

EFFING THE INEFFABLE:
THE MYSTICISM OF SIMONE WEIL AND LUDWIG WITTGENSTEIN

by

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*To Dan Chook-Reid, without whom I wouldn't have known this was my passion and calling,
and I wouldn't have pursued it as such.*

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD.
For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts.”

~ Isaiah 55:8-9¹

“Let us think the unthinkable,
let us do the undoable.
Let us prepare to grapple with
the ineffable itself,
and see if we may not eff it after all.”

~ Douglas Adams²

Soli Deo Gloria.

¹ Biblical quotations throughout are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version*.

² *Dirk Gently's Holistic Detective Agency*, 150.

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ABSTRACT

Both Simone Weil and Ludwig Wittgenstein hold mysticism—i.e., the belief in something utterly transcendent—centrally. The mysticism present in Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* presents a problem: if “the mystical” is a “deep” nonsense, and there is something important that cannot be sensibly presented in language, we are left in an undesirable situation. The mystical is taken to be of paramount importance, but is ultimately inaccessible to reason. Weil, starting with political and theological considerations, arrives at a similar problem.

A mystical position yields the “problem of mysticism”: There is the mystical; it is of crucial importance, and it is inaccessible to our reason. Weil’s mystical *praxis* of decreation is a solution to the problem. This does not present a way that we can come to the mystical, but a way that we can become aware of its revelation, which bypasses our reason.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS USED

CV	Ludwig Wittgenstein, <i>Culture and Value</i>
ECR	Simone Weil, <i>Essay on the Concept of Reading</i>
FLN	Simone Weil, <i>First and Last Notebooks</i>
GG	Simone Weil, <i>Gravity and Grace</i>
LC	Ludwig Wittgenstein, <i>Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief</i>
LE	Ludwig Wittgenstein, <i>Lecture on Ethics</i>
OC	Ludwig Wittgenstein, <i>On Certainty</i>
OL	Simone Weil, <i>Oppression and Liberty</i>
PI	Ludwig Wittgenstein, <i>Philosophical Investigations</i>
RF	Ludwig Wittgenstein, <i>Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough</i>
SE	Simone Weil, <i>Selected Essays 1934-1943</i>
TLP	Ludwig Wittgenstein, <i>Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus</i>
WG	Simone Weil, <i>Waiting for God</i>

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CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

“In the beginning was the Deed.”

This is the way Goethe’s Faust intentionally mistranslates the first verse of the Gospel according to John (*Faust* Part I Scene III). Ludwig Wittgenstein quotes this phrase (CV 31), and does Simone Weil (FLN 24). For both, it encapsulates an important truth, not so much about the world as about the situatedness of the human being (and thus, the philosopher) *within* the world. Faust renders λόγος—which, while notoriously difficult to translate, is more commonly rendered as *word* or *thought*—with the one meaning it most certainly does *not* have.

Yet for the human thinker (as, perhaps, not for God) it is precisely the *deed*—lived, embodied practice—which must precede the thought or word. Philosophical theorizing cannot spring into being independent of the vagaries of social practice. Even in our attempts at *a priori* philosophy, we philosophize as particular human beings in particular social circumstances, speaking and reading particular languages which express particular concepts in particular ways. Our philosophy is not like the goddess Athena, who sprang fully-formed from her father’s forehead. If we attempt to theorize in this way, we will end up only more confused. This is the methodological insight which shapes the philosophy of both Wittgenstein¹ and Weil.

For two philosophers who, though contemporaries,² never seem to have encountered one another’s work to share this fundamental insight—which shapes so much of their philosophizing—is striking. There is a temptation to think they must both have been aware of a common *Zeitgeist*,³ but this is unsatisfying as an explanation, as this insight seems to have taken hold more broadly *after* their work had obtained a broader readership. Indeed, it is difficult to doubt that Wittgenstein himself is largely responsible for the broader sway this perspective would come to hold.

¹ Particularly in his later work.

² Wittgenstein lived 1889-1951, while Weil lived 1909-1943.

