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Climbing Down the Ladder:

Inwardness and Abstraction in Wittgenstein's Philosophy with Reference to Kierkegaard

Lisa Hoelle, Honors Research in Philosophy, April 19th, 2005

I. Introduction

Both Søren Kierkegaard and Ludwig Wittgenstein argued that there are some truths, located beyond the boundaries of rational understanding, which cannot be communicated directly to others. Wittgenstein was influenced by his reading of Kierkegaard's texts on these matters, and accordingly he, like Kierkegaard, has a place in his philosophy for the importance of *inwardness* in knowing paradoxical truths. A move of 'inwardness,' for Kierkegaard, is an action that requires a personal and absolute belief that can't be explained directly to others, while 'paradoxical truths', as Kierkegaard uses the phrase, refers to propositions that we regard as incomprehensible but true (one of his examples is the claim that Christ is both fully God and fully human). For Kierkegaard, we express inwardness when we actively and fully invest ourselves in believing a paradox. It is clear that Wittgenstein also believed that we can understand some things in a non-standard, non-objective way. The passages in which he discusses this kind of non-objective understanding, however, are notoriously obscure.

In this paper, I look to Kierkegaard's philosophy for insight as to what Wittgenstein is saying in these passages. One familiar place where Wittgenstein discusses this form of non-standard, non-objective understanding is in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*:

> My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually recognizes them as nonsensical, when he has

> used them – as steps – to climb up beyond them. (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it.)[1]

Wittgenstein's ladder analogy returns, years later, in *Culture and Value*:

> I might say, if the place I want to reach could only be climbed up to by a ladder, I would give up trying to get there. For the place to which I really have to go is one that I must actually be at already. Anything that can be reached with a ladder does not interest me.[2]

I will show how Kierkegaard's philosophy sheds light on these difficult passages. I also will show how Wittgenstein's views on non-objective truth fit into his overall philosophy, and how they affect his view of the philosophy of his contemporaries.

II. Kierkegaard: Subjective and Objective Understanding

We can begin to understand Wittgenstein's views by first looking at Kierkegaard's distinction between subjective and objective understanding. Having subjective knowledge or subjective understanding, according to Kierkegaard, is to *be in a relation to truth.* I will sometimes refer to this simply as 'relating to truth.' While it is difficult to determine what subjective knowledge amounts to, to the extent that we can discuss it, it will be useful in understanding Wittgenstein.

In *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Kierkegaard attempts to answer the question of how truth that is essentially related to the subject's existence (henceforth

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[1] Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus.* Trans. D. F. Pears & B.F. McGuinness. New York, N.Y.: Routledge Classics, 2001. 6.54

[2] Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Culture and Value: A Selection from the Posthumous Remains.* Trans. Peter Winch. Ed. G. H. von Wright. Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing, 1998. 10e.

referred to as "essential truth," as Kierkegaard used the term) can be reached.[3] Essential truth is subjective truth. Kierkegaard's primary example of this type of truth is the claim that Christ was simultaneously God and man. He explains that one must reach these essential truths subjectively rather than objectively because we are existing beings. Since essential truths are paradoxical, we must constantly reaffirm our absolute belief in them at every moment. Thus, the claim that Christ was both God and man necessarily relates to our existence in time because we are required at every moment to reaffirm the truth of it. Kierkegaard maintains that it is often the case that we do not pay adequate attention to the implications of our existence in time in considering essential truths.

We are existing beings, by which Kierkegaard means that we are in the process of becoming: our temporality entails that we are constantly in a state of flux. Nonetheless, we often regard ourselves as complete and unchanging at given moments. When we do, we also regard our relation to other things as static. In effect, we are abstracting ourselves from time. In other words, we understand that we are developing throughout our lives, yet we consider ourselves complete at any given moment. For Kierkegaard, there is a tension between the abstract form of being and the concrete form of being. When we abstract the concept of our concrete being, i.e. the concept of ourselves as existing persons changing in time, we momentarily disregard our temporality and flux, and we think of truth as something complete or finished. Kierkegaard holds that when we consider ourselves as non-temporal, we consider our thoughts and the state of affairs in the world as static. Since truth is static, it can be understood as a complete, unchanging identity between a thought and a state of affairs. Kierkegaard maintains that

[3] Kierkegaard, Søren. *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*. Volume 1. Trans. Howard V. Hong & Edna H. Hong. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992. 189.

this abstract, static, form of truth does not always apply to us as existing beings, however. We exist in time, and cannot abstract our temporal existence from ourselves. Even if we tried, we would still be existing in time. Since subjective truth relates essentially to existence, we must take into account the constant change inherent in us because of our existence in time.

