationalist’s field, the notion of Christ as the truth withers and dies. It has been the purpose of this discussion so far to identify and articulate the problem and priority of recognition in order to develop some methodological devices for approaching the Christian claim that Christ is the truth.

The bird-watcher, who goes out into the field to look for a particular species of bird, must have some technical knowledge of what the bird looks like, some knowledge of its habitat, migratory patterns, courting rituals, etc. Perhaps most importantly, the bird watcher must go to where the bird lives. No amount of knowledge of the species will bring it into his living room. These preliminary reflections on aesthetic criticism and a notion of language-games are intended as tools that aid in the quest for recognition. Ultimately, however, they are just tools, and an accurate textual illustration or even a photograph of the bird will not be in any sense equivalent to seeing the bird itself. Encountering the bird and then personally appropriating that experience of encounter is the ‘bacon’ the bird-watcher brings home after a day, a week or a lifetime’s waiting and stalking.

And Pilate asked, “What is truth?”: The Existential Grammar of Christian Truth

It was claimed in the discussion above that the idea of language-games as a framework (or system of reference) for understanding becomes particularly important in relation to religious claims. Wittgenstein illustrates this point when he writes,

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63 Wittgenstein, Zettel, 173.
64 I believe that the problem of recognition is one so prevalent within and around Christian discourse that its ‘truth-claims’ are hardly ever addressed.
If Mr. Lewy is religious and says he believes in a Judgment Day, I won’t even know whether to say I understand him or not. I’ve read the same things as he’s read. In a most important sense, I know what he means.\(^{65}\)

The point of this ambiguity is made explicit in relation to the meaning of the word ‘believe’.

One talks of believing and at the same time one doesn’t ‘believe’ as one does ordinarily. You might say (in the normal use): “You only believe – oh well . . .” Here it is used entirely differently; on the other hand it is not used as we generally use the word ‘know’.\(^{66}\)

The form of ethico-religious claims often resembles the form of ordinary language. However, such claims operate on an entirely different level and cannot be subjected to the same criteria as ‘everyday language’. The image of ‘levels of meaning’ points towards Wittgenstein’s notion of surface/depth grammar:

in the use of words one might distinguish ‘surface grammar’ from ‘depth grammar’. What immediately impresses itself upon us about the use of a word is the way it is used in the construction of the sentence . . . now compare the depth grammar, say of the word “to mean”, with what its surface grammar would lead us to suspect. No wonder we find it difficult to know our way about\(^{67}\)

Applying this approach to religious language,\(^{68}\) one finds that the meaning of religious claims shifts fundamentally. Identifying that such a shift occurs helps reveal that a ‘religious utterance does not function as a description of supernatural entities in a fashion analogous to science’s description of natural entities’.\(^{69}\) Furthermore, this method for achieving linguistic clarity begins by concentrating on the way that the phrase is used. That means that the role or function that the religious utterance plays in a person’s life discloses the essential meaning, rather than its relationship to an explanatory meta-language or, for that matter, to other words within a theoretical system. If this is convincing, it follows that religion is not a theoretical system and therefore requires something other than a theoretical approach if the fullness of its meaning is to be disclosed.

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\(^{68}\) An application for which there is much support: see the Bibliography for this chapter.

\(^{69}\) Clack, *An Introduction to Wittgenstein’s Philosophy of Religion*, 55.
In light of the distinction between surface and depth grammar, it is clear that the form of religious utterances should not be allowed to determine their meaning. Because ‘the clothing of our language makes everything look alike’, ‘we remain unconscious of the prodigious diversity of all the everyday language games’. For example, when one says, “I believe it will rain tomorrow”, one is using the term ‘believe’ in an entirely different way (therefore meaning something entirely different), from when one says, “I believe that it is God’s will I resign from my employment and care for my sick neighbour”. While evidence certainly has a role to play in both cases, the criteria or conditions for what constitutes evidence are entirely different. The logic of the language-game ‘is found within the various language-games themselves. That is, we learn to distinguish between sense and nonsense in different ways by actually using language in the varied circumstances of social life’.

In this way, recognizing Christian truth is fundamentally different from ‘knowing’ (in the cerebral/linguistic sense) what Christian truth is. The term ‘recognition’ has been chosen specifically because it invokes the personal and experiential dimensions of knowing. In this the entire self, in all its subjectivity and partiality, is called to look and look again, to hear and hear again, to walk and stumble and get-up, and continue along a way that is unfolding, existential – incarnate. This is the kind of orientation that will now be applied directly to Kierkegaard’s reflection on Pilate’s famous question, ‘What is truth?’ (John 18:38).

The seemingly straight-forward question asked by Pilate, and left unanswered by Jesus, represents a fulcrum point in the problem of recognition. In his Practice in Christianity, Kierkegaard writes ‘in one sense his [Pilate’s] question was altogether appropriate, and in another sense it was as inappropriate as possible’. This observation cuts to the heart of the present discussion and reveals a significant overlap with Wittgenstein’s notion of language-games. Considered outside its ethico-religious context, Pilate’s question was

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70 Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations, 191e.
altogether appropriate. However, considered from the perspective of Christian faith, from the point of view of the pre-existent Logos who became Incarnate in the person of Jesus, the question is indeed ‘as inappropriate as possible’. Had Pilate misunderstood? Yes and No. On the superficial level, Jesus had made the claim that he had ‘come to testify to the truth’ (John. 18:37); so it was quite appropriate for Pilate to ask what this truth is. However, Pilate had failed to recognise that it was Christ himself that was the truth; ‘Christ’s life upon the earth, every moment of this life, was truth’ and therefore ‘how then could Christ with words enlighten Pilate about this when that which is truth, Christ’s life, has not opened Pilate’s eyes to what truth is’.  

This rendering of the exchange between Pilate and Jesus brings one to the sharp-end of the problem of recognition: in the realm of ethico-religious truth, the truth may, literally speaking, be standing immediately before one! Tragic misunderstanding occurs when the notion of truth is shackled and thus impoverished within an empirical-scientific framework. Pilate’s question could never be ‘answered’ in the typical sense, but only be pointed to: ‘look at him, learn from him, he was the truth. This means that truth in the sense in which Christ is the truth is not a sum of statements, not a definition etc., but a life’.  

It has been claimed that in order to appreciate a Christian notion of truth, a complete revision of what is assumed to constitute ‘truth’ on this side of modernity is required. An ethico-religious understanding which strives to reinstate the centrality of existential and subjective concerns in ethical and religious truth-claims is proposed here. It has been a persistent concern of this thesis to demonstrate that an ethico-religious notion of truth is not equivalent to subjective romanticism. Ethico-religious truth must not be dismissed as illogical, irrational or non-rational, but must rather be sought outside criteria of the empirical-scientific kind. A demonstration of this is revealed by way of Kierkegaard’s radical, though certainly not extravagant, claim that ‘truth is subjectivity’. Examined within the framework of Christian faith, such an understanding of truth is shown to be

73 Kierkegaard, Practice in Christianity, 203.
74 Kierkegaard, Practice in Christianity, 205.
75 See Chapter Four above which begins with a historical survey of various models of truth.
thoroughly appropriate and in fact necessary to presenting an orthodox christology. While the incarnate truth of Christian faith must still be approached in terms of evidence and criteria, these categories must be considered beyond the empirical-scientific framework that is too often assumed. If they are not, they become absurd in the way that, for example, ‘I believe it will rain on Sunday because I dreamt it would rain on Sunday’ becomes absurd. In this case, there is no causal relation between these two claims despite having the form of a causal statement. Furthermore, in this case ‘dreaming it would rain on Sunday’ does not constitute appropriate evidence. Where there needs to be evidence of the empirical-scientific kind, there is none. However, in the case of ‘believing that Christ is the truth’ because ‘he has set me free’, the criteria and understanding of causation that befit the empirical sciences are altogether unsuitable.

The purpose of these reflections is to challenge some of the more serious assumptions that derail an earnest inquiry into Christian truth, and to bring to the fore the necessity of recognizing ‘the truth’ - cultivating an eye for the truth - if one is to encounter Christ existentially, personally, and intellectually, with all one’s heart, with all one’s soul, with all one’s mind, and with all one’s strength’ (Mark 12.30).

**Seeing an Aspect: The Task of Recognition**

I had nursed a love of architecture, but, though in opinion I had made that easy leap, characteristic of my generation, from the puritanism of Ruskin to the puritanism of Roger Fry, my sentiments at heart were insular and medieval. This was my conversion to the Baroque. Here under that high and insolent dome, under those coffered ceilings; here, as I passed through those arches and broken pediments to the pillared shade beyond and sat, hour by hour, before the fountain, probing its shadows, tracing its lingering echoes, rejoicing in all its clustered feats of daring invention, I felt a whole new system of nerves alive within me, as though the water that spurted and bubbled among its stones, was indeed a life-giving spring.\(^76\)

In this evocative description of the author’s conversion to the Baroque, it is clear that where he had previously been nursed through the easy leaps characteristic of his

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\(^76\) Waugh, *Brideshead Revisited*, 97.
generation, the sentiments of his heart remained unchanged. However, in physically passing through those arches of Brideshead Manor, in probing its shadows and tracing its lingering echoes, the heart of his sentiments shifted away from their insular and medieval tendencies. One might say that there, before the fountain, he encountered the spirit and truth of Baroque architecture, it entered into him, and in so doing, the cold stone fountain became a life-giving spring. Thus, he moved, in the aesthetic domain, from oblivious imprisonment to conscious liberation. This is an account of an authentic aesthetic encounter, of the moment of recognition. Although Christian truth is a quite different matter, the problems and possibility for recognition bear a striking similarity. It has been the intention of this chapter to demonstrate the merits of an analogy with aesthetics, but now, in conclusion, the association must be made more concrete. What is it about Christian truth that requires such emphasis upon recognition, and how can a methodology drawn from aesthetic inquiry be fruitful in theological exploration?

To the extent that Christian truth possesses a fundamentally paradoxical nature, reason alone will not suffice in describing Christian truth. More than that, however, Christian truth, if fundamentally paradoxical, must be recognised as an article of faith that is revealed in the personal engagement of the earnest seeker. While the ‘Jesus of history’ can be known – in a historical-empirical sense – the Christ of faith can only be known through engagement and personal encounter. But if such subjective factors as personal engagement and encounter are the means by which one knows, how does one speak intelligently and in an intellectually meaningful way of Christ as ‘the truth’? This kind of question arouses the scientific-empirical assumptions that are attached to the term ‘truth’ and in so doing, generates a proper kind of either/or: either Christ as truth is a disreputable and contradictory notion or empirical-scientific notions of truth are irrelevant to the notion of truth as it is presented in the Gospels. It is clearly the latter position that has been defended in this thesis.

In seeing the Christian notion of truth grounded in, and defined by, the person of Jesus Christ, a different kind of vocabulary has been invoked. The Kierkegaardian categories of ‘religious offensiveness’ (that pertained to the offence caused to reason) and ‘objective
absurdity’ showed not that reason is redundant in a christological notion of truth, but that it is precisely where reason fails that the fullness of Christian truth begins to reveal itself, and it is for this point that an existential theology strives. This realm beyond reason, that does not abandon reason but rather exceeds it, invokes all the faculties of human discernment (including the intellectual). This position holds that ‘only in the stream of thought and life do words have meaning (my emphasis).'' I have described this realm as existential.

The failure of reason (though not its abandonment) to convince of the veracity of Christian Truth represents a shift from persuasion by argument, to persuasion by description. By this it is meant that the nature of Christian truth demands that it be seen by the individual person. That Christ is ‘the truth’ is not known because He is the Son of God, but by looking at his life, teachings, etc. and seeing truth that sets one free. Unlike the earth’s orbit around the sun, Christian truth cannot be grasped at ‘second-hand’; if this were possible, Jesus could presumably answer Pilate’s question by telling him what truth is. Rather, it must be encountered personally and existentially, in the circumstances and utter particularity of an individual person’s life. Consequently,

instruction in a religious faith . . . would have to take the form of a portrayal, a description, of that system of reference, while at the same time being an appeal to conscience. And this combination would have to result in the pupil himself, of his own accord, passionately taking hold of the system of reference."