³ *Lit.* “Spirit of the times.”

This common starting point for the practice of philosophy leads to what Peter Winch observes in the introduction to his book *Simone Weil: "The Just Balance"*, namely that “there are...great affinities between the way [Weil and Wittgenstein] conceived and approached philosophical questions, as well as equally striking divergences” (4). The striking similarity of their philosophies (and in particular their philosophical methodology) makes all the more illuminating their points of divergence. When two thinkers who are so similar disagree as strongly as these two do on some points, to explore the underlying causes of these disagreements seems likely to illuminate their broader philosophies.

Winch is clear that in *The Just Balance* he has “not attempted any systematic comparison between [Weil and Wittgenstein]” (4). Instead he has simply used Wittgenstein to elucidate some of the thornier parts of Weil’s philosophy where it informatively converges on or diverges from Wittgenstein’s. As far as I am aware, no such systematic comparison has yet been carried out. And yet it seems that such could be a valuable project, aiding in the interpretation of these two philosophers, and giving grounds to bring to bear the insights of the one on the topics raised exclusively by the other.

I have neither space nor time herein to systematically compare the entire bodies of work of these two minds. What I have endeavoured to do is to place side-by-side—and indeed, in conversation—their thoughts on one particular subject: namely, the mystical.

1.1 THE MYSTICAL

Why the mystical? Well, Weil and Wittgenstein represent two of the foremost mystical thinkers of the twentieth century. Mystical considerations held considerable weight in both of their lives—intellectually and personally. Moreover, they have remarkably similar philosophical treatments of the mystical. Where they differ (and this is not without philosophical consequence) is in their mystical *practice*. While Wittgenstein returned time and again to mystical considerations, he always did so as a philosopher and an outsider. Weil, on the other hand, is as much a mystical practitioner in the tradition of Julian of Norwich (the anchoress and author of the *Revelations of Divine Love*, in which she recounts

a series of sixteen visions and reflections of the love of God those inspired) or the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* as she is a philosopher.

The mystical, then, is treated at length by both Weil and Wittgenstein. Moreover, their conceptions thereof are in many ways central to their border philosophies—an understanding of how they treat the mystical will illuminate a great deal else in their thought. If there is one topic for which a systematic comparison of their work is likely to be fruitful, it is the mystical.

1.2 METHODOLOGICAL DIFFICULTIES

This project is accompanied by certain methodological difficulties which should be acknowledged before I can begin in earnest. Both Weil and Wittgenstein undergo fairly radical shifts in their thinking, and for both their work can be categorized into an “early” and a “late” period. For Weil, the shift happens over the course of four years from 1935-38 (Pétrement 249, WG 26) wherein she has a series of three mystical experiences, and converts to Christianity (though she refused to be baptized). As a result of this, Weil’s writing becomes overtly religious. It is harder to pin down when exactly the shift in Wittgenstein’s thought happens, but at some point between writing the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (published 1922) and what would become the *Philosophical Investigations* (prepared in 1945) Wittgenstein seems to have rejected many philosophical views he had previously held (e.g., logical atomism).

To offer a systematic comparison of what Weil and Wittgenstein have to say about the mystical will require me to draw on material written by them in both their early and late phases. There is a temptation to draw a sharp boundary between these two phases—to treat the early and late Wittgenstein as radically different philosophers (the latter of whom is primarily concerned with critiquing the former), or to treat the early Weil as a radical political theorist and the late Weil as an apolitical Christian mystic.

However, their *oeuvres* simply will not bear this out. Weil’s late work remains incredibly political, treating of such subjects as nationalism and Marxist doctrine. As regards the mystical dimension of her thought, she continues to develop notions which were present in her pre-conversion writings. Similarly, while there are substantive shifts

between Wittgenstein's early and late periods, I argue in the following chapter that his thought does not change substantially regarding the mystical. For these reasons, I will throughout largely treat Weil and Wittgenstein as each presenting one unified philosophical position regarding the mystical.