Our development through time and our completeness at each moment forces us to consider two ways in which we relate to truth: through objective reflection and subjective reflection. Kierkegaard writes:

> To objective reflection, truth becomes something objective, an object, and the point is to disregard the subject. To subjective reflection, truth becomes appropriation, inwardness, subjectivity, and the point is to immerse oneself, existing, in subjectivity.[4]

The distinction between the two kinds of reflection is apparent, but as we relate to truth in both ways, we can only seek to overcome this distinction through objective reflection or subjective reflection. For Kierkegaard, *mediation*, a solution proposed by Hegel in which our objective and subjective relations to truth merge, is not a viable option.[5] Mediation fails because it turns truth into what Kierkegaard calls a "subject-object"[6] — both a subject engaged in a dynamic relationship with the knower and a static object to be grasped intellectually and held onto without any continued effort on the part of the knower. In other words, mediation presupposes movement (the dynamic relation) as part of truth, but still attempts to abstract truth (the static relation). In abstraction nothing changes, so the movement that is presupposed by mediation is denied. This leads to a

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[4] *Ibid.* 192.
[5] It is not the focus of my paper to discuss Kierkegaard's response to Hegel's theory. Because of this and for the sake of brevity, I will not discuss it in any depth.
[6] *Ibid.* 192.

contradiction in that truth must relate to us, in time, abstractly. Essential truth relates to the knower, but the knower is existing, so truth cannot be an abstract relation. It is impossible for us, as knowers, to abstract ourselves out of existence.

Since mediation is not an option for reconciling the objective and subjective relations we have to truth, we must go back to objective reflection and subjective reflection to determine if either will allow us to transcend our existence so that we can attain truth in its complete and abstract sense as well as in relation to ourselves as temporal beings. Kierkegaard maintains that since we are existing persons, the way to achieve essential truths is "the one that especially accentuates what it means to exist."[7] He turns first to objective reflection. In seeking to understand truth objectively, a person attempts to dismiss the fact that she is dynamic and so her relation to truth is always changing. Thus, the existence of the subject, i.e. the existence of the individual seeking truth, is left out of the picture. While Kierkegaard recognizes that abstract thinking and objective validity have their place as useful tools in subjects like math and history, he holds that one cannot relate to essential truths through objective understanding. The subject cannot become completely indifferent to her own existence, so this objective attempt will fail at reaching essential truth. Since we exist in time, the only way we can come to this type of truth is as beings in time; therefore, we can't come to essential truth by abstracting truth and ourselves. More simply stated, we are not abstract, and so the fact that we exist and are constantly changing cannot be dismissed as accidental in our struggles to stand in relation to an essential truth.

Subjective reflection aims in the opposite direction of objective reflection. Kierkegaard thinks that while in objective reflection a person seeks to remove herself *as*

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[7] *Ibid.* 193.

an existing being from the truth she hopes to capture by declaring herself to be a subject only accidentally, in subjective reflection she focuses on herself as an existing being and on her own relationship to truth. We might depict objective reflection as looking at the state of affairs in the world from an atemporal place outside the world and subjective reflection as looking at the world while also constantly looking at one's changing relationship within it, where reaffirmation of one's belief is always needed. Similarly, the person seeking subjective knowledge is not allowed to deny her existence. Kierkegaard holds that the fact that a person exists temporally means, at its most fundamental level, that her self is in flux, that she is in constant change or motion. In recognizing this, we can see that truth, for us, as the agreement of being and thinking, cannot be reached since flux is inherent in our being. Just as we cannot grasp our relationship to an object that constantly changes without abstracting that object, so we cannot grasp our relation to truth while we are constantly in flux.