An authentic understanding of Christian truth consists in a personal recognition of the truth; to see it with one’s own eyes. However, in this kind of approach a fundamental difficulty arises, namely the problem of recognition. It has been the concern of this chapter to show that recognition consists in the application of a variety of techniques in the style of ‘portrayals’ and ‘descriptions’ and is therefore not without its own sensible and logical structure; a set of inter-related techniques. But must recognition necessarily consist in a range of techniques? Is it not a case of simply seeing it or not? This is an important point and one on which Wittgenstein can again be of some help. His

77 Wittgenstein, Zettel, 173. Although this claim, taken in itself, is highly contentious, where questions of the fullness of meaning are concerned, as they are here, such a claim is most pertinent. Where fullness of meaning is concerned, claims can only be properly understood in the context of living, where ‘Practise gives words their sense’. Wittgenstein, Culture and Value, 97e.
78 Wittgenstein, Culture and Value, 73e.
description of the ‘Gestalt shift’ and the problem of ‘aspect-blindness’ will show that recognition, though essential to an existential methodology of encounter, cannot stand alone but must exist within a ‘family of approaches’.

Aspect-blindness and the Gestalt Shift

‘Immediately something like scales fell from Saul’s eyes, and he could see again’
(Acts 9:18)

The story of Saul’s conversion may suggest an example where ‘recognition’ has nothing to do with questions of appropriate technique, etc. Despite Saul moving from ‘blindness’ to ‘sight’, there is really no intelligible set of techniques or methods that facilitate that movement; Saul moves from blindness to recognition swiftly and suddenly, and seemingly without dispute. Such a movement might be compared to the process of recognition that occurs in encountering Gestalt images. The famous ‘Duck-Rabbit’ image, a configuration of lines that can be seen as both a duck and a rabbit, raises the fundamental problem of how recognition of one, and then the other, occurs. In the case of two people looking upon the image, one seeing only a duck and the other only a rabbit, the question of ‘aspect-blindness’ arises. The one who sees only the duck is blind to the ‘rabbit’ aspect; for the other the opposite is the case. In this scenario, who is recognizing the true content of the image? Clearly neither one is, for the image in question possesses the dual aspects ‘duck’ and ‘rabbit’.

In a discussion of recognition – of how one moves from seeing one aspect to seeing another – Wittgenstein offers at least two possibilities. Firstly, seeing an aspect of an image will be entirely dependent upon the viewer’s faculties. In this case, ‘aspect-blindness will be akin to the lack of a ‘musical-ear’. Where this is present no variety of techniques or persistent practice will enable one to see what one is intrinsically blind to, as no one who is lacking a ‘musical ear’ can hear the variation in tone and pitch. As distinct from ‘musical appreciation’, a ‘musical ear’ cannot be acquired. Where one hears certain features of a musical piece by virtue of possessing a ‘musical ear’, for example,

79 Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations, 165e-67e.
80 Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations, 182e.
this awakening or realization appears to exceed the scope of criticism. It should, however, be noted that such a conclusion [i.e. ‘no musical ear’] can only be properly asserted after a series of tests; after applying and practically exhausting all relevant techniques. Continuing with the musical analogy, Wittgenstein speaks of ‘hearing an aspect’ of a piece of music after it has ‘been played . . . several times and each time in a slower tempo’. At the end of hearing this piece several times, one might say, “Now it’s right”, or “Now at last it’s a march”. This is what Wittgenstein calls the ‘dawning of an aspect’. To recognise Christ as the truth is a ‘dawning’ of this kind; not an assent to objective fact, received at ‘second-hand’, but a hearing, for oneself, the full symphonic sound of truth. Recognising a piece of music as ‘a march’, as this example illustrates, consists in a process of listening and listening again, of walking again and again under the high domes of Brideshead. This is the spirit that is required if one is to encounter the march in the music.

Returning to the Gestalt ‘duck-rabbit’ image, if one failed to see the rabbit, for example, the critic may begin by ‘drawing attention, pointing, prompting, highlighting’, for example, “imagine that the duck’s bill is in fact a pair of ears, now follow the lines across to the skull, etc.” If this failed to convince, perhaps one could ‘sketch in some more details on the figure itself’. If this process looks persuasive, then it would seem that although recognition of the rabbit may be sudden, the process that leads to the moment of recognition is gradual, incremental, and can proceed by way of a variety of techniques.

Gestalt images therefore contain at least two valuable points for this discussion. First, they show that while the moment of recognition may be sudden, there is a series of techniques that are applied and re-applied and that lead to that moment. Second, if one is simply unable to see the ‘other’ aspect of the image – if seeing an aspect is ‘akin to a musical ear’ – then this can only occur after the failure of techniques; it must always be conclusion rather than first principle. These two points help to define the scope and function of criticism, and in so doing resolve the potential confusion that may arise from

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81 Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations, 176.
the recognition of the kind attributed to Saul. In short, Saul was not ‘persuaded’ to see his error by God; it was not by way of ‘criticism’ that God helped him to see that he was a persecutor. God does not engage in criticism; God does not ‘do theology’. The account of Saul’s conversion is one of ‘direct revelation’. All questions of technique and method, coherency and consistency, are eclipsed by the strongest form of experiential argument. In the absence of direct revelation, however, theological method becomes indispensable, which can and always should contain an imperative towards personal, existential recognition.

The purpose of this brief exploration, as it relates to the problem of recognition for an existential encounter with the Christian notion of truth is that ‘inner process stands in need of outward criteria’. Such criteria are not exhaustive but indicative, and take the form of a methodology. It begins by asserting that the first problem in presenting a Christian notion of truth consists in a problem of recognition and that this challenge can be fruitfully met through considering the notion of Christian truth by way of a Wittgensteinian notion of aesthetics. Aesthetics, as it has been presented here, places primary significance on the reality of personal encounter with the work itself. When personal encounter is the bedrock of aesthetic claims, the nature and spirit of aesthetic criticism must be understood accordingly. Thus, persuasion takes the form of description and suggestion, of pointing and goading, but ultimately strives towards enabling the other to see the particular aspect or quality of the work for him or herself. However compelling an aesthetic argument may be, it can never be convincing, for that is the exclusive role of the work itself. The import this has for the question of Christian truth is that it provides the analogy par excellence for delineating the role of the theologian as critic and the nature of the truth in question. In short, the aesthetic model shows that in order to encounter the meaning of Christian truth one must become more than a mere ‘observer’ of religious precepts, holidays, etc. One must enter into the eternal striving to become a participant in the life of the one who claims to be the truth. From this it follows that the nature and spirit of theological reflection should be to create the conditions for recognition. By creating this demarcation of sorts, one is enabled to see that ‘the meaning

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of terms like ‘real’, ‘unreal’, ‘rationality’ and ‘corresponding to reality’ differ from context to context; that words like ‘existence’, ‘love’, and ‘will’ are not used in the same way of God as they are of human beings or objects’. By reference to ‘language-games’, it becomes clear that the notion of Christian truth is not unintelligible or intellectually disreputable, but that the fullness of its meaning cannot be revealed within the realm of empirical-scientific discourse, or a discourse underpinned by assumptions of a similar order. The notion of Christ as ‘the truth’ is, fundamentally, a claim that belongs within an ethico-religious discourse and thus is only fully or deeply revealed or known in the context of existential encounter.

The imperative to encounter ‘the truth’, for which this existential methodology has been developed, has been aided by analogies from aesthetics and Wittgenstein’s idea of ‘language-games’. However, by invoking the notion of existential encounter as the bedrock of ethico-religious understanding, the two analogies favoured so far must be set aside. While the idea of ‘language-games’ shows that ‘what counts as a reason or as evidence depends on the context: [because] all testing occurs within a system’, something of that context will next be explored. Similarly, the notion of aesthetics proposed here shows that there is a mode of criticism that befits aesthetic claims and counter-claims, and that all criticism is ultimately measured against the personal encounter with the work itself. However, the myriad works one may encounter in aesthetics are not comparable in kind or in degree to the one who is the essence of Christian life. Thus, although one may be said to properly appreciate Rembrandt’s _Prodigal Son_ because one can _recognise_ the sense of reconciliation, liberation, and restoration depicted in the embrace between Son and Father, one cannot say that proper appreciation of Christ as the truth consists in recognition alone. Thus, the tools offered by aesthetics must now be set aside. As Wittgenstein says of Christianity,

> sound doctrines are all useless. That you need to change your life (or the direction of your life) . . . you need something to move you and turn you in a new direction . . . Once you have been turned round, you must stay turned round.

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86 Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, 61e.
This is to encounter the truth, rather than merely recognise it. This movement, from recognition to encounter is a further step towards the full expression of Christian truth that is revealed in the mode of *embodiment*. 
Chapter VII - Living the Gospel: On the Embodiment of Christian Truth

‘Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw the signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves’ (John 6:26)

While the previous discussion was concerned with the conditions associated with the recognition of a Christian notion of truth, this concluding discussion proposes the idea of embodiment as the epistemic response to a christologically grounded notion of truth. The meaning of embodiment will emerge out of a reflection on the imperative of appropriation entailed by a Christian notion of truth. In everyday usage, to appropriate something means to take possession of it, or to take it to oneself. Applied within an ethico-religious domain, that which is taken possession of, or taken to oneself, is a value or idea. Within Christian discourse, the meaning of the term is subjected to a particular kind of strain, for that which is taken possession of is the supreme paradox, the one who is Truth, and what is taken to oneself is the Risen Christ himself. In *Culture and Value* Wittgenstein writes, ‘perhaps one could convince someone that God exists by means of a certain kind of upbringing, by shaping his life in such and such a way’\(^1\). In other words, a theological claim may need to be considered within its existential context or accompanying form of life, if it is to be genuinely persuasive.

The notion of encountering the truth, in the fullness of inter-personal engagement, is essential to the Wittgensteinian notion of form of life. In this discussion it will be shown that the kind of truth proposed by Christianity (i.e. Christ) is one that, of itself, demands to be taken-up into one’s life. In other words, the very meaning of Christian truth requires appropriation if anything of its essence is to be revealed; without personal appropriation, there can be no authentic knowledge. Echoes of this position can again be found in some of Wittgenstein’s remarks on the Gospels: ‘here you have a narrative, don’t take the

same attitude to it as you take to other historical narratives! Make a quite different place in your life for it.”

The meaning of appropriation, as it is proposed here, is akin to Paul Knitter’s understanding of a ‘bold adult spirituality’ which he describes as the ‘full, personal, existential giving over of ourselves to truth that we know only partially, incompletely, fragmentarily’. This full, personal, existential giving over of ourselves to truth is a necessary condition for appropriation in a Christian-existential epistemology.

The idea of recognition, introduced in the previous chapter, showed that the meaning of religious claims is largely determined by the linguistic context in which they are used; hence the idea of ‘language-games’. However, it became evident that the meaning of religious claims, and in particular notions of truth such as Christ as the truth, cannot be adequately revealed through the detached observation and analysis of the relevant linguistic discourse. Rather, the meaning of ethico-religious claims is grounded in, defined by, and understood in and through a way of living. While this epistemological demand is not unique to a Christian notion of truth, arguably it is most acutely revealed in relation to the object of Christian faith, viz Jesus Christ. The movement from linguistic context to existential foundation, from observation to participation, reveals the existential character of language-games: as something played or practiced in time and place, where meaning arises only in and through the relevant form of life.

In the case of a Christian notion of truth, the ‘what’ of objective knowledge is surpassed by the ‘who’ of personal encounter. Where the meaning of Christian truth is grounded in one’s existential orientation to the One who is Truth, it becomes further evident that an orthodox understanding of Christian truth is made intellectually intelligible and existentially relevant by an epistemology of encounter.