This brings us to our second significant methodological challenge, one presented by the subject matter rather than the philosophers under consideration. The mystical is necessarily difficult to talk or write about; it is outside the scope of the world, of language, and of logic.⁴ Wittgenstein writes "There is indeed the inexpressible. This *shows* itself; it is the mystical" (TLP §6.522, emphasis in original). The mystical, whatever precisely it is,⁵ lies *outside* the world, and therefore cannot be represented by language or presented in logic (TLP §4.121). To treat of the mystical philosophically, then, is to invite linguistic difficulty, for it is to try to treat of something necessarily extra-linguistic *in* language. In TLP, Wittgenstein offers a way this may be possible: philosophy must "mean the unspeakable by clearly displaying the speakable" (TLP §4.115). The mystical cannot be said (or written), but it can be shown or displayed.

This work *cannot* say that which it is about, for the mystical by definition cannot be captured in language. Thus I must endeavour at key points to *show* that which is central and of paramount importance. It must be clear, even if it lies between the lines. This is neither an easy nor a straightforward task. To attempt to portray the mystical in language is to invite paradox—not apparent paradox, but honest contradiction. Such is the nature of the subject-matter. Indeed, if everything here below is said in plain language without ever taking recourse to metaphor or paradox, it may be taken as evidence that I have not presented the mystical.

I throughout avoid asserting that the mystical "exists," choosing instead to echo TLP §6.522 by simply claiming that the mystical "is." This is because to use the language

⁴ While there certainly are those (e.g. Spinoza) who treat God as within the scope of the world, such thinkers would not be discussing "the mystical" in the sense I intend herein. Throughout, I treat "the mystical" as definitionally outside the scope of the world. Within the literature with which I shall be engaging, this is the standard usage.

⁵ In large part, this will be the subject of Chapters 2 and 3.

of existence is to invite the creation of a misleading picture whereby the mystical is one thing among others in the world, where this is exactly what the mystical *isn't*.

It is worth noting that the overwhelming majority of examples in discussions of religion that follow draw upon Christianity. The reasons for this are twofold. The first is that in this respect, I am following the example of Weil and Wittgenstein who, though they occasionally mention religious beliefs or practices from other traditions, are primarily occupied (when they discuss religion) in discussing Christianity. The second is that I have a degree of knowledge and understanding of Christian belief and practice which I do not have of any other religion. It has seemed preferable to me use Christian examples than to attempt a more diverse representation and run the risk of misrepresenting or trivializing religions of which I lack both knowledge and understanding.

1.3 SUMMARY

In what follows, I shall endeavour to present a systematic comparison of what Wittgenstein and Weil have to say (or show) on the subject of the mystical, some of the problems that then arise, and consider possible ways those problems may be resolved.

In Chapter 2, I outline Wittgenstein's mystical position. I present a "deep nonsense" reading of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, whereby the talk of "the mystical," while self-declared nonsense, is nonsense that is meant to *show* something of deep importance. I further argue that the late Wittgenstein does not abandon his philosophical commitment to the mystical; he merely de-emphasizes it out of methodological concerns. Hints of a commitment to the mystical present themselves in Wittgenstein's late works. Nothing in the philosophy of his late period entails a repudiation of the mystical. I will show how Wittgenstein arrives at what I call "the problem of mysticism"—i.e. that there is the mystical; it is of crucial importance, and it is utterly inaccessible to our reason.

In Chapter 3, I outline Weil's mystical position. I present her unique Platonic position and endorsement of the mystical (which in "Human Personality" she calls "the impersonal"—i.e., God), and consider some of this position's implications for political philosophy. I will show how Weil's Christian Platonism gives rise to a form of the problem of mysticism in a way not entirely unlike that which faces Wittgenstein.

In Chapter 4, I will consider one intuitively appealing way we may solve the problem of mysticism—namely, religion. I examine Weil’s critique of the Church, and develop that to show why participation in the Church cannot grant one access to the mystical. I also develop a Wittgensteinian account of what a religion is, and conclude that it is not the sort of thing that can give one access to the mystical.