Kierkegaard stresses the paradox involved in our search for truth: "truth as the identity of thought and being is therefore a chimera of abstraction and truly only a longing of creation."[8] Through subjective reflection one realizes that we cannot attain essential truths as temporal beings; the nature of temporality prevents us from grasping truth as a relation to the self, since we would be grasping at something that is always changing. It is only in the atemporal realm that one could have a relationship to essential truth that can be reached absolutely, since the relation of truth to atemporal beings would be immutable. But since we are not atemporal beings, this entails (1) that abstracting truth as a relation to the self will not work, for we could only grasp abstract truth if we were abstract beings, and in abstracting ourselves our existence, i.e. half of the dialectic

[8] *Ibid.* 196.

of essential truth, vanishes; and (2) that reaching truth as a temporal being is also an impossibility, since our relation to truth is always changing.

III. Kierkegaard: Christian Truth as a Question of Subjective Truth

When Wittgenstein remarks that "The believer's relation to these messages [of the Gospels] is neither a relation of historical truth (probability) nor yet that to a doctrine consisting of 'truths of reason,'"[9] he echoes Kierkegaard in rejecting the idea that the essential truths can be understood objectively. Wittgenstein maintains that we can reach essential truths through subjective understanding. But Kierkegaard has denied this in my explanation of his theory so far. However, despite the incomprehensibility of subjectively understanding truth Kierkegaard will argue, as I explain next, that it is ultimately through absolute subjectivity that one can overcome the distinction between our objective relation to truth and our subjective relation to truth that has caused so much trouble for those seeking to relate to essential truth.

For Kierkegaard, we can only stand in relation to an essential truth by transcending the dialectic of our selves. He believes that we are both always changing through time and complete at each individual moment, during which times we regard our relation to things as static. These two elements are contradictory, and so we must bring together the temporal and eternal, or the finite and infinite, elements within ourselves. If a person were to achieve this, she would be eternal and infinite while simultaneously existing in time as a particular. Kierkegaard believes that this fusion of the finite and

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[9] Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Culture and Value: A Selection from the Posthumous Remains*. Trans. Peter Winch. Ed. G. H. von Wright. Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing, 1998. 38e.

infinite can be achieved only in a moment of passion, i.e. a moment of absolute belief. He remarks, "At its highest, inwardness in an existing subject is passion; truth as a paradox corresponds to passion, and that truth becomes a paradox is grounded precisely in its relation to an existing subject."[10] In believing absolutely, one focuses completely on her relation to truth and all things objective fade away. For Kierkegaard, this absolute subjectivity is achieved in a moment of faith, by being faithful. It is only through paradox that we can have faith, for faith requires that one believe two things despite the fact that they contradict each other. One believes, while fully aware of the contradiction involved and in spite of it, in essential truth. Kierkegaard maintains that in faith one unites the infinity and finitude of the self, which is paradoxical. This move is one of inwardness, it requires a personal and absolute belief that cannot be explained directly to others. If you tried to explain your belief in a paradox, others would ask you to give reasons for your belief to help them understand, and you could not do so because rationality and reason are opposed to your belief. If essential truth, or if this move of faith, *could be* communicated directly, one could come to grasp it objectively, which Kierkegaard thinks is impossible. Kierkegaard's view that some truths are in this sense ineffable is important for understanding what Wittgenstein is doing in the *Tractatus*.

In *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Kierkegaard considers Christianity as an essential and paradoxical truth. In seeking Christian truth objectively, one rationally understands that the atemporal, omniscient, and omnipotent being at the center of Christianity is God. The objective thinker will not be able to objectively understand God as essential truth in spite of her best efforts. The person seeking objective knowledge

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[10] Kierkegaard, Søren. *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*. Volume 1. Trans. Howard V. Hong & Edna H. Hong. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992. 199.

dismisses the fact that she is temporal and changing. In doing so, she dismisses the fact that she is existing and, consequently, it is not possible for the subject to relate to essential truth, since this truth relates essentially to the subject's existence, which she is attempting to deny.

Subjectively, truth is the relation of God to the self. This, in itself, is a problem as it asserts that truth is the eternal relating to the existing. For Kierkegaard, the paradox lies here, and it is only through faith, i.e. absolute inwardness or subjectivity, that one can stand in relation to subjective truth. He maintains that faith allows you to open yourself to the idea that God, as infinite and eternal, relates to individual persons, who are finite and temporal, while being fully aware that this relation is not possible. This paradoxical relation is embodied by Jesus, who we understand simultaneously as God and man, infinite and finite, and eternal and temporal. In faith, you realize the paradoxical nature of these incompatible properties, but believe absolutely nonetheless.