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2 Wittgenstein, Culture and Value, 37e.
4 This idea is strongly advocated in Bonhoeffer’s comment regarding the movement from enthusiasm for an abstract idea (i.e. the idea of Christ) to personal obedience to Christ. The question of faith in Christ is answered in the decision between obedience and disobedience. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, The Cost of Discipleship, trans. R.H. Fuller, 1995 ed. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1959), 59, 76.
From Language-Games to Form of Life

The idea of language-games as a tool for recognition leads naturally to some existential implications. Hinted at by the term itself, language-games are not private reflections but communal activities, something played, practised, participated in. In a discussion on the justification of propositions, Wittgenstein remarks that ‘giving grounds . . . justifying the evidence, comes to an end; – but the end is not certain propositions striking us immediately as true, i.e. it is not a kind of seeing on our part; it is our acting, which lies at the bottom of the language-game’.⁵

Arguably, the term itself ‘is meant to bring into prominence the fact that speaking of language is part of an activity, or a life-form’,⁶ and that sharing a language consists fundamentally ‘not [in] agreement in opinions but in form of life’.⁷

This association between speaking and acting brings the existential imperative entailed by a Christian notion of truth into sharper focus. However, in drawing this association, two preliminary questions must first be addressed. First, are there grounds for applying Wittgenstein’s idea of Form of Life to this Christian-religious context? Certainly, the grounds are not explicit (i.e. Wittgenstein himself nowhere said, ‘this is how one should understand the Christian notion of truth.’). In terms of what he recorded on the subject, like the idea of language-games, one is left with only a handful of remarks in the Philosophical Investigations which conceal as much as they reveal.⁸ This ambiguity has generated much conjecture among the various post-Wittgensteinian philosophers of religion⁹. However, it is precisely Wittgenstein’s concern, post-Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, to avoid the dogmatic spirit of his earlier philosophy and to shun the

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⁹ Patrick Sherry engages in this kind of discussion, challenging the use of the idea of ‘form of life’, as it relates to religion, in the writings of D.Z. Phillips and Norman Malcolm. Despite taking a negative position to religious application, he does concede that ‘it is difficult to say exactly what Wittgenstein meant by ‘form of life’, because he gave so few examples’. See Patrick Sherry, Religion, Truth and Language-Games (London: Macmillan, 1977), 22-23.
quasi-scientific precision of his logical positivist contemporaries.\textsuperscript{10} And so one is left without any clear directive on how this particular idea may be used, but for his famous exhortation, \textit{to look and see}. This advice, which reveals more about the spirit of Wittgenstein’s philosophy than any particular philosophical idea, finds deeper echoes in the over-arching conviction of his later philosophy that ‘understanding consists in seeing connections’.\textsuperscript{11}

In his Preface to the \textit{Investigations}, Wittgenstein strives to free his philosophical remarks from prescriptive applications:

\begin{quote}
my thoughts were soon crippled if I tried to force them on in any single direction against their natural inclination. – And this was, of course, connected with the very nature of the investigation. For this compels us to travel over a wide field of thought criss-cross in every direction.\textsuperscript{12}
\end{quote}

This attitude and spirit has defined the application of Wittgenstein’s philosophy so far and continues in the present discussion. Though suggestive and in many ways provisional, Wittgenstein’s concern with the relationship between language and religious claims and attendant ways of living, cannot be underestimated. Both the spirit of his inquiry and the force of his concern can be recognised in this (attributed) remark in \textit{Lectures and Conversations}: “Why shouldn’t one form of life culminate in an utterance of belief in a Last Judgment?” (58).

The second preliminary question is: where does the ‘form of life’ idea fit within the wider Christian-religious discourse? As with the idea of ‘language-games’, introduced in the previous chapter, the problem arises whether Christian-religious discourse should be understood as a distinctive and singular language-game, or whether it consists of a variety of language-games, such as worshipping, imploring, mourning, etc. This discussion is not concerned with Christian discourse in general, but rather with a specific notion of truth that is grounded in the Christ-event. The form of life idea will be brought to bear only

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\textsuperscript{11} Monk, 308.

\textsuperscript{12} These comments are indeed reminiscent of one of Marcel’s understanding of his own method; as one that appears to ‘double-back’ on itself in the style of the kind of roads that ascend a mountain.
upon the specific matter of the Christ-event (thereby leaving space for other ‘forms of life’). However, the assumption that will colour the next step will be that

religion is not to be regarded as emerging from a rational contemplation of the world . . . or a super-empirical explanation of the world . . . but is, rather, something like a way of responding to the world, a mode of orientation, or a way of living in the world.\(^\text{13}\)

The recurrent value in the idea of the form of life is that it brings into prominence an understanding of religion as existential engagement and fundamental orientation in the world. This means that at the heart of religious claims is a way of living, or form of life. The importance of a relevant form of life to questions of religious truth is in revealing the dynamic, personal and experiential imperative entailed by ethico-religious truth.

It has been proposed in this thesis that a Christian notion of truth must be understood in terms fundamentally different from those of the empirical-scientific/temporal-spatial order. It is has been an ongoing concern to challenge empirical-scientific assumptions where they are mistakenly applied to categories of truth that are ethical and religious in nature. The example chosen from the ethico-religious order is a notion of truth that is christologically grounded. To reveal more fully this notion of truth, a fundamentally different kind of epistemology (from that of the empirical sciences) has been generated, one that emphasises the necessity of existential engagement, and the possibility of authentic subjectivity. Through personal engagement, the idea of Christian truth is liberated from the bondage of pure, cognitive thought and is manifested most fully in the lived experience of discipleship.

Wittgenstein’s emphasis upon general associations between linguistic meaning and a relevant form of life can be applied to show how the meaning of Christian truth requires, for its fullest expression, reference to the form of life that accompanies it. Because the meaning of Christian truth is inextricably bound to a Christian form of life, theology must always be a form of discipleship.\(^\text{14}\) Standing before Pilate, Jesus offers the only possible

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\(^{14}\) The notion of *discipleship* proposed in this discussion will be similar to that found in Bonhoeffer’s *Cost of Discipleship*. That is, in distinction from ‘apostles’ who ‘lived in bodily fellowship with Jesus, men who
answer to Pilate’s question, “What is Truth?” He offers himself as the innocent sacrifice and in so doing shows that truth is the costly love of God and love of neighbour. This may be the paradigmatic example: theological ‘answers’ must be embodied, incarnate and existential.

**Form of Life and Justification**

This thesis began its inquiry by acknowledging that within an existential context the notion of truth cannot be subjected to empirical-scientific criteria. This position allows at least two different kind of responses. Either the notion of truth is meaningless within the existential domain, or the criteria for determining the meaning of truth must be revised. That is, either the inquiry into existential truth should be abandoned as flimsy, romantic and not serious, or the criteria of place and understanding of ‘seriousness’ must be revised. Clearly it is the latter position that this thesis has sought to take. While traditional (Western philosophical) notions of truth rest on a logical-empirical understanding of justification, an ethico-religious notion of truth must rest on some other mode of justification. Existential-religious truth cannot justify itself by logical-empirical means (and discredits itself if it attempts to do so) any more than a pear tree can sprout from the seed of an apple.

If logical-empirical truth rests on a logical-empirical form of justification, must one conclude that existential truths simply remain unjustified? Rather than reject the question altogether, one must look for a different, though appropriate, form of justification, without which the discussion of truth would descend into mere subjectivism. In Wittgenstein’s view, justification of existential truths begins to emerge when all other justifications have drawn to a close: ‘If I have exhausted the justifications I have reached bedrock, and my spade is turned. Then I am inclined to say: “This is simply what I do”.’

However, does characterising existential justification in these terms undermine the very meaning of justification? That is to say, does such a position, unable to find justification,

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saw the incarnate, crucified and risen Christ (249), one becomes a **disciple** by following Jesus Christ, in all times and places. ‘Discipleship means adherence to Christ, and, because Christ is the object of that adherence, it must take the form of discipleship’ (59). Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*.

find something else and merely call it justification? Perhaps so, but if justification cannot be existentially grounded – in what one does – then all the problems of philosophy have been solved, and very little achieved, for the problems of life remain completely untouched.\(^{16}\) Wittgenstein’s famous invocation of silence at the close of the *Tractatus* represents the beginning of the ‘second unwritten part that he claimed to be the most important’; where justification is always, eventually, existential.\(^ {17}\) The ‘doing’ that Wittgenstein speaks of in the *Investigations*, reveals a telling continuity with his earlier notion of silence which, as has been wisely observed, does not represent ‘an abandonment of the quest. It is placing the search, at last, in the right context’.\(^ {18}\) By stepping out from under the shadow of abstraction, the prevalence and significance of ‘incarnate justification’ begins to be revealed. For the ‘human condition is not a barrier to language and knowledge; rather, it is the *conditio sine qua non* for all modalities of meaning and comprehension, and, therefore the condition of language and knowledge’\(^ {19}\).

It has, I believe, been clearly shown that certain domains of existence – for example, ethics, aesthetics and religious belief, the ontology of human personhood, the existence of God, the realm of values, emotional states such as belonging, isolation, boredom, etc. – are disclosive and charged with meaning, and yet cannot be properly explained within the structure of a logical-empirical discourse. Within this thesis the essential unknowability of these dimensions was introduced by reflecting upon the existential thread that has run through the history of Western philosophy. In particular, an existential reading of the *Tractatus* was undertaken to reveal that there are certain aspects of human experience, such as the existence of God, which is not ‘a fact like other facts, much less a thing among other things’.\(^ {20}\) Ideas of God, like those of ethics and aesthetics are of the ‘mystical’ order, and thus in their fullness exceed the scope of logico-linguistic expression. The existential reading proposed in this discussion has endeavoured to reveal

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\(^{17}\) On this somewhat cryptic remark, see relevant discussion in Chapter II above.


the Socratic wisdom of the *Tractatus* in terms of the infinity of the mystical and the finitude of human capacities for understanding. On this basis, the *Tractatus* can be understood as suggesting that while one cannot *speak* of these domains of existence, they can be *shown*. In particular, the mystical, or the ‘domain beyond the facts’ can be shown in the attitude that is taken up by the willing subject to the world. If the ‘good or bad exercise of the will does alter the world, it can only alter the limits of the world, not the facts – not what can be expressed by means of language’ (6.43). In this reading of the *Tractatus*, through the orientation of the existing individual in the world, in the good or bad exercise of his or her will, the domain beyond the facts is made manifest.

Differences notwithstanding, a certain shared spirit of philosophical inquiry was found to exist between central claims of the *Tractatus* and Marcel’s generalised notion of incarnation. Like Wittgenstein, Marcel made very clear the ultimate impossibility of knowledge regarding the fundamentals of human existence. Marcel held that, as the inquirer, I am thoroughly implicated in the inquiry for I am at once both the ground and the object of the inquiry. The prospect of objective abstract analysis of human existence must be abandoned for it is perilous to attempt to separate the dynamic particularities of existence from the subject of existence. However, rather than descend into unbridled scepticism, Marcel held that the category of *incarnation* (in a Christian humanist rather than christological sense) should be taken as the central core of all metaphysics. In this way the so-called truths of metaphysics are located within the existential fulcrum of concrete experience. Wittgenstein’s understanding of the *willing subject* and Marcel’s notion of *incarnate being* reinforce the incarnate and situational element of authentic philosophy, that arises out of, and responds to, ‘the problems of life’ (6.52)

To the end of invoking a notion of authentic subjectivity within an epistemology of encounter, the modernist inclination to separate thinking and existence needs to be rejected. The task, therefore, is restorative rather than creative, a distinction which can be

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illustrated through this example of Wittgenstein: ‘Suppose people are playing chess. I see queer problems when I look into the rules and scrutinise them. But Smith and Brown play chess with no difficulty. Do they understand the game? Well, they play it’.  

Reflection on this remark suggests that proper understanding of ‘the rules’ occur when they are enacted and encountered in the playing of the game, for which the rules are intended. In other words, the rules of chess are not a thought experiment; they enable the game to be played. It is from the perspective of the playing of the game that the rules are properly understood and encountered. This connects with Wittgenstein’s idea that a relevant form of life binds the propositional dimensions of knowledge to the experiential datum of existence. Although the notion of a relevant form of life has its genesis within a ‘meaning-as-use’ theory of language, its potential far exceeds linguistic analysis, revealed in Wittgenstein’s remarkable influence upon disciplines other than philosophy. The essential idea that ‘an expression has meaning only in the stream of life’ is well illustrated by this simple example: ‘I am sitting with a philosopher in the garden; he says again and again ‘I know that that’s a tree’, pointing to a tree that is near us. Someone else arrives and hears this, and I tell them; ‘This fellow isn’t insane. We are only doing philosophy’. 