In Chapter 5, I examine notions of immediacy in both Weil and Wittgenstein. Both are at pains to consider non-linguistic means by which we come to know, and these have informative similarities. I will examine the concepts of “reading” and something’s “showing itself”, and suggest that these represent a way in which we may come to know which bypasses our reason. These concepts are of central importance if we are to overcome the problem of mysticism.

In Chapter 6, I present Weil’s mystical *praxes* of attention and *malheur* as means of addressing the problem of mysticism. Working with a synthesis of Weil’s and Wittgenstein’s positions, I ground the solution to the problem of mysticism not in theory but in lived *praxis*. We cannot reach “outside the world” to the mystical; the grammar of our world makes that very notion nonsense (in both the technical and conventional meaning of “nonsense”). Weil’s mystical *praxis* is the means by which we become aware of *God’s* reaching to *us*.

CHAPTER 2 THE PERSISTENT MYSTICISM OF LUDWIG WITTGENSTEIN

Dealers in fine musical instruments almost never play the instruments they appraise. Their assessments are based on externally measurable proportions, antique value, the visual appearance of the varnish, the reputation of the luthier and so on. An understanding of the *Tractatus*'s arguments might be compared to a violin's market value; an understanding of its thought, to a musician's appreciation of the instrument's sound. (Zwicky 1992, §40L)

2.1 INTRODUCTION TO CHAPTER

Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* is a notoriously dense and impenetrable text. For much of TLP, Wittgenstein appears to working out a specific metaphysics and logic—merely contributing to the contemporary discourse in the field. Such a reading is complicated by TLP §6.54: “My propositions are elucidatory in this way: he who understands me finally recognizes them as [nonsense],¹ when he has climbed out through them, on them, over them. (He must so to speak throw away the ladder, after he has climbed up on it.) He must surmount these propositions; then he sees the world rightly.” It would seem that Wittgenstein is declaring the whole of TLP to be nonsense.

Moreover, he writes at various points of specific sorts of nonsense: religion, ethics, aesthetics, metaphysics, the limits of thought and of the world—these are (or are importantly related to) “the mystical.” And yet, in the preface of TLP, Wittgenstein writes: “What can be said at all can be said clearly; and whereof one cannot speak thereof one must be silent” (p27). Whether we understand this as a statement of fact, an injunction, or both, it seems to fly in the face of TLP's very existence. Russell aptly captures this in his introduction to the English translations of TLP: “What causes hesitation is the fact that, after all, Mr. Wittgenstein manages to say a good deal about

¹ While Ogden has here rendered the word “*unsinnig*” as “senseless”, this is inaccurate. Throughout TLP, Wittgenstein distinguishes—in a way which may or may not be consistent or systematic—between those things that are “*sinnlos*” (i.e., “senseless” or “without sense,” such as so-called “logical laws”) and those things that are “*unsinnig*” (i.e., “nonsense”). This is a distinction which neither major translation of TLP presents systematically in all instances.

what cannot be said, thus suggesting to the sceptical reader that possibly there may be some loophole through a hierarchy of languages, or by some other exit” (p 22).

This leaves us with a question: is the nonsense in TLP worthless, holding no more significance than a baby’s babbling, or is it some sort of “deep” nonsense? Is there something of significance that, while not *said*, is perhaps *shown*? If what Wittgenstein wanted say in TLP is something that he necessarily couldn’t say, was he—to borrow Hacker’s phrase—“trying to whistle it”?

In this chapter I will suggest that Wittgenstein was, in fact, trying to show his reader something of significance in TLP—that the nonsense was “deep nonsense.” I will then go on to argue that Wittgenstein does not abandon a belief in the mystical by the time he writes the *Philosophical Investigations*. I will outline what role I consider the mystical to play in his later philosophy. Finally, I will draw out what I call “the problem of mysticism”—namely that there is the mystical, it is of paramount importance, and yet it is utterly inaccessible to our reason.