IV. Wittgenstein on Christian Truth as a Question of Subjective Truth

Wittgenstein held that there are certain truths that lie beyond the boundaries of reason. He regarded these truths as paradoxical in nature, and concluded that if they can be understood at all they must be understood non-objectively. He cites Christianity as an example. In Christianity, we encounter numerous paradoxes in its most basic premises as well as a host of contradictions within Biblical texts. The paradoxical truth most fundamental to the Christian belief system is the idea of God as man. Logically, one cannot be both an eternal entity and a temporal creature, but Christ is said to be just that.

Despite this effrontery to our rationality, though, Christ is regarded as the paradigm we should aspire to imitate.

Although the conception of Christianity Wittgenstein outlines in *Culture and Value* is influenced by Kierkegaard, it is not rigorously developed, and Wittgenstein does not draw attention to our present-day lack of faith as Kierkegaard does. Instead, Wittgenstein focuses on why Christian truths are difficult to understand. After noting Kierkegaard's view that Christianity is not supposed to be easy,[11] Wittgenstein has a third party ask *why* the Scripture is so unclear. The third party points out that if someone faced a dangerous situation, we wouldn't try to help by reciting riddles. Instead, we would make our instructions as explicit as possible. Shouldn't the Bible be as explicit as possible in order to save those in danger from the perils inherent in misunderstanding Christianity? Wittgenstein replies that this is the wrong way of looking at the Scripture. Perhaps, if the Scripture is unclear, it is because it could not be made more explicit. It is possible that Christianity, in being more direct, would only lead Christians further from the truth they seek.

If we are to find the truth in Christianity, Wittgenstein maintains, we cannot take the Bible as expressing historical truths:

> 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. [12]

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[11] Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Culture and Value: A Selection from the Posthumous Remains*. Trans. Peter Winch. Ed. G. H. von Wright. Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing, 1998. 36e.
[12] *Ibid.* 37e.

Wittgenstein is using Kierkegaard's distinction between objective and subjective knowledge here. Objective knowledge, in this sense, is the knowledge a person would have if her views corresponded with reality. We have subjective knowledge when we realize that we cannot reach truth as an identity between our conception of how things are and a state of affairs, in this case the state of affairs presented in Christianity, because we are existing beings. This entails that, for us, a static relation between our conception of how things are and the actual state of affairs cannot be achieved, but is always developing. Although objective knowledge has its place, it is only subjectively that we can come to know religious truth. Since Christianity is founded on a paradoxical notion, we cannot seek its truth through objective reasoning. We are incapable of rationally understanding the contradictions in the Bible. Instead, we must strive to affirm our belief in Christian truth in our actions. Christianity presents people with a paradox and tells them to believe it to prevent them from theorizing about Christianity rather than practicing it. Because the Christian cannot maintain an objective perspective if she believes a paradox, the contradictory nature of Christianity forces her into trying to understand it subjectively. Subjective understanding differs from trying to grasp a thing intellectually; it is an adaptation of one's life to the practice of Christianity.

V. Dissolving Philosophical Problems

Wittgenstein investigates truths that we must reach subjectively in Kierkegaard's sense. While his comments on Christianity reflect this view most clearly, the examination of inwardness as truth appears throughout his writings when he discusses

topics such as mysticism, indirectness, and pursuits opposed to science. One theme is apparent: truths of this nature are more important than we often think, particularly in the sciences and in philosophy. This sentiment is most apparent in Wittgenstein's statement, "The inexpressible (what I find enigmatic & cannot express) perhaps provides the background, against which whatever I was able to express acquires meaning."[13] I now examine some of Wittgenstein's writings on the subject of inwardness with this passage in mind.

In *Culture and Value*, truths that must be reached indirectly come into play in his discussion of pursuits opposed to science. Wittgenstein often takes a rather harsh look at science, but in doing so he is not challenging the fact that there are objective truths or that there is value in being objective. He is, rather, attempting to help us see the framework in which we think. All too often philosophers think with their heads without using their eyes, and Wittgenstein wants to make us aware of the potential hazards of this abstraction. He remarks on our academic neglect of fields unrelated to science to help us realize that scientific objectivity by itself cannot help us solve philosophical problems. Rather than attempting to solve them by producing formal theories, they are dissolved when we comprehend the world outside our minds by directly attending to it.