In other words, the conditions of what is reasonable and unreasonable, sane and insane, is determined by the game that is being played. That is to say, the meaning of the statement, ‘the Queen’s authority’, will be determined by whether one is playing chess or discussing international relations. The scope of this application in religious discourse is further developed in Wittgenstein’s Lectures and Conversations, to which this discussion will shortly return.

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25 The emphasising of this original relationship characterises the present work as restorative.
26 Similarly, the creeds, doctrines, moral teachings of the Church and Christianity are properly understood from within the life of the believer, who makes them incarnate in the act of living, not by scrutinizing them from afar.
Understanding and Encounter

So far, this discussion has attempted to outline a notion of truth that depends for its proper expression upon personal participation. This claim will now be brought into sharper focus through the category of encounter. It has been a conviction elaborated throughout this thesis that the nature of Christian truth requires an epistemology of encounter. So what does encounter mean in such a context? It has been shown that the idea of encounter has been without concrete and explicit expression in both Christian and philosophical discourses in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, with one notable exception. In 1943 Emil Brunner published a book entitled *The Divine-Human Encounter*, and expanded and re-titled this in 1964: *Truth as Encounter*. In this text he claims that ‘truth as encounter is a concept of truth unknown to philosophy and science. In this book it receives its first expression and systematic formulation’.  

At the heart of Brunner’s discussion is the attempt to develop and apply the early existentialists’ protest against subject-object antithesis to an authentically biblical notion of truth. In protest against modernist bifurcation, Brunner focuses upon the ‘totality of man’; the necessity of ‘apprehending man as a whole’; essentially and existentially. Brunner’s branch of the existentialist tree is supported by the existentialism of Kierkegaard (rather than that of Heidegger and Sartre), which Brunner believes facilitates a holistic understanding of being human; ‘philosophizing as a Christian . . . [Kierkegaard] recognised this totality not in man but beyond man’. This reading contains echoes of Marcel’s notion of being as something that exceeds any individual human being, as something in which human beings are called to participate, and in participating to become fully human (what Marcel describes as ‘the exigence of being’). Departing from the Socratic notion of truth as something within a person, Brunner, referring to Kierkegaard, observes that

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divine truth itself has come to humanity in the form of a man, from outside man, and from outside the world, in a unique event in time, ‘in the moment’: the
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30 Brunner, *Truth as Encounter*, 16.
incarnation of the divine Word in Jesus Christ is the event which can only be perceived in the act of faith.\textsuperscript{32}

In agreement with Kierkegaard, the way to truth is not through Socratic \textit{recollection} but through faith in Christ.

Brunner’s discussion, however, represents an allied rather than analogical approach to the one offered in this thesis. Brunner is concerned to elaborate a Biblical-Christian ontology of truth, whereas the focus of the present inquiry is the essential meaning of a Christian notion of truth and its implications for proposing a suitable epistemology. Within this, I have been concerned to reveal the existential imperative that is entailed by a Christian concept of truth. The category of \textit{encounter} serves this purpose well, for it seeks to restore to the Christian notion of truth the necessity of personal engagement. Second-hand assent will not be sufficient. With the same spirit of gravity as Heidegger’s notion of \textit{Dasein} as a Being-towards-death, the Christian is called to be a \textit{being-towards-Christ}, and only in the personal, individual recognition of this orientation to Christ does one enter into anything resembling authentic discipleship, and thereby authentic humanity. In this way the notion of \textit{encounter} brings the existentialist priority of authenticity into the realm of Christian truth and shows, in a Kierkegaardian spirit, that personal engagement with Christ, in the mode of faith, is the substratum upon which the Christian life is daily practised.

The essence of encounter, as it is proposed within this discussion, is that it seeks and arises from personal engagement with that which it desires to know. This approach changes irrevocably the form of knowledge acquired, as well as the conditions of evidence, by grounding both in the concrete circumstances of a life of discipleship. It means that, within Plato’s Cave, the pure light of being is abandoned in favour of the imperfect human shadows, upon which the light is reflected and refracted. Instead of seeking ‘human being’ as the object of inquiry (as if it is not \textit{a} human being who is inquiring), one begins, as Augustine did, by reflecting upon oneself, upon one who exists. This approach means that one must abandon work on any kind of high-vaulted Hegelian

\textsuperscript{32} Brunner, \textit{Truth as Encounter}, 18.
palace in favour of exploring and restoring the dog-kennel or porter’s lodge in which one actually lives. With this focus Kierkegaard writes, ‘since the questioner specifically emphasises that he is an existing person, the way to be commended is naturally the one that especially accentuates what it means to exist’.\textsuperscript{33}

A priority upon encounter may be seen as one of the positive outcomes of the backlash against the impersonal philosophy of Descartes, Hume, Locke and Hegel, for it takes as its starting point not the \textit{cogito} but the \textit{ergo sum}. The human condition is the primary datum of existential philosophy, in which the problems of existing can only find adequate response in terms of \textit{authentic} existence.\textsuperscript{34} The freedom and responsibility that are the building blocks of authentic existence are made manifest in the ‘willing subject’ and neither depends upon linguistic justification for its truth-value nor is it itself a justification; for ‘the end is not an ungrounded presupposition: it is an ungrounded way of acting’.\textsuperscript{35} This is perhaps why ‘those who have found after a long period of doubt that the sense of life became clear to them have then been unable to say what constituted that sense’.\textsuperscript{36} This mode of truth takes the domain of the willing subject, the existing individual, as its locale for both recognition and evidence. Truth is revealed, justified, and encountered in the individual, for the structure of truth is embodied presence in the world. This is the sense in which the ‘mystical manifests itself’; where aesthetics, ethics and religious belief are embodied in the concrete lives of individuals. This is the mode through which an authentic notion of Christian truth can be recognised and known as real and present in the ambiguous and shifting topography of a post-modern world.

This discussion has attempted to defend and uphold questions of intelligibility and justification in relation to a christologically grounded notion of truth, while challenging the empirical assumptions that typically attend these categories. This position carries with it the challenge of upholding the rigour demanded by these terms while not allowing

\textsuperscript{34} In these terms one finds \textit{authenticity} and \textit{discipleship} inter-penetrating concepts, and brings to the fore the idea of \textit{authentic subjectivity}.
\textsuperscript{35} Wittgenstein, \textit{Certainty}, 110.
\textsuperscript{36} Wittgenstein, \textit{Tractatus}, 6.521.
expectations of rigour to be equated with, or reduced to, expectations of logical verification and linguistic precision of the kind sought in the *Tractatus*. For this purpose the existentialist’s position has been helpful, for it places fundamental philosophical questions in the realm of individual existence (with all the variation that entails) and recognises as its guiding light a notion of authentic existence. Existential philosophy in general and certainly as it has been presented in this paper does not abandon questions of truth, recognition and justification but locates them within the realm of individual existence.

This thesis has attempted to show that an orthodox Christian notion of truth demands an existential approach and that an approach of this kind may be described as the *way of discipleship*. In other words, the existential approach is not primarily demanded as a backlash to the excessive assumptions of empiricist philosophy or the variety of philosophies that arose out of Descartes’ *cogito*; nor is it primarily required as a means of bringing into balance the ebbs and flows of western philosophy, though it may have served all these purposes, and more. Rather, in this thesis the existential mode of philosophy has been employed as a means of eliciting the essential and distinctive quality of a notion of truth that is grounded in the Word made Flesh. Kierkegaard’s writings, retrospectively labeled ‘existential’, served a similar purpose: to reveal what it means to be Christian. Existential philosophy, in the context of Christian theology, can never overturn or abandon the demands for recognition, and evidence for it begins with the concrete claim of the Christ event and the existing individual who must encounter this event for him or herself. Therefore, it is precisely an existential approach to a Christian notion of truth that makes the most rigorous demands of intelligibility and justification, for these issues cannot be satisfied by external assent or institutional authority. Rather, ‘everyone must sew it for himself’. 37

In *Investigations*, Wittgenstein proposes a notion of understanding that is grounded in a way of acting. In doing this, he retains notions of justification and intelligibility while revealing that these consist in much more than cognitive agreement. Although

Wittgenstein’s remarks engage with questions of justification, intelligibility and agreement in a general philosophical sense, it can be shown that his propositions achieve an acute relevance in the context of a Christian notion of truth. Wittgenstein proposes that ‘human agreement . . . is not agreement in opinions but in form of life’. 38 Later he writes, ‘what people accept as justification – shews how they think and live’. 39 These remarks point to an understanding of intelligibility and justification that arises from the integration of thinking and existence, and an explanatory finality that exists in forms of living rather than a logico-linguistic meta-system. Perhaps Wittgenstein’s most enigmatic expression of this position is that ‘If a lion could talk, we could not understand him’. 40 This singular proposition encapsulates the necessity of integrating relevant form of life into logical propositions, if intelligibility and questions of justification are to be meaningful. In the simplest possible terms, the form of life of a lion is so fundamentally different from a human form of life that even if a lion were to use the same words as a human – such as, “I must pay the rent today and purchase some cabbage from the green grocer” – one would have no idea what the lion means. This is how one can see that agreement in language entails some kind of agreement in form of life. As a general principle, these claims are open to contention. However, the interest of this thesis is in the fruits of their application within the context of a Christian notion of truth. This application is not unique or idiosyncratic, as the connection has been made by many commentators including W. Donald Hudson in his Wittgenstein and Religious Belief. He writes that

a secular man who from time to time uttered sentences from the Creed such as ‘I believe in God the Father Almighty’, but whose general behaviour apart from this was devoid of any other manifestation of religious belief, such as acts of worship, service or advocacy, would be as puzzling to a religious believer as Wittgenstein’s lion would be to any human being. 41

As the lion has not appropriated the relevant form of life, the secular man in Hudson’s example has not (for the sake of the example) appropriated a Christian form of life.

Therefore the words of the Creed are barely intelligible in the speech of the secular man, and justification of his utterances (as being true) is compromised by the absence of a

40 Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations, 190.
relevant form of life. To be clear, this is not to say that a relevant form of life is the 
*sufficient* condition for the justification of an ethico-religious utterance, but it is a 
*necessary* condition, without which the utterance becomes nonsense. If the secular man 
from the earlier example announced, from time to time, that Jesus is ‘the Way, the Truth, 
and the Life’ but did not ground these words in a relevant form of life, the truth of the 
claim would not be established. On this basis, religious utterances cannot be dismissed as 
entirely subjective. The value of reflecting upon the accompanying form of life is that it 
reveals that questions of intelligibility and justification achieve their most acute 
expression beyond logical boundaries, but within an existential context.

This line of argument is not, however, proposing that commitment to a Christian notion 
of truth is equivalent to ‘good deeds’, and does not wish to enter into a discussion of the 
relation between faith and works\(^\text{42}\). Rather the intention is only to show that religious 
notions of truth, and in particular a Christian notion of truth, can and must be subject to 
questions of intelligibility and justification through the existential realm: the 
accompanying ‘form of life’. This thesis has attempted to show that such an approach is 
not an alternative approach to understanding a Christian notion of truth but is demanded 
by such a notion of truth itself.