2.2 TRACTARIAN DEEP NONSENSE

The nature of nonsense is something to which Wittgenstein commits a good deal of space in TLP. A distinction needs to be drawn between what is nonsense (*unsinnig*) and what is senseless (*sinnlos*). Something is senseless if it has no meaning—on the logic of TLP, this means that it does not offer a picture of possible facts. The so-called “laws of logic,” then, are senseless—there is no arrangement of things in the world which would render them false. The laws of logic are tautologies, and tautologies are without sense (TLP §4.461). *Nonsense*, on the other hand is that which is outside of logical space entirely—and thus outside the world.² Something which does not present a picture whatsoever is nonsense: abstract art cannot be said to be true or false to life; it does not attempt to portray the world. The same holds for gibberish (“oogldy boogldy boo”). Nonsense is not concerned with facts or possible facts, which is (in a Tractarian sense) just to say that it is not concerned with the world.

² Cf. TLP §1.13

Much of TLP is clearly senseless. §§1-1.2, for example, becomes a series of vacuous tautologies if one takes the identities proposed seriously. §1.1 (“The world is the totality of facts, not of things.”) and §1.11 (“The world is determined by the facts, and by these being all the facts.”) together yield the not terribly enlightening conclusion “The totality of facts is determined by the facts, and by these being all the facts”. Indeed, TLP is shot through with this sort of thing—when one works through the details of what Wittgenstein has written, one concludes that it is without sense. This may be why in TLP §6.54, Ogden renders *unsinnig* as “senseless”. However, the claim Wittgenstein makes is that his propositions are *nonsense*, not merely *senseless*. It is not that they fail to picture a particular set of possible facts within logical space, but that they fail to provide a picture of logical space at all. In what way might TLP be presenting nonsense?

Wittgenstein writes: “[Philosophy] should limit the thinkable and thereby the unthinkable. It should limit the unthinkable from within through the thinkable. It will mean the unspeakable by clearly displaying the speakable. Everything that can be thought at all can be thought clearly; Indeed everything that can be said can be said clearly” (TLP §§4.114-4.116). What cannot be thought cannot be spoken of clearly, indeed we cannot *say* it at all. However, we can “mean” the unthinkable, we can delimit it, by speaking clearly about what is thinkable.

What is it that is thinkable and unthinkable? “The limits of my language mean the limits of my world. Logic fills the world: the limits of the world are also its limits” (TLP §§5.6-5.61). When one attempts to describe the nature of logic, one inevitably fails to utter sensical propositions. The “laws” of logic are tautologies, and they therefore fail to describe the world as being any one particular way. What a tautology asserts holds irrespective of which facts do or do not obtain in the world. This is true of anything which attempts to describe the nature of logic.³ This is echoed in a 1931 remark in *Culture and Value*: “The limit of language is shown by its being impossible to describe the fact which corresponds to (is the translation of) a sentence, without simply repeating the sentence” (CV 10). What is sensical (and therefore sayable) is bounded by senselessness.

³ *Cf.* the general form of the proposition in TLP §6

What cannot be thought or said is precisely the *non-factual*; this is outside the world. This includes, crucially, meaning and value (TLP §§6.4-6.42). That there even is a world—or an experiencing subject—is not to be found among the facts that obtain in the world—or among those facts that do not obtain. These are matters which fall outside of logical space.

Wittgenstein expresses the same notion in his later *Lecture on Ethics*:

Suppose one of you were an omniscient person and therefore knew all the movements of all the bodies in the world dead or alive and that he also knew all the states of mind of all human beings that ever lived, and suppose this man wrote all he knew in a big book, then this book would contain the whole description of the world; and what I want to say is that this book would contain nothing that we would call an *ethical* judgement or anything that would logically imply such a judgement. (LE 6)

Wittgenstein calls the feeling that the world is a limited whole the *mystical* feeling (TLP §6.45)—for the notions of limits and of wholes entail that there is something outside the limit, something which is not part of the whole. Of course, what is outside the world is not a fact—for the world is the totality of facts.