Consider the following passage, "While still at school our children get taught that water *consists* of the gases hydrogen and oxygen, or sugar of carbon, hydrogen and oxygen. Anyone who doesn't understand is stupid. The most important questions are concealed."[14] According to H.A. Nielsen ("A Meeting of Minds on Water"),

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[13] Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Culture and Value: A Selection from the Posthumous Remains*. Trans. Peter Winch. Ed. G. H. von Wright. Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing, 1998. 23e.
[14] Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Culture and Value*. Trans. Peter Winch. Ed. G.H. von Wright. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1980. 71e.

Wittgenstein is saying that we are routinely taught to believe that we understand what water is when we understand its scientific definition, but in doing so, we forget the importance of how water interacts with the world. Nielsen asks, responding to someone who claims that "in science we try to get at *water itself*," "what on earth do you mean by 'water itself?' When is it *not* itself? Perhaps when a chosen way of speaking drops existence out of account?"[15] When we speak abstractly about water as the combination of two parts hydrogen to one part oxygen, we forget how water interacts with the world, and, consequently, we do not fully understand the different aspects of water. Instead of asking what water is composed of, Wittgenstein urges us to ask how it can be that hydrogen and oxygen can form water. Even if we cannot grasp the answer to this, we will at least bring a sense of wonder into our education. Maintaining this sense of wonder helps the subject recognize the limits of her understanding. This 'roughage' in each individual's intellect, to use Nielsen's terminology, is important since it jolts us back to reality from our place in the clouds of abstraction.

Surprisingly, Wittgenstein advocates the importance of truths that cannot be reached by objective studies most clearly, in what is perhaps his most analytic work: *The Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. He first explains that there are certain problems which haunt us; one of these is what he terms the problem of life. In presenting this problem, he writes, "Death is not an event in life: we do not live to experience death. If we take eternity to mean not infinite temporal duration but timelessness, then eternal life belongs to those who live in the present. Our life has no end in just the way in which our visual

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[15] Nielsen, H.A. "A Meeting of Minds on Water." *The Grammar of the Heart: New Essays in Moral Philosophy and Theology*. Ed. Richard H. Bell. San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1988. 78.

field has no limits."[16] When we think of death as another stage in life, we are much more likely to wish the stage of life we are in will not end. This way of thinking about death is misguided; we should not live in regret, but rather, we should live in the present and focus all of our selves in the moment. When we are completely in the moment we are, in Kierkegaard's sense, absolutely passionate. A person in this state accepts the dialectic of her eternality and temporality, understanding that eternality and temporality are opposed to one another, and yet fully believing that she is simultaneously eternal and temporal. The subject thereby embraces her eternality while completely remaining within the temporal realm. She is wholly finite, but in her passion is absolutely infinite as well. Our life certainly will come to an end, in the sense that we are temporal beings. Yet, this ending is not a part of life, and when we live completely and infinitely in the present there can be no ending here. The problem of life as Wittgenstein addresses it is quite similar to the problem upon which Kierkegaard focuses so intently: the paradox of the self.

Wittgenstein's approach to the problem of life is not a solution in the traditional sense. It is better to view it as a dissolution of the problem. The problem ceases to exist, so a solution is not necessary. As we saw in my explication of Kierkegaard's theory of truth as subjectivity, a person can only stand in relation to an essential truth in a moment of absolute faith. When the subject has faith, she understands the incompatibility of our eternality and temporality, for example, but nevertheless fully believes that we are simultaneously both eternal and temporal. The problem is thus dissolved for the person in faith. Though the person realizes that her belief that we are simultaneously eternal and