**Appropriation, Subjectivity and a Christian Notion of Truth**

Wittgenstein’s reflections on language-games and forms of life provide the most suitable 
back-drop for a direct consideration of the demands placed upon the individual who 
confesses a notion of truth grounded in Jesus Christ. While a persuasive case exists for 
attributing equal importance to speech and act in questions of ethico-religious truth of a 
general order, this integration of speech and act become an absolute imperative in a 
christologically grounded notion of truth. Precisely because the foundation of a Christian 
notion of truth is the God-man Jesus Christ, a purely cognitive grasp of this truth 
becomes absurd in its impossibility. To grasp this kind of truth, one must be in 
relationship with this truth and therefore one must take this truth into oneself; one must 
appropriate Him who is truth. Kierkegaard is emphatic on this point when he writes,

\(^{42}\) See NRSV Letter of James 2:14-26.
not every acceptance of the Christian doctrine makes one a Christian. What it especially depends upon is appropriation, that one appropriates and holds fast this doctrine in a way entirely different from the way one holds anything else, that one will live and die in it, risk one’s life for it, etc.\textsuperscript{43}

On this point Wittgenstein, in 1937, wrote something strikingly similar that deserves quotation in full:

\begin{quote}
Christianity is not based on a historical truth, but presents us with a (historical) narrative & says: now believe! But not believe this report with the belief that is appropriate to a historical report, - but rather: believe, through thick & thin & you can do this only as the outcome of a life. \textit{Here you have a message – don’t treat it as you would another historical message!} Make a quite different place for it in your life.\textsuperscript{44}
\end{quote}

These reflections suggest that Christianity is cosmologically, historically, and existentially founded on two aspects of one truth. The first, one might say, is Christ Himself, who is the truth. The second concerns the individual’s relationship to Christ, which itself can be truthful or not. It has been argued in this chapter that the kind of truth Christ is demands that this second expression of truth – the individual’s relationship to Christ - be subjective and existential in character. This position finds resonance in Kierkegaard’s remark that ‘an objective uncertainty, held fast through appropriation with the most passionate inwardness, is the truth, the highest truth there is for an existing person’.\textsuperscript{45}

An individual’s relation to Christ requires an epistemology of encounter. The idea of appropriation implies the existence of a definite something that is appropriated, and in so doing, further challenges any suggestions of subjectivism. The epistemology of encounter proposed here does not merely uphold the existence of a definite reference point (in terms of an orthodox christology), but actually claims that because of this, a particular kind of approach is required: one that leads to authentic subjectivity (rather than mere subjectivism or the relativism that subjectivity is now often assumed to mean). This kind of epistemology is not anti-intellectual or anti-theological, for it is concerned with a fullness of truth that demands appropriation by the fullness of personhood – intellectual and experiential. This kind of holistic epistemology is implied in the following journal

\textsuperscript{43} Kierkegaard, \textit{Postscript}, 608.  
\textsuperscript{44} Wittgenstein, \textit{Culture and Value}, 37e.  
\textsuperscript{45} Kierkegaard, \textit{Postscript}, 204.
entry of Kierkegaard: ‘I still recognise an imperative of understanding and that through it one can work upon men, but it must be taken up into my life, and that is what I now recognise as the most important thing’. 46

This means that understanding, in the cognitive sense, is not to be rejected but taken up into one’s life. To do this is to appropriate the truth and enter into a mode of authentic subjectivity in which discipleship and encounter become the central categories in any ‘explanation’ of Christian truth.

The accusation of subjectivism, in relation to a Christian notion of truth and its existential appropriation, has been challenged throughout this discussion. 47 Furthermore, it has been argued that it is not merely reasonable (according to christological ratio) but absolutely necessary to draw into a discussion of a Christian notion of truth the demands of authentic subjectivity. In fundamental dissociation from subjectivism (or any mode of atheistic existential philosophy that suggests that a comprehensive notion of truth can be drawn from within the freedom and responsibility of the individual), authentic subjectivity consists in the earnest orientation of the existing individual to the objective uncertainty of the Incarnate God.

The authenticity of this mode of knowing is most clearly recognised in the subtle relation between the object that is known (Christ), and the mode in which this object is known (subjective inwardness). Rather than reducing the object of knowledge, Christ, to an idea, doctrinal fact, or moral necessity, a Christian-existential notion of truth will affirm the objective uncertainty of Jesus Christ – the absolute paradox of the Incarnate Word. The objective uncertainty that attends human knowledge of Christ further serves to relocate questions of intelligibility and justification in the realm of individual experience. In this domain alone, the truth of the Incarnate God is revealed and known. In other words, a Christian notion of truth, with its intrinsically existential character, consists in a discernible call from beyond oneself, and yet is specifically addressed to a person. This

47 See Chapter Four above.
call is heard in the particularity of individual existence and invites the individual, in his or her particularity, into relationship with the truth, which consist in a (re)orientation within the concrete circumstances of one’s life. Wittgenstein makes this point, albeit in a somewhat polemic tone, when he writes,

I believe that one of the things Christianity says is that sound doctrines are all useless. That you have to change your life (Or the direction of your life) . . . For a sound doctrine need not seise you; you can follow it, like a doctor’s prescription – But here you have to be seised & turned around by something (I.e. this is how I understand it.) Once turned around, you must stay turned around.\(^{48}\)

The call and response to a Christian notion of truth therefore occurs in the realm of individual experience and demands an epistemology that is deeply subjective but never narcissistic, for authentic subjectivity is a response to a call from an Other; the supreme Other; the Other who is the Absolute Paradox; Emmanuel – God with us.

Perhaps the dual emphasis upon the objective uncertainty of Jesus Christ and the validity of individual experience as a mode of knowledge, has deceived some commentators into believing that the demands of an existential notion of Christian truth are, at the most, minimal and, at the least, entirely subjective. However, as has been argued in this thesis, authentic subjectivity (as presented in Kierkegaard’s writings) entails a very specific notion of truth, with which the individual is in subjective relation; Jesus the Christ: ‘This “how” [of subjectivity] can fit only one thing, the absolute paradox [Christ] . . . [for] to have faith is specifically qualified differently from all other appropriation and inwardness’.\(^ {49}\)

This form of subjectivity is neither pluralistic nor dogmatic. Rather, it demands the supreme exertion of the individual towards Christ, who can only be known in the passion of subjectivity and yet never reduced to subjectivity. By upholding a specific and definite objective uncertainty in the form of Christ, the way of subjectivity becomes authentic or inauthentic to the extent that is it orientated towards a fully christological notion of truth. The way of subjectivity, therefore, is a way of discipleship.

\(^{48}\) Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, 61e.  
\(^{49}\) Kierkegaard, *Postscript*, 610-11.
The paragraphs above have attempted to distinguish the subjectivity that attends a Christian notion of truth from the subjectivism that could be attributed to the popularised French existentialist philosophy of the twentieth century, and the later post-modern subjectivism.\(^{50}\) The distinctiveness of authentic subjectivity has been revealed through critical reflection upon Kierkegaard’s writings. The use of ‘authentic’, however, if understood in the Heideggerian sense, is always subjectively determined. This makes it difficult or impossible to characterise what is meant by ‘subjective orientation towards Christ’. However, the distinction already made between subjectivism and authentic subjectivity facilitates further exploration which reveals that the subjective apprehension of a Christian notion of truth can more accurately be described as a form of discipleship. This is an important shift, for it shows that in the Christian.existential framework the individual is not merely before oneself, but before God, while never overlooking the fact of being a self. It is in this personal relation – between the individual human being and Christ – that the authentic subjective relation is most prominent, for this is essentially the quality and condition of discipleship.

### The Way of Discipleship

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his *Cost of Discipleship*, writes, ‘Discipleship means adherence to Christ, and, because Christ is the object of that adherence, it must take the form of discipleship’.\(^{51}\) In short, the only proper relation to Christ is in the mode of discipleship. This is, in a sense, another branch of the existential framework contained within a Christian notion of truth, for it reveals that a christologically grounded notion of truth requires personal engagement and personal encounter with this truth, and therefore challenges the satisfactoriness of abstractions. Again, Bonhoeffer writes,

> With an abstract idea it is possible to enter into a relation of formal knowledge, to become enthusiastic about it, and perhaps even to put it into practice; but it can never be followed in personal obedience. Christianity without the living Christ is

\(^{50}\) This reference to post-modern subjectivism is not intended to suggest that subjectivism is unique to contemporary thought (for radical subjectivity can be found among the pre-Socratics such as Heraclitus and Protagoras, who wrote ‘Man is the measure of all things: of things that are, that they are; of things that are not, that they are not’ – see Chapter I above). Post-modern subjectivism however, is noteworthy for its remarkably popularised influence upon mainstream culture.

inevitably Christianity without discipleship, and Christianity without discipleship is always Christianity without Christ.\(^{52}\)

Approached from the other end, from the point of discipleship, the same conclusion is reached. If discipleship is present, so too is the living Christ, for ‘discipleship without Jesus Christ is a way of our own choosing. It may be the ideal way. It may even lead to martyrdom, but it is devoid of all promise. Jesus will certainly reject it’.\(^{53}\)

In other words, discipleship without Christ is not discipleship at all. As adherence to Christ entails adherence in the mode of discipleship, equally the practice of discipleship entails adherence to Christ. This understanding recalls Kierkegaard’s notion of subjectivity, which is ‘entirely conditioned by its relation to a specific revelation of eternal truth’.\(^{54}\) Discipleship is the ‘how’ that can fit only one thing, the absolute paradox’.\(^{55}\) That is to say, an authentic relation to Christ is always subjective, and authentic subjectivity is always and only possible when Christ is the one to whom the existing individual is in relation. Christ and authentic subjectivity entail one another.

To advocate the way of discipleship as the only suitable means for the existing individual to understand a Christian notion of truth may suggest that the idea of subjectivity is dispensable or unnecessary. If discipleship is the most appropriate designation for the authentic divine-human relation, why draw so much from a Kierkegaardian notion of ‘subjectivity’? There is a variety of responses that can be offered to this question; the most important one in the context of this discussion arises from the understanding that discipleship represents the fullness or superlative expression of subjectivity. Authentic subjectivity (as distinct from relativism) and discipleship therefore are not rivals or alternative means of approaching a Christian notion of truth. Because ‘God is a subject’ (the supreme subject) the way of knowing God is the way of ‘subjective inwardness’.\(^{56}\)

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\(^{56}\) Kierkegaard, *Postscript*, 199-200.
In this sense a Christian notion of truth one is presented with the fullness of truth and therefore does not cancel out all other models of truth, but rather eclipses them. From this perspective it can be seen that Kierkegaard’s notions of the existing individual and the Incarnate God entail one another. (Despite the persistent interest in Kierkegaard’s notion of the individual, atheistic existentialism neglects the fundamental basis upon which Kierkegaard’s notion of the individual stands). Similar in structure to Kierkegaard’s notion of the existing individual and God, the early Wittgenstein’s dual emphasis on the mystical and the willing subject are likewise not confused or conflicting, notwithstanding some of the interpretations of the Vienna Circle and the school of logical positivism.

In both Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein’s writings, as well as orthodox Christian theology, one does not become an individual through standing alone, but, paradoxically, one is truly an individual when one is before another. Discipleship, which is existence before the supreme Other – the Incarnate God – is the point at which true individuality and the fullness of subjectivity are realised:

Through the call of Jesus men become individuals. Willy-nilly, they are compelled to decide, and that decision can only be made by themselves. It is no choice of their own that makes them individuals: it is Christ who makes them individuals by calling them.\(^{57}\)

This description of the decisive moment cannot be adequately described in terms of formal knowledge, for it consists in an invitation to be existentially orientated towards Christ. It is a mode of comprehension that exceeds all analogical reasoning, for it is comprehension that consists in being comprehended. It is the paradoxical not-knowing mode of knowledge. As Martin Luther writes,

Discipleship is not limited to what you can comprehend – it must transcend all comprehensions. Plunge into the deep waters beyond your own comprehension . . . Bewilderment is the true comprehension. Not to know where you are going is the true knowledge.\(^{58}\)

Reminiscent of Kierkegaard’s later image of faith as swimming upon 70,000 fathoms, Luther proposes the way of paradox as the way of discipleship. These riddles are not, however, riddles for their own sake. It is not the case that bewilderment, confusion and

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\(^{57}\) Bonhoeffer, The Cost of Discipleship, 95.

\(^{58}\) As quoted in Bonhoeffer, The Cost of Discipleship, 93.
solitude are considered good in themselves, or as ends in themselves. Rather, paradox is proposed as the way that leads to clarity and peace of the kind that analogical reasoning can only speak about. Reflecting on Pilate’s ignorance, Kierkegaard observes that

Christ is the truth in the sense that to be the truth is the only true explanation of what truth is . . . look at him, learn from him, he was the truth. This means that truth in the sense in which Christ is the truth is not a sum of statements, not a definition, etc., but a life.⁵⁹

This rendering of Christian truth demands a supreme shift, both intellectual and existential. A Christian notion of truth represents a fundamental challenge to the supremacy of empirical notions of truth, for it posits Christ as the highest truth possible.