Perhaps then we ought to reject the feeling that the world is a limited whole—and avoid any attendant elocutions, for they lead us to attempt to think nonsense. However, Wittgenstein does not take this path. Instead, he boldly asserts: “There is indeed the inexpressible. This shows itself; it is the mystical” (TLP §6.522). What is outside the world (i.e., that which is not a matter of facts or of possible facts) is the mystical (which in TLP §6.432 Wittgenstein calls “God”). Why then? Why doesn’t Wittgenstein adopt a sort of logical positivism (a view with which the Tractarian position is occasionally confused), and simply reject all propositions that are not merely about possible facts in logical space?

Wittgenstein thinks there are some things outside the world, which we simply do accept. We do ethics, we do aesthetics. These are practices which are not going away. More convincingly, perhaps, we experience things. There is someone who sees what I see, and who hears what I hear. The metaphysical subject, however—the one who is doing the seeing and hearing—is neither seen nor heard. The subject is simply not a fact among others. “The subject does not belong to the world but it is a limit of the world” (TLP §5.362). This is why Wittgenstein tells us that “...what solipsism *means*, is quite correct,

only it cannot be *said*, but it shows itself” (TLP §5.62). No-one else is a limit of my world—every person except myself is a fact (or series of facts) in my world.

This form of solipsism is not tantamount to the hypothesis that everyone except myself is a philosophical zombie. It merely says that anyone except myself, by necessity, bears a fundamentally different relationship to my world than I do. It is to say that *I* see what I see—you do not see what I see. Moreover, I see what I see, but I do not see my seeing. This is almost trivially true—to put it in words sounds absurd. It is the sort of thing which *shows* itself—the world is such that this arises from it. But the relationship of the metaphysical subject to the world is no more a fact in the world than the metaphysical subject itself is.

We do not become aware of the metaphysical subject by means of *thought*. That someone is seeing what I see and hearing what I hear is not a belief at which I arrive by means of contemplation, any more than I arrive at the belief that something is *good* or *beautiful* by means of thinking really hard. It is something that I *feel*. Indeed, on TLP’s account, one cannot *think* of anything that does not picture possible facts, for “[t]he logical picture of the facts is the thought” (TLP §3). We may well attempt to think of the mystical—indeed, we may believe that we have done so—yet we will be mistaken, and left with nonsensical pseudo-propositions. What is mystical is not only unspeakable, but it is *unthinkable*.

We may (and in discussing this material, *must*) put much of what Wittgenstein is intending to show regarding the mystical into linguistic formulations, but in doing so, we will always miss the mark somewhat. Certainly part of what it means (e.g.) that “ethics is outside the world” is an assertion of an is/ought divide, yet this doesn’t quite capture it. On this formulation, we are saying that it is a *fact* that facts do not entail ethical principles. But to say that is exactly to put the ethical into the realm of the factual; it is exactly this that Wittgenstein thinks would be a mistake.

It seems then that there is nonsense that matters, and moreover that it is the sort of thing that has historically engaged philosophers a great deal. If the mystical—God, ethics, the metaphysical subject, and so on—is nonsense, there is reason to think it should simply be rejected. However, one of the central claims of TLP—on the deep nonsense reading I am advocating—is that nonsense can still evoke something in the one who

encounters it. Consider the nonsense-poem “Jabberwocky,” from Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking-Glass*, which begins:

'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe;
All mimsy were the borogoves,
And the mome raths outgrabe. (Carroll 18)

Alice goes on to remark: “Somehow it seems to fill my head with ideas—only I don't exactly know what they are!” (Carroll 19). *This* is the sort of nonsense with which TLP is full. It fills the reader’s head with ideas, and when they try to articulate those ideas linguistically, they fail. While much of TLP may be disguised nonsense which we are intended to work our way to seeing as plain nonsense, it is nonsense intended to evoke a reaction within us. Just as one reading *Jabberwocky* has a definite experience which is quite a bit *like* having some information communicated though nothing meaningful was in fact *said*, TLP communicates a great deal.