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[16] Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Trans. D. F. Pears & B.F. McGuinness. New York, N.Y.: Routledge Classics, 2001. 6.4311

temporal is paradoxical, she does not recognize it as being problematic. When we further apply Kierkegaard's model, we see that this dissolution of the problem cannot be expressed directly. It is impossible for the person of faith, whose faith necessarily transcends the universal and exists in the religious private, to explain her dissolution of the problem of life. She experiences the dissolution, but if she tried to explain it she would ultimately fail, as doing so requires her to rationalize her belief, which she cannot do; her relationship with truth is intensely personal. Just as the answer cannot be expressed by our language, the question itself cannot be properly expressed by our language. Wittgenstein therefore ends the *Tractatus* with his now infamous line, "What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence."[17] He thus emphasizes the existence of a distinction between sentences which represent states of affairs and sentences that do not fit this model, such as those dealing with ethics, the self, etc. Wittgenstein claims that sentences falling under the latter category are meaningless. A disregard for the proper boundary between the two categories leads philosophers down the wrong path.

I have thus far shown that Wittgenstein held that there are certain essential truths which are paradoxical in nature. Furthermore, due to their nature, these truths must be understood subjectively. This entails understanding them as relating essentially to the self as both eternal and temporal. I have also shown that Wittgenstein believes these truths are very important in getting a clear picture of how we view the world. In the following sections, I explain how the picture of truth as inwardness allows us to see and re-evaluate our academic tendency toward absolute objectification.

VI. Kierkegaard's Battle Against Over-Abstraction

[17] *Ibid.* 7

In explaining the significance of Wittgenstein's theory of inwardness to his overall philosophical project, two areas are of particular importance. First, I concentrate on Kierkegaard's battle against over-abstraction, which will help us understand the similar battle which Wittgenstein waged in his own time. Wittgenstein's rejection of logical atomism and Kierkegaard's call for a return of subjectivity to Christianity are familiar themes. But because they concentrate on such extremely different subject matters, it is often difficult to see that they were fighting very much the same battle against formalism and abstraction, albeit from different angles and with different motives in mind.[18] Following my discussion of Kierkegaard, I look at Wittgenstein's attempt to point out the dangers of over-abstraction in philosophy. In doing so, I focus on his ladder analogy, which expresses Wittgenstein's attitudes toward inwardness and abstraction in philosophy. Since the analogy recurs in his later writings, it will help us trace how his ideas on these issues develop from his early to his later philosophy.

In *Philosophical Fragments* and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Kierkegaard is primarily concerned with the related questions of how Christianity ought to be defined and how individuals can enter into a relation to Christianity that allows them to grasp its truth. He concludes that to understand the truth of Christianity, we must understand it as a communication of our own qualitatively dialectical existence. This understanding, as I've explained, can only be reached through the absolute instance of inwardness: faith. For Kierkegaard, the problem with Christianity was essentially a problem of how we could reach an eternal truth, achieve eternal salvation, or simply accept our eternality and

[18] This is not to say that Kierkegaard was not interested in language or that Wittgenstein was not interested in Christianity. Their work in these areas is simply not as well-known.

infiniteness as individual beings existing temporally. Thus, the problem of Christianity is a problem of how Christianity can relate to existing beings.

In the late 1830s, Kierkegaard dedicated much of his time studying Hegel. He came away with an even stronger belief that a person must seek the essential truth of Christianity subjectively. Kierkegaard contended that for Hegel and many of his followers, the problem of Christianity was not a question of how an individual could relate to Christianity. The Hegelians aimed at a synthesis through the mediation of a supposed contradiction in Christianity, which they believed could be achieved through objective reasoning and thought. Because of the objective nature of Hegel's account, Kierkegaard thought that the question of an individual's relation to Christianity is denied in Hegel's theory. Moreover, Hegel's speculative theory denied the importance of faith and mitigated the paradox of receiving eternal truth while being in time. Kierkegaard, therefore, rejected Hegelian theory. Christianity, he asserted, is paradoxical; mediation is doomed to fail, particularly because it ignores the contrast of our individual, temporal existence and infinite, eternal salvation. Niels Thulstrop writes that for Kierkegaard, Hegelian "speculation represented a distorted concept of man and a distorted concept of Christianity." He continues, "even if speculation could speculatively apprehend everything possible other than the individual man and his correct relation to Christianity, Kierkegaard found it at best trivial and at worst, distracting from what was for him the only essential thing."[19] Hegelianism flourished in Denmark during this period, so it was no surprise, given Kierkegaard's views toward the Hegelian theory of Christianity, that

[19] Thulstrup, Niels. *Kierkegaard's Relation to Hegel.* Trans. George L. Stengren. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1980. 372.

he fought against speculative theory both directly and indirectly throughout much of his life.