Now all the expressions are formed according to the view that truth is cognition, knowledge (now one speaks continually about comprehending, speculating, observing, etc.), whereas in original Christianity all the expressions were formed according to the view that truth is a being.⁶⁰

Where truth is a being, the scope of intellectual inquiry must be defined by its role as something that accompanies and arises from a lived orientation. That is, ‘knowing the truth is something that entirely of itself accompanies being [in] the truth, not the other way around’.⁶¹ This emphasis upon discipleship (or being in the truth) does not represent a rejection of an intellectual approach to truth but rather consists in the full expression of the intellect – before the supreme intellect – God.

Precisely because of the utterly Christ-oriented character of discipleship, a systematic exposition or prescriptive program of discipleship is fundamentally flawed from the outset. Because the meaning of discipleship is always grounded in the simple words of Jesus, “Follow me”, discipleship describes the comprehension of truth which is the

⁵⁹ Søren Kierkegaard, Practice in Christianity, ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, trans. Howard V. Hong (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1991), 205. The concern with Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein’s notion of truth is not intended to suggest that such a notion of truth is intrinsically Christian. Rather the notions of truth presented by these writers provide invaluable tools for eliciting the fundamental character of Christian truth. As has been noted above, Wittgenstein’s notion of accompanying or relevant forms of life belongs primarily to his general theory of linguistic meaning which includes, but cannot be reduced to, religious utterances.

⁶⁰ Kierkegaard, Practice in Christianity, 206.

⁶¹ Kierkegaard, Practice in Christianity, 205.
realisation-epiphany of being comprehended by the truth. Reflecting upon the call of Levi, Bonhoeffer writes,

to follow in his steps is something which is void of all content. It gives us no intelligible programme for a way of life, no goal or ideal to strive after. It is not a cause which human calculation might deem worthy of our devotion . . . [the call to discipleship] is no universal law. It is the opposite of all legality. It is nothing else than bondage to Jesus Christ alone, completely breaking through every programme, every ideal, every set of laws.\footnote{Bonhoeffer, \textit{The Cost of Discipleship}, 58.}

The absence of a prescriptive program allows for the existential immediacy of discipleship to become rightfully prominent and leaves no place for relative wrangling, historical and metaphysical debate, which only obscures the ever-present demand of the call. Wittgenstein brings into prominence this existential immediacy when he writes,

Christianity is not a doctrine, not, I mean, a theory about what has happened & will happen to the human soul, but a description of something that actually takes place in human life. For ‘recognition of sin’ is an actual occurrence & so is despair & and so is redemption through faith. Those who speak of it (like Bunyan), are simply describing what has happened to them.\footnote{Wittgenstein, \textit{Culture and Value}, 32e.}

A discipleship of immediacy, of personal orientation to the living Christ, is the foundation of the epistemology of encounter proposed in this thesis.

Where encountering the truth is at the heart of understanding, the imperative of discipleship becomes more significant, for it is precisely in the practise of discipleship that the Christian notion of truth, the Living Christ, is revealed in the world. In Bonhoeffer’s exploration of the story from Matthew’s Gospel of the rich young man, he emphasises the moment of encounter when Jesus calls the young man to follow him:

Here is the sum of the commandments – to live in fellowship with Christ. This Christ now confronts the young man with his call . . . He stands face to face with Jesus, the Son of God; it is the ultimate encounter. It is now only a question of yes or no, of obedience or disobedience.\footnote{Bonhoeffer, \textit{The Cost of Discipleship}, 75- 76.}

One important dimension of this moment in the story is that the young man is addressed personally by Jesus, and in this personal and direct command encounters and is encountered. The young man is invited to become a disciple of Christ, but has much that
he is unable to leave behind. Had he said yes, he would have, in Kierkegaard’s terms, been in the truth, and by being in the truth, manifested the truth. As Kierkegaard puts it, the being of truth is the redoubling of truth within yourself, within me, within him, that your life, my life, his life expresses the truth approximately in the striving for it, that your life, my life, his life is approximately the being of the truth in the striving for it, just as the truth was in Christ a life, for he was the truth.65

This understanding of a Christian notion of truth suggests that discipleship is a mode of revelation in the sense that the practice of discipleship, of personal obedience to Christ, reveals in the world His teaching, His message, His presence. This ‘redoubling of truth within yourself’, as Kierkegaard puts it, means that because Christ himself is truth, the individual whose life approximates to Christ’s life, reveals in approximation the truth that is Christ. However, distinct from imitating or enacting an idea or principle, the approximation of Christ’s life in the practice of discipleship is concretely possible. Because ‘God has taken on flesh . . . all flesh can disclose the glory of God’.66 The Incarnation has shown that,

the truth, if it is there, is a being, a life. Therefore it says, “This is eternal life, to know the only true God and the one whom he sent . . . That is, only then do I know the truth, when it becomes a life in me . . . Therefore Christ compares truth to food and appropriating it to eating, for just as, physically, food by being appropriated (assimilated) becomes the life sustenance, so also, spiritually, truth is both the giver of life and the sustenance of life, is life.67

When the individual enters upon the way of discipleship, he or she appropriates the truth, who is Christ, and by appropriating it makes a place for Christ to dwell within that individual, and dwelling within that individual, makes manifest God’s presence in the world. In the mode of discipleship, the Christian notion of truth – Christ – is revealed through His embodied presence in the life of every disciple.

**Evoking a Framework for Practice**

The conclusion of this chapter is that a Christian notion of truth is revealed most fully in the practice of discipleship. Accordingly, the most suitable epistemology for a Christian

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65 Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, 205.
67 Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, 206.
notion of truth will be one that consists in a notion of authentic subjectivity and the meaningfulness of personal encounter. Precisely because personal encounter lies at the heart of all knowledge-experience of a christologically grounded notion of truth, an appropriate epistemology cannot be exhaustively defined. Because an epistemology of encounter is always situational, personal, relational, existential, its exposition must also be provisional, incomplete and suggestive. Accordingly, an epistemology appropriate to a Christian notion of truth has the flavour or sense of an orientation, rather than a conclusive point of arrival. Like any practice, its capacity to persuade or convince arises in and through its personal application, in the reality of discipleship, in the experience of being-towards-Christ. As earlier cited, in Bonhoeffer’s Cost of Discipleship ‘to follow in [Christ’s] steps . . . gives no intelligible programme for a way of life, no goal or ideal to strive after. It is no cause which human calculation can deem worthy of our devotion . . .’. While agreeing with the sentiment of this remark, in the closing passages of this thesis I wish to expound, challenge and complement these remarks of Bonhoeffer’s.

In proposing discipleship as the mode in which ‘knowledge’ of a Christian notion of truth is properly revealed, (that is, in the existential reality of encounter), all ‘programmes’ for ways of living must be understood as provisional rather than comprehensive. Because the foundation of Christian discipleship is the absolute paradox of the Incarnation, intelligible programmes must always be suitably qualified by the fundamental unknowability of the paradox. However, to follow in His steps, I argue, is not ‘void of all content’ (taken in a straightforward sense) but rather so full of content that it exceeds the reach of exhaustive cognitive analysis. This does not mean that a Christian notion of truth and the way of discipleship through which He is revealed are utterly inexplicable. The very fact of the present discussion testifies to a degree of explicable. However, although the expression of Christian truth and discipleship exceed the capacity of programmes, systems and abstract definitions, the Christian Scriptures provides the supreme account of meaning through a collection of sacred stories. In this mode of sacred narrative, the incarnate truth of God in Christ is shown to the reader, rather than spoken about. In this discussion the meaning and possibility of showing the way was first introduced in the early

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68 Bonhoeffer, The Cost of Discipleship, 58.
Wittgenstein’s distinction between *saying* and *showing* (Chapter II). In the closing passages of Chapter IV this idea was given its theological expression through reflecting on the *encounter* between Jesus and the Samaritan woman in the story of the Woman at the Well.

This crucial distinction between *saying* and *showing*, first introduced into this discussion from Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*, implies, in his later writings, a notion of holistic understanding. That is to say, by examining the intimately related categories, ‘form of life’ and ‘language games’, it becomes evident that the very term ‘language game’ brings ‘into prominence the fact that speaking of language is part of an activity, or life-form’. 69

This inter-penetration is perhaps nowhere more essential than in a discussion of a Christian notion of truth and the way of discipleship. Wittgenstein observes of a statement of belief that people will face a Day of Judgment, ‘*that* [the statement] says nothing to me. And it could only say something to me if I were to live *quite* differently’. 70

In a sense, discipleship is devoid of content of the kind that can be abstracted, intact, from its lived situation. A Christian notion of truth and the content of discipleship will indeed be regarded as nonsense if they are abstracted from the form of life that accompanies it. The foundation of a Christian notion of truth and the way of discipleship depend utterly upon an appropriate form of life for the fullness of their meaning to be revealed. Without an appropriate form of life, ‘a way of acting’, questions of justification, evidence, and meaning cannot in any sense be considered, and a christologically grounded notion of truth becomes equivalent to pure subjectivism. 71

The ‘outward criteria’ of which the ‘inner process’ stands in need, as Wittgenstein puts it, is a way of acting; in the case of a Christian notion of truth, the outward criteria take the form of discipleship.

As Bonhoeffer rightly observed, this way of acting should not be regarded as goals or ideals to *strive after*. And yet, in a particular sense, to follow in Christ’s steps is indeed a goal and an ideal (for Christ himself is the supreme goal and ideal: humanity and divinity

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70 Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, 38e.
71 Wittgenstein, *Certainty*, 204.
fully realised), though it is unlike a goal or ideal of any other kind, for it cannot be realised through driven commitment and the doubling of human effort. It is the goal or ideal in the sense of the supreme end for which humankind has been created, to which the restless hearts of human beings are drawn, once the obstacles of resistance have been weakened.

The content of discipleship, of following in Christ’s steps, will now be briefly explored a little further under three related headings: Discipleship as Orientation, Discipleship as Becoming Christian and Discipleship as Revelation of the Risen Christ. These headings are, by virtue of their very meaning, indicative and suggestive, and evoke the character and sense of discipleship rather than propose a ‘programme for a way of life’.  

First, the writings of both the earlier and later Wittgenstein, Kierkegaard, and Marcel assist in revealing the quality of existential orientation essential to Christian discipleship. More broadly, with Heidegger’s conception of Dasein as being-towards-death an indubitable influence, Leonardo Boff describes discipleship as a ‘demand to imitate his [Jesus Christ’s] way of being (being-for-others)’. Tweaking this term further, one may suggest that discipleship consists in being-towards-Christ. In 1946, Wittgenstein remarked that ‘amongst other things Christianity says, I believe . . . [is that] you have to change your life. (Or the direction of your life.) . . . Once turned around, you must stay turned around.’

These expressions characterise discipleship as an orientation towards an inexhaustible plenitude rather than an exhaustive minimal standard. I argue that discipleship, precisely through its inconclusiveness, is not devoid of content (for the scriptures themselves are full of accounts of discipleship which provide examples, rather than abstract definitions, of what it means to be a disciple), but rather consists in the content of the Kingdom of God, expressed fragmentarily and in anticipation. The fundamentally eschatological

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74 Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, 61e.
character of Christian faith means that the way of discipleship is a way that is always on-the-way. As a Practice, it is necessarily on-the-way to somewhere, something, someone. In the mode of faith, Christian discipleship is on-the-way to God and the reign of His Kingdom. It is to this that authentic discipleship is existentially oriented. The character of discipleship as orientation rather than arrival demands that, as Kierkegaard noted, being a Christian should more accurately be described as becoming Christian.