I am not herein concerned with what TLP may show about logical form.⁴ I am concerned with what it shows about the mystical; it is not in the world, and therefore is not within logical space—it simply is not the sort of thing that can be the case or fail to be the case. It simply *is*.

2.3 MYSTICISM IN THE LATE WITTGENSTEIN

It cannot be denied that the mystical is a major preoccupation of TLP. Even if one adopts an interpretation of TLP whereby it is all supposed to be recognized as worthless nonsense,⁵ much of the nonsense *appears* to be about the mystical. Wittgenstein discusses value, the limits of language, the limits of world, and even God.

Yet such subjects are largely absent from PI, which as the longest sustained work Wittgenstein wrote after TLP is understandably considered the flagship work of his late period. Wittgenstein’s rejection of the logical schema of TLP could reasonably be thought to eliminate any place for the mystical in his late philosophy.

⁴ Though I am of the opinion that it shows—or endeavours to show—a great deal about logical form.

⁵ This is exactly the interpretation I have, in the preceding section, rejected.

In this section I will consider a possible argument that the position of PI leaves no room for the mystical. I will then argue from the textual evidence of PI that this is not the case, and conclude by examining Wittgenstein’s mystical position in some of his other late works.

2.3.1 Logic, Limits, and the *Philosophical Investigations*

The mysticism of TLP follows from the logical system therein. If “the world is everything that is the case” (TLP §1), and “determined by the facts and by these being *all* the facts” (TLP §1.11), then “the world” consists of “the facts in logical space” (TLP §1.13). This entails a limit to the world—whatever is not in “logical space” is outside the scope of the world. Wittgenstein’s logical atomism requires this notion of “logical space,” and in TLP it is from the notion of logical space that the mystical arises, as a necessary contrast. The mystical arises from the notion of logical space in much the way the eye arises from the notion of the visual field—the eye never sees itself (TLP §§5.633-5.6331), it is a *limit* of the visual field. Such is the relation of the mystical to logical space.

PI does away with this logical system. In it, Wittgenstein adopts a practice-first approach to language, concepts, meaning, grammar, and logic. He begins PI by having the reader consider a series of child-like games with language, whether it be builders who have only imperatives of increasing complexity, or children playing at opposite day, or a language consisting only of interrogatives and affirmatives or negations (PI §§1-19). Language, Wittgenstein tells us, works as it does in these games. How terms *mean* is a matter of convention, which develops in the midst of social practice. Just as children might *decide* that on a given day, “yes” means “no” and “no” means “yes,” we have *decided* that “desk” refers to the large flat thing I am currently resting my computer on, and “word” means the meaningful mouth-noises I utter and meaningful squiggles I am currently producing.

In PI §81, Wittgenstein considers the relationship between logic and the sorts of games we play in language—i.e., the way we employ language. If logic exists in a vacuum, independent of language as it is actually spoken, then its role is to be the meter-stick to which actual linguistic utterances are held, to see if they are “logical.” “All this,”

Wittgenstein goes on to tell us, “can only appear in the right light when one has attained greater clarity about the concepts of understanding, meaning, and thinking. For it will then also become clear what can lead us (and did lead me) to think that if anyone utters a sentence and *means* or *understands* it he is operating a calculus according to definite rules” (PI §81, emphasis in original). Wittgenstein is expressly denying that there is one logic. Instead different language games operate according to different logics—different grammars. The logic of a given context or interaction is not necessarily the same as—or even very similar to—the logic of another.

This position is in direct contrast to the understanding of logic in TLP. In PI, Wittgenstein is denying a totalizing approach to logic—there is no talk of “the world” or “logical space.” Because of this, there is no reason to think there is a *limit*, and thus no reason to think there must be something *beyond* that limit. How do we understand what an utterance means? We see how it is used—what leads one to utter it, and how others engaged in the same language-game respond. Because of this, everything about how words mean is internal to the context in which they are being used. In PI, Wittgenstein is not concerned with some sort of Ultimate Ground of Meaning.