The dismissal of thought as a means to essential truth was part of the natural progression of Kierkegaard's theory. As he became more convinced that our dynamical existence was an essential part of the problem of Christianity, Kierkegaard realized that objective thinking, thinking that treated the changing self as an accidental factor, could not be a way of overcoming the problem and thereby reaching truth. He explains that "if there is to be any distinction at all between thought and action, the former must be assigned to possibility, indifference, the objective, and the latter to subjectivity."[20]

Alastair Hannay maintains that this passage captures an important difference between Kierkegaard and the early Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein holds that "the world is all that is the case," which defines reality as the object of thought. For Kierkegaard, reality is subjective and, thus, not the object of thought. It is, instead, the object of faith. Despite this difference, it is apparent that Wittgenstein follows Kierkegaard in drawing a sharp distinction between the sphere of objectivity and thought and the sphere of subjectivity and faith. Wittgenstein also advocates a change in philosophy that corresponds to this distinction. Let us trace this development from its initial stages, though.

VII. Wittgenstein's Ladder

In the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein compares the process by which he attempts to get closer to these essential truths to climbing a ladder. He states:

[20] Qtd. in Hannay, Alastair. *Kierkegaard.* New York, N.Y.: Routledge, 1991. 153.

> My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually recognizes them as nonsensical, when he has used them – as steps – to climb up beyond them. (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it.)[21]

Because what cannot be explained logically cannot be discussed directly, Wittgenstein must convey his thoughts on essential truth indirectly. The *Tractatus* itself is, at least in part, an instance of indirectly conveying truths. He states that everything that can be spoken of is in the world. Aesthetics, ethics, and metaphysics, Wittgenstein finally determines, fall outside the domain of language and so their claims are ineffable. The propositions that Wittgenstein employs in the *Tractatus* aim at something outside of this world, though. Wittgenstein's conclusion places the subject of the *Tractatus* in the category of the ineffable as well. For this reason, he labels his propositions 'nonsensical.' When a person understands why one of the tasks of a philosopher is to make sure that language is used properly, she will necessarily repudiate the very propositions that have led her to believe this. In other words, she must "throw away the ladder after [s]he has climbed up it."[22] This abandonment does not entail the uselessness of the propositions, as they lead us to a better conception of the paradox surrounding the mystical. When a person follows Wittgenstein's logic and understands why certain claims fall outside of language, she will understand why the mystical must be spoken of indirectly. It, too, falls outside of the domain of language and its claims are, according to Wittgenstein, nonsensical. This is not to say that mystical claims are without meaning or use. Just as Wittgenstein's propositions in the *Tractatus* are nonsensical yet useful, mystical language or indirect truths can still perform some function in our lives.

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[21] Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Trans. D. F. Pears & B.F. McGuinness. New York, N.Y.: Routledge Classics, 2001. 6.54
[22] *Ibid.* 6.54

Wittgenstein may have had this in mind when he urged us, "Don't for heaven's sake, be afraid of talking nonsense! Only do pay attention to your nonsense"[23] directly after his comment that "wisdom is something cold.... (Faith, on the other hand, a passion.)"[24]

The ladder analogy is repeated in *Culture and Value*, in a remark from 1930. Wittgenstein's interest in the development of a conception of ineffable truths had not waned since the publication of the *Tractatus,* although many of his thoughts on language had changed considerably. Instead of throwing away the ladder when you have reached the top (i.e. an understanding), Wittgenstein writes that the ladder is altogether unnecessary, or at least of no concern to him. He writes:

> I might say, if the place I want to reach could only be climbed up to by a ladder, I would give up trying to get there. For the place to which I really have to go is one that I must actually be at already. Anything that can be reached with a ladder does not interest me.[25]

This passage contains an implicit comment on his earlier work. When composing the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein thought that philosophy must aim at the world. This seemed to coincide with his and Russell's highly formalistic theory of logical atomism, which held that one could describe the world and natural language through purely analytic or logical means. In the first analogy presented above, Wittgenstein refers to his argument in the *Tractatus* as a ladder. The propositions he presents are rungs which we climb up, to continue the analogy, and eventually throw away when we have reached an understanding of what can be said with language. By 1930, he has rejected the notion of logical atomism that formed this 'ladder.' The steps are too formal and abstract. Even if