Second, the status of becoming Christian evokes the on-going and dynamic character of discipleship and especially its existential character. As Kierkegaard writes,

one who is existing is continually in the process of becoming . . . to be continually in the process of becoming in this way is the elusiveness of the infinite in existence . . . the perpetual process of becoming is the uncertainty of earthly life, in which everything is uncertain. 75

These remarks arise naturally from Kierkegaard’s focus upon the comments attributed to Lessing regarding the choosing of ‘persistent striving after truth’ rather than the ‘pure truth’. 76 In My Work as an Author, Kierkegaard identifies the fundamental reason for his writing as an attempt to explore what is entailed in the on-going process of ‘becoming Christian’. In the context of this discussion, the idea of becoming reveals discipleship as intrinsically existential, since it occurs within an earthly life and therefore bears, in part, an inseparable connection to the contingency of human existence. However, just because the situational character of discipleship resists abstract definition, it does not follow that it is devoid of content. Rather, the content of discipleship is most evident in the subjectivity of individual, historical existence. While Christian discipleship can never be reduced to or equated with the sheer contingency of individual existence – if it were it would become disoriented – equally it must never be separated from its concrete expression. Doing so would strip from the Incarnate Truth the very quality of incarnation. The incarnate character of a Christian notion of truth therefore permeates a Christian notion of discipleship. I argue, in conclusion that it also leads to an understanding of discipleship as the supreme revelation of the on-going, contemporary presence of the risen Christ.

75 Kierkegaard, Postscript, 86.
76 For a discussion of Lessing’s remark see Chapter IV above.
Finally, earlier in this thesis, Kierkegaard’s idea of *contemporaneity* was used to introduce an existential epistemology of encounter. At the heart of this idea is the conviction that Christ’s life on earth ‘accompanies the human race and accompanies each particular generation as the eternal history; his life on earth has the eternal contemporaneity’. The contention of this thesis is that the superlative expression of Christ’s accompaniment of each generation is revealed in the practice of discipleship.

This conclusion integrates the various lines of argument presented in this thesis: the introduction of a notion of truth that takes with utter seriousness the contingent character of existence and yet cannot be reduced to existence (Ch. I); the epistemological challenge of communicating such a notion of truth, but the possibility that, if it cannot be spoken of, it can be shown (Ch. II); the inter-subjective nature of the expression of such truth – its relational structure and presence as mystery (Ch. III); the possibility of authentic subjectivity that cannot be reduced to open-slather relativism but places demands upon the existing individual, and that an ethico-religious notion is of this kind, something one participates in rather than observes from a distance (Ch. IV); a notion of truth grounded in the Incarnation of God in the person of Jesus Christ – an understanding of truth that is a human life; the character of that life and the epistemological challenge of speaking of such a model of truth (Ch. V); the possibility that aesthetic criticism provides the most suitable way of approaching a Christian notion of truth since it is grounded in, and depends upon, personal encounter with the subject of the inquiry in the subjective passion of inwardness (Ch. VI); and finally, the epistemological demand that arises from a Christian notion of truth that transcends the expectations of aesthetics: the personal appropriation of truth, the taking up into the existing individual the truth that is Christ’s life, the call to discipleship (Ch. VII). This notion of discipleship, as the foregoing sections have sought to show, consists in an existential orientation towards a future reality, the coming of Christ. Because of this, discipleship is not secured or completed in baptism; rather, baptism constitutes the first step in an on-going process of *becoming* Christian.

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77 Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, 64.
Because a christologically grounded notion of truth takes the life of Christ as its primary datum, the expression of this truth must bear a recognisable structure. As a logical truth is most suitably expressed as a matter of logic, it would be nonsense to claim that a certain empirical truth is most suitably revealed in *a priori* terms. The incarnate truth that is Christ’s life is revealed most suitably in the practice of discipleship. In discipleship the life of Christ is taken-up, appropriated, into the life of the existing individual and thus reconfigures that life. By so doing, the truth that is Christ’s life is manifested in each generation through the practice of discipleship. This point, I believe, has been adequately made. However, the final task in this discussion is to attempt to show that discipleship, when understood in terms of authentic subjectivity, is not devoid of all content but posses a specifiable character. Leonardo Boff writes,

> In Jesus, God appeared in a concrete form, assuming our human condition. Hence each human being reminds us of the human being who was Jesus. To accept a poor person as poor is to accept the poor Jesus. He hides himself; he is incognito, behind each human face. Faith demands that we look profoundly into the face of our brothers and sisters; love them; give them food, drink and clothing; visit them in prison. For in so doing, we are being host to and serving Christ himself . . . the human being is the greatest manifestation not only of God, but also of Christ resurrected in our world.  

This is the demand of discipleship and the fullest expression of Christian truth grounded in the incarnation of God. The incarnate structure of a Christian notion of truth calls for an incarnated apprehension of truth in the life of every disciple, in every generation. Because the essence of a Christian notion of truth is *a life*, Christ’s life, the way of discipleship is the way of *imitation*. This idea of imitation, however, stands in contradiction from the commonly assumed meaning generated by materialist culture. In the latter case, imitation may be understood to refer to the copying of superficial qualities of something or someone, while neglecting the essential or underlying qualities which distinguish the genuine article from the fake or imitation. However, in the imitation of the kind required by Christian discipleship the emphasis is, in a sense, the opposite. A Christian notion of imitation is not at all concerned with the contemporary follower possessing a superficial similarity to Jesus by, for example, growing a beard and long hair, wearing a cloak and sandals. Rather, the imitation entailed by authentic discipleship

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78 Boff, *Jesus Christ Liberator*, 218.
consists in the appropriation by the contemporary follower of that which is essentially of Christ; that which belongs to the spirit and nature of God.

As the Gospels present stories about Christ’s life, in all their particularity (rather than a series of lectures or teachings), the demand of discipleship requires that our own stories be woven out of and into the eternal story, the story of the Incarnate God, Jesus Christ. This means finding, not the barn in which Jesus was born but our own barn in which to be born again, accepting the cup that we are given, and walking our own path to our own Calvary. As Boff writes, ‘the meaning of the imitation of Christ is in itself simple: trying to act in our existential situation in the same way Christ acted in his situation . . . to have the same spirit as Jesus, incarnating it in our concrete situation.’

The act of ‘imitation’, grounded in our existential situation, incarnates a christological notion of truth in the lives of His followers. Though certainly not a program, in the Gospels one hears a ‘message’ and, as Wittgenstein says, ‘don’t treat it as you would another historical message! Make a quite different place for it in your life’. Jesus’ final parable in the Gospel according to Matthew arguably establishes the existential imperative entailed by the call to imitate Christ, as well as providing a framework for authentic imitation. In this one may recognise the spirit of discipleship through which the presence of the risen Christ manifests itself contemporaneously to every generation:

I was hungry, and you gave me food; I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink; I was a stranger and you welcomed me; I was naked and you gave me clothing; I was sick and you took care of me; I was in prison and you visited me . . . Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these you did it to me (Mt 25:35-36, 40)

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79 Boff, *Jesus Christ Liberator*, 220.
80 Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, 37e.
Conclusion

Existential Philosophy

This thesis has sought to generate awareness of the existential imperative entailed by a christologically grounded notion of truth. To this end, the character of existential philosophy offers parameters for understanding the kind of truth professed within Christian discourse. Thus, the discussion began by distinguishing the various schools of existential philosophy popularised in the second half of the twentieth century from an existential mode of philosophical reflection found in the writings of Heraclitus. Out of this a series of challenges or negations were identified as characteristic of existential philosophy. These negations included the rejection of abstraction in relation to questions of existence; the rejection of dogmatic schools of thought; rejection of a mind–body separation, or of the possibility of pure rationality; and a deep suspicion towards claims of objective truth. This series of rejections or denials was contrasted with a series of affirmations, or positive characteristics that can be identified with existential philosophy. These included the affirmation that all knowledge is embodied; that emotions are disclosive; that mind and body are integrated and therefore must be brought to bear upon philosophical questions; and that subjective knowledge is intellectually meaningful. These qualities lead to an explicit provisionality in the assertions of existential philosophy. However, perhaps more than any other feature, the supreme affirmation made by an existential mode of philosophy is that of the significance of the existing individual – gendered, cultured, historical, situated, and variable - in all philosophical inquiry. The primacy of the existing individual in all philosophical thought is arguably the supreme contribution made by an existential mode of philosophy and one of which the Western intellectual tradition, especially after the ‘Cartesian turn’, has been in dire need of reminder.

In the context of this thesis the existential emphasis upon the primacy of the existing individual raises far-reaching questions concerning the meaning of truth, and the authority (or lack thereof) of truth-claims as such. If the existing individual, with all his or her variability, is regarded as the fundamental category for philosophical inquiry, can
there be any place for objective notions of truth? Is the notion of truth inseparable from the abstract and objective assumptions characteristic of rational philosophy? If it is, can truth be understood as subjective without descent into subjectivism? Furthermore, what meaning can be attributed to theological truth claims, which clearly are not, in the usual sense, objective or subjective? In other words, where the notion of truth is defined by the experience of the individual, is such a notion of truth reduced to individual experience, or is it possible to overcome this binary framework of objective-subjective oppositions? A popularised form of Existentialism, found for example in aspects of Sartre’s writings, tends to suggest that the sense of freedom and responsibility which accompanies living out of the recognition of oneself as an individual, renders irrelevant any notion of truth beyond oneself and one’s agency in the world. However, for the so-called “Grandfather of Existentialism”, Kierkegaard, questions of truth were thoroughly inseparable from, and as significant and meaningful as, his notion of the existing individual. The prominence of Kierkegaard’s contribution to the lineage of existential philosophy suggests that the affirmation of the existing individual does not abrogate questions of truth, but in fact could represent the most appropriate context for reflections upon truth. To explore this possibility, this thesis drew upon a small but highly potent work of philosophy: the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, by Ludwig Wittgenstein.

The *Tractatus* generates a challenging affront to the very possibility of meaningful philosophical discourse. This early work by Wittgenstein assumes a notion of truth or meaning so rigorous that it claims to bring to a close the possibility of asking meaningful philosophical questions at all. He claims to have ‘found, on all essential points, the final solution’ to the problems which fall within the bounds of philosophy as he understands it, and yet confesses from the outset that this solution only ‘shows how little is achieved when these problems have been solved’. In the closing passages of his philosophical treatise, Wittgenstein turns to the existential foundation of philosophy: the ‘problem of life’ (or of living). He asserts that the ‘solution’ to this ‘problem’ cannot be expressed (rather ‘the solution to the problem of life is seen in the vanishing of the problem’). The

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particular value to this thesis of Wittgenstein’s conclusion is in showing that the solutions to philosophical problems, if they are to be of any significance at all, must engage the problems of life, of existing. The important problems of philosophy are thus of an existential kind and their ‘solution’ (or rather a suitable response) must therefore take the form of a lived orientation. According to the *Tractatus*, the solution to ‘the problem of life’ exists beyond the scope of logical-linguistic truth, in the realm of what Wittgenstein describes as ‘the mystical’, of which ‘we cannot speak’, and yet which manifests itself in the practices of aesthetics, ethics and religious belief. Although one cannot say who or what the mystical is (reminiscent, in some aspects, of Plato’s Pure Light), it can be shown. Furthermore, while aesthetics, ethics and religious belief fall outside of the scope of sensible philosophical discourse (as defined within the *Tractatus*) ‘very little is achieved’ unless reference is made to these domains beyond the facts, for it is in these that existential meaning is most fully present. In the context of the *Tractatus*, where the most absurdly rigorous expectations of (linguistic) meaning are sought, the notion of truth is not abandoned in favour of individual behaviour. Rather, the notion of supreme truth – in the formless form of the mystical – is claimed to be revealed precisely in those practices in which the existing individual, or more precisely the condition of being an existing individual, is most explicit and determinative; for example in the practices of aesthetics, ethics and religious belief. This understanding emphasises the disclosive significance of the ‘problem of life’ and the necessity of an existential response; that is to say, a response that is always in communio with the concrete fact of existing.