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[23] Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Culture and Value: A Selection from the Posthumous Remains*. Trans. Peter Winch. Ed. G. H. von Wright. Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing, 1998. 64e.
[24] *Ibid.* 64e.
[25] *Ibid.* 10e.

a perfect formal language could be developed, it would fail to describe our own natural language. Abstraction removes philosophical theories from the way in which things in the world actually function. While Wittgenstein maintains that philosophy should aim at reflecting reality, he realizes in his later writings that the abstraction that results from the extreme objectivity of logical atomism prevents us from achieving this goal.

Wittgenstein's later position regarding philosophical truth as concrete and non-formal does not imply that one will always be capable of fully grasping truth in the way that one can grasp a logical theorem. Quite the opposite, Wittgenstein alludes to a continuing movement toward truth, i.e. truth as a process of striving. He writes directly after the (1930) ladder analogy:

> One movement orders one thought to the others in a series, the other keeps aiming at the same place.
> One movement constructs & takes (in hand) one stone after another, the other keeps reaching for the same one.[26]

Whereas the *Tractatus* emphasized the abstract permanence of language, Wittgenstein's later philosophy promotes a more context-dependent philosophy, i.e. a philosophy of language where one must take instances of language's employment into account. As this requires a move toward the temporal, it entails a *continued* grasping for the truth. Truth is not necessarily something static for Wittgenstein. This thought is present even in his most famous of doctrines, "the meaning of a word is its use in the language."[27] This is a radical departure from his statement in the *Tractatus* that a name's meaning is its

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[26] *Ibid.* 10e.
[27] Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Philosophical Investigations*. Trans. G.E.M. Anscombe. Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers, 2001. Remark 43.

referent.[28] In his theory of logical atomism, a person determines the meaning of the name completely objectively through knowing the referent of that name. Wittgenstein places the burden of meaning solely on the semantic content in his earlier work. In his *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein writes that by believing that the meaning of a name is its referent, one is "confound[ing] the meaning of a name with the *bearer* of the name."[29] Rather than defining the meaning of a particular name as a static and abstract relation between that name and its referent, he holds that a word's meaning is its use. As the use of a word changes in different situations and over time, we see that the truth of a sentence is dependent upon context. Wittgenstein has learned that absolute abstraction is a step in the wrong direction if we want to understand natural language. Just as we must look inward to grasp truths that relate essentially to the self, we must look at the concrete use of a sentence in order to grasp the truth of the proposition expressed. I am reminded here of Nielsen's remark that a person does not understand water simply because she knows its scientific definition. A person must look at water's functions and use in the world to fully grasp the truth about it. When we think about the chemical composition of water, we tend to forget about water as it exists and interacts with the world, but this knowledge is most important. Similarly, when we think of a word as a symbol attached to a referent, we tend to neglect our actual usage of the word in language. Paradox and inwardness are often overlooked because they are rarely mentioned directly, but the reader could maintain that Wittgenstein steps away from abstraction, in the direction of Kierkegaard's subjective, and lands in the ever-changing concrete.

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[28] Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Trans. D. F. Pears & B.F. McGuinness. New York, N.Y.: Routledge Classics, 2001. 3.203

[29] Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Philosophical Investigations*. Trans. G.E.M. Anscombe. Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers, 2001. Remark 40.

VIII. Conclusion

Wittgenstein took Kierkegaard's devotion to subjective knowledge to heart in his assessment of contemporary philosophy (including his own!). More specifically, he noticed a trend in analytic philosophy that moved toward absolute abstraction. When Gottleib Frege, for example, found that language did not always correspond to his logical theory of how language functioned, he sometimes claimed that the lack of correspondence was not a fault of his logical theory; rather, it occurred because we were misusing language or because language was imperfect. This practice of extreme objectification seemed counterintuitive to Wittgenstein. He wrote fervently that philosophy, if it was to have any merit or success, must show the world for what it is. Ultimately, when we rely solely on abstraction, we climb ladders above the clouds, and we become lost in their opacity.

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