Through this existential reading of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*, the thesis arrived at a notion of truth that is neither entirely subjective nor purely objective, but rather, to borrow a term used by Gabriel Marcel, inter-subjective. Both Wittgenstein and Marcel, in very different ways, assist in restoring to the notion of truth its experiential and communal dimensions. However, Marcel’s notion of inter-subjective truth explicitly proposes that truth, when it is grounded in the fact of existing, is fundamentally relational and emerges from the inter-communion of human engagement. Where a Cartesian notion of truth is assumed, Marcel’s understanding demands a revised methodology, one that consists in

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restoring the primal and communal condition of being to philosophical inquiry. For Marcel, being is always being-in-relationship. Building on the earlier reading of the *Tractatus*, this discussion focused on Marcel’s notion of *incarnation*, which he applies in a general, anthropological sense (rather than in the christological sense typically assumed). Through this term Marcel proposes a notion of truth that is characterised by an imperative towards existential authenticity; a notion that is only properly revealed when ‘incarnated’ in the situated actions of the existing individual. Out of this discussion, and the earlier reflection on the *Tractatus*, there emerged a notion of truth that was described as *ethico-religious*. This term denotes a further step towards an understanding of truth that is grounded existentially, and seeks to overcome the objective/subjective bifurcation that is too often erroneously attached to conceptions of truth. A notion of truth that encompasses objective and subjective dimensions in a way that is not reductive, and that takes with utmost seriousness the capacity of each individual to respond with the fullness of his or her being to the question of truth, leads implicitly though ever more closely to truth as it is understood within Christian discourse. In other words, the notion of ethico-religious truth is deeply coloured by the existing individual, and yet at the same time cannot be reduced to the whim of personal preference. This is a notion of truth that neither diminishes the individual nor is diminished by the individual but is revealed through the existing individual, and, in being revealed, reveals the existing individual most fully. The analysis of both Wittgenstein and Marcel’s work undertaken in this thesis has served to reinforce the possibility that *truth*, with all the gravity and authority entailed by the term, is not compromised by an existential context but rather is revealed most fully precisely when placed within an existential setting.

The somewhat abstract conceptions of truth that are presented in the first part of the thesis were developed further through a brief survey of some alternative truth models; a post-modern conception of truth (retrospectively labeled as such) in Nietzsche’s *Parable of the Madman*; a notion of truth as ultimacy with reference to Plato’s world of Forms; and truth as finality in the mode found in the writings of Aristotle, Augustine and Wittgenstein. This final category, in which truth is understood to refer to the terminus of the inquiry, is considered to be the common thread that binds the term ‘truth’ to its many
and various designations. However, the supreme demand placed upon the notion of truth within an existential context (as distinct from an empirical-scientific context) is that it will bear ‘an essential relationship to the existence of the knower’.  

4 This is the primary quality of an ethico-religious notion of truth: it must always relate ‘to the existing of the knower’.  

5 This notion of relating, while characteristic of the existential mode of philosophy, is in no sense unique or innovative. Kierkegaard repeatedly emphasises that the underlying merit of the Socratic wisdom ‘is to have paid attention to the essential meaning of existing, of the knower being an existing person’.  

6 In this thesis, the essential significance of the existing individual in questions of truth has been the first and foundational step towards revealing the distinctive character of a Christian notion of truth.

In the Tractatus Wittgenstein is fundamentally concerned with what can be known (thoughts) and what can be expressed (language) and found that what can be known – the mystical – cannot be expressed in language but can be shown in certain practices: aesthetics, ethics and religious commitment. This understanding, and Marcel’s notion of truth as emerging inter-subjectively, supports one of the central contentions of this thesis, that an existentially grounded notion of truth requires a fundamentally different framework, or methodology, for exploration. This framework can be broadly termed ‘incarnational’.

Incarnation

The kind of awareness found in secular existentialism undergoes dramatic revision when considered in the context of a christological notion of truth. In the Socratic model, for example, truth is known through a process of recollection, for truth is conceived of as existing in eternity, and not in time.  

7 In the Incarnation of God in Christ, one encounters a

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5 Kierkegaard, Postscript, 178.  
6 Kierkegaard, Postscript, 204.  
7 This notion of truth was grounded in Socrates’ notion of ‘the soul . . . as being immortal, and having been born again many times, and having seen all things that exist, whether in this world or in the world below, has knowledge of them all; and it is no wonder that she should be able to call to remembrance all that she ever knew . . . for all enquiry and all learning is but recollection’. B Jowett, ed., Plato’s Meno (California: Wadsworth, 1965), 17.
radically different and unique conception of truth, for in the Incarnation truth becomes a being in time. An epistemology of recollection, so to speak, is surpassed by an epistemology of encounter, for within the Christian framework truth is at once historical and eternal, at once human and divine. A christological notion of truth means that the truth is not a ‘what’ but a ‘who’; truth is, in a sense, an existing individual, a life, and therefore can be adequately engaged neither by rational analysis nor by existential recollection. A christological notion of truth therefore poses a fundamental challenge to the very notion of explanation. Where ‘Christ is the truth in the sense that to be the truth is the only true explanation of what truth is . . . [This] means that truth in the sense in which Christ is the truth is not a sum of statements not a definition etc., but a life.’

A radically different notion of truth entails a revision of what constitutes a suitable methodology.

A discussion of Christian truth is always fraught, for it is precisely within the conceptual ambiguity of christological truth that its existential imperative is revealed most acutely. Kierkegaard, in his famous discussion on the subjectivity of truth, writes ‘an objective uncertainty, held fast through appropriation with the most passionate inwardness, is the truth, the highest truth there is for an existing person’. The Incarnation reveals at once the ultimate limitation of rational analysis and the demand for the existing individual personally and existentially to appropriate the truth, and thereby to enter into authentic subjective relation. This subjective relation, however, is fundamentally distinct from any form of subjectivism, for it is a mode of subjectivity that fits only one thing: Christ. In other words, subjectivity becomes authentic only when it is subjectivity before God. Clearly, this is a notion of subjectivity that is distinct from the reductive subjectivity often associated with post-modern philosophy and culture. While authentic subjectivity can never satisfy the narrow standards of pure objectivity, neither can it be reduced to an understanding of subjectivity that is merely self-referential. In dialogue with an ethico-religious notion of truth, authentic subjectivity implies a sense of self-in-relation.

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8 Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, 205.
The category of incarnation encompasses two fundamental aspects of a Christian notion of truth. First, it describes the model of truth itself, in which the eternal truth of God becomes incarnate in a human being, compromising neither eternal essence nor temporal existence. Second, it describes the mode of disclosure, the existential appropriation of Christ by each individual. The existential imperative emerges, not from historical or political considerations but from the very ontology of Christian truth. Because the is-ness of christological truth is Christ, the God-man, an existential epistemology is required. To emphasise the utterly distinctive character of a christologically grounded notion of truth, Kierkegaard describes the Incarnation as Absolute Paradox, and by so doing, reveals the impossibility of grasping a Christian notion of truth by means of the categories of formal philosophical knowledge. The absolute paradox of the Incarnation repels understanding and brings to a standstill objective reasoning, for in the matter of christological truth, personal appropriation is required over and above conceptual approximation. A christologically grounded notion of truth is founded on the Incarnation of God – the Absolute Paradox – and is revealed most fully to the existing individual in a mode of authentic subjectivity.

**Embodiment**

This thesis has proposed an epistemology that responds to a christologically grounded notion of truth. It is an epistemology that locates the expression of this truth in the domain of individual existence. The existential reading of christological truth undertaken here leads naturally to an epistemology of encounter. Such an epistemology may be characterised as a mode of knowing that is grounded in and oriented towards a personal and experiential encounter with christological truth; that is, with Christ. This *epistemology of encounter* emerged following a sustained exploration of Kierkegaard’s notion of contemporaneity which holds that, because Christ is fundamentally an object of faith, historical proximity offers no epistemological advantage. As Kierkegaard writes, ‘if the one who comes later receives the condition [of faith] from the god himself, then he is
a contemporary, a genuine contemporary – which indeed only the believer is and which
every believer is.’

In other words, because knowledge of Christian truth – Jesus Christ – is not a matter of
historical or intellectual approximation, the existing individual becomes
contemporaneous with Christ through personal appropriation, that is, through faith. This
sense of knowing Christ, contemporaneously, emphasises the imperative, carried within a
Christian notion of truth of personal engagement and appropriation by each individual of
every generation. Without this, Christian truth becomes an article of historical knowledge
that fades, with each successive generation, into the cultural background of corporate
existence, and thus becomes something that it is not.

Despite the priority given to non-empirical forms of knowledge, an epistemology of
encounter is neither subjectivist nor anti-theological, for it is critical and takes as
instructive the fact that ‘inner process stands in need of outward criteria.’ However,
such an epistemology resists the tendency to reduce or equate the most important features
of a claim to its outward criteria. In order to develop a suitable framework, an exploration
of the notion of criticism was undertaken, as it is applied within a discourse on aesthetics.

This thesis found that the language of aesthetics, and in particular the style, character and
expectations of aesthetic criticism, provides the most appropriate methodological tools
for revealing the full existential character of a christologically grounded notion of truth.
Art criticism and discussion of aesthetics in general, utilise a style of analysis and
argument, the basic features of which can be transferred, in part, to a discussion of
christology.

The most striking commonality shared by these quite different discourses is that criticism
and argument are always applied in response to, or for the purpose of generating the
possibility of personal encounter with the work itself – in the service of personal
encounter. In other words, the purpose of aesthetic criticism is to enable one to see some

11 Søren Kierkegaard, Philosophical Fragments by Johannes Climacus, ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H.
12 Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations, 129e.
aspects of a work that have hitherto been overlooked. And distinct from arguments of the mathematical and empirical sciences, aesthetic arguments are found convincing only in the existential reality of encounter, the point at which all analysis is put aside: ‘Don’t think, but look!’

An epistemology of encounter informed by some of the basic features of aesthetic criticism provides a way of approaching a Christian notion of truth without objectifying or relativising it. Through the demand for personal engagement, each individual is confronted by what Kierkegaard calls ‘the moment’, in which one must choose, and in so doing, must reveal the fullness of one’s individuality. In Bonhoeffer’s words, ‘it is Christ who makes [people] individuals, by calling them’. This specific notion of individuality arises out of the passion of authentic subjectivity (as distinct from the reductive subjectivity often assumed by the term) through orientation towards, and appropriation of, something greater than any and all individuals, the Incarnate Truth – Jesus Christ.

The existential appropriation demanded by a christologically grounded notion of incarnate Truth forms the bedrock of discipleship. In responding as individuals, in saying “Yes” to the decisive moment (the invitation to discipleship), one enters into the way of truth. This leads to a further and, in this discussion, final dimension to a Christian notion of truth. The discussion in this thesis has attempted to bring into focus a cluster of ideas arising from the incarnate nature of Christian truth. These included the belief that truth is a being who existed in time in the person of Jesus Christ; that the existing individual is called to become contemporaneous with Christ in the mode of faith through the passionate appropriation of Him who is Truth; and, that this existential appropriation may be more fully described in terms of the way of discipleship. One final feature that belongs to this cluster is the phenomenon of embodiment. Adherence to the incarnate Truth consists in existential orientation to Christ in whom supreme truth is made manifest. It is not a question of formal knowledge. As Wittgenstein writes, ‘the truth can only be

14 Kierkegaard, *Fragments*, 111.
spoken by someone who is already *at home* in it; not by someone who still lives in untruthfulness, & does no more than reach out toward it from within untruthfulness.\(^{16}\)

This characterisation of truth points towards the notion of embodiment, which can be applied to describe the presence of Truth manifested in the lives of disciples. The fullness of incarnate Truth is revealed in discipleship, for discipleship is a response to, and an orientation towards the being – Christ – whose life is truth. Understanding of this truth occurs when ‘it becomes a life in me’, so that ‘your life, my life, his life expresses the truth . . . just as the truth was in Christ a *life*’.\(^{17}\) In the embodiment of Christian truth by the disciples of every generation, the eternal contemporaneity of Christ is made manifest in the world. A christologically grounded notion of truth finds its supreme and authentic expression in the Christ-orientated way of discipleship. To the extent that a Christian notion of truth can be ‘understood’, the mode of comprehension is discipleship in which understanding emerges through existential orientation to Him who is ‘the way, the truth and the life’ (Jn 14:6).

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\(^{16}\) Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, 41e. Immediately prior to this comment Wittgenstein provides a significant hint to the kind of truth he is referring when he writes, ‘One *cannot* speak the truth; - if one has not yet conquered oneself. One *cannot* speak it – but not, because one is not clever enough’.

\(^{17}\) Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, 205.
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