For this reason, one might reasonably think by the time of the investigations, Wittgenstein has abandoned a belief in the mystical—after all, it no longer serves any role in his understanding of logic, and it does not serve to ground anything else. Reasonable as this position might be, however, it does not account for the textual evidence.

2.3.2 The Mystical in the *Philosophical Investigations*

In §38 of PI, in a discussion of how naming works, Wittgenstein tells us that “philosophical problems arise when language *goes on holiday*” (emphasis in original). That is, philosophical problems arise when we attempt to get language to do work where it cannot or ought not. This yields the late Wittgenstein’s understanding of the purpose of philosophy: “The results of philosophy are the uncovering of one or another piece of plain nonsense and of bumps that the understanding has got by running its head up against the limits of language. These bumps make us see the value of the discovery” (PI §119); i.e. we encounter philosophical problems when we misuse language, and

particularly when we try to apply language where it simply won't work. The business of philosophy, then, is to get clear on how we're using language, and avoid attempts to speak or write about what cannot be grasped in language.

This ought to be familiar—indeed, the very same notion is expressed in the preface and in the final proposition of TLP: “Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent”. Throughout TLP, Wittgenstein is attempting in language to *show* what cannot be said; by the writing of PI, he is scrupulously choosing to obey his own adjuration; he is silent about the mystical. Yet the remarks at PI §38 and §119 give us reason to think that a belief in the mystical remains, in the background, whereof Wittgenstein is very intentionally being silent.

In §38, Wittgenstein is precisely critiquing a tendency—common among the analytic philosophers with whom he is in discourse—“to sublime the logic of our language”; i.e. to put logic in a place that is beyond the scope of the world. We want logic not to be empirical, but to be grounds upon which empirical study can be built. “Certainly,” those whom Wittgenstein is critiquing would say, “we must have our logic sorted out before we can understand any sort of human practise empirically.” “Certainly,” they might continue, “if we want to think or talk about the sorts of things people do and say, if we want to make *inferences*, we must know how inferences work, and that must be *a priori* and universal.” What Wittgenstein is saying in §38, though, is that this tendency is exactly what leads to the creation of philosophical problems—as indeed, the study of logic has yielded many trenchant philosophical problems.

Why does the “tendency to sublime the logic of our language” yield philosophical problems? Because it brings us to the place where “language goes on holiday”; language cannot capture the sublime. To do this is to attempt to capture in language (whether natural or “ideal”) something which is not *in the world*. This tendency is to try to get at the very foundations of the possibility of knowing and thinking—and thus of language. If there is such a thing, it cannot be captured in language; such a thing would be *the mystical*. When we wish to capture that which is outside the world is exactly when “language goes on holiday”; this is not an inconvenient coincidence, it is instead unavoidable.

This is what Wittgenstein elaborates upon in PI §119. This comment also comes in the midst of a discussion of logic. Wittgenstein has explained that we return always to

the notion that there must be *one* universal logic, rather than particular logics (or “grammars”) for particular language-games. He tells us that “A *picture* held us captive. And we could not get outside it, for it lay in our language and language seemed to repeat it to us inexorably” (PI §115, emphasis in original). The job of philosophy, Wittgenstein is saying, is to examine this picture, and see where it is disguising nonsense as sense. Philosophical problems are persistent because the picture of logic as transcendent and transcendental⁶ is constantly repeating nonsense back to philosophers. Of course it is nonsense; it is a picture of something outside the world—yet it is only within the world that things can have sense. Outside the world, facts neither obtain nor fail to obtain; outside the world, facts *aren't*. Truth and falsity only quantify over that which is *within* the world. Wittgenstein considers an attempt to avoid this problem: “One might think: if philosophy speaks of the use of the word ‘philosophy’ there must be a second-order philosophy” (PI §121). That is, we might think we can talk *about* logic or language, using some sort of meta-language, but this does not work. “[I]t is not so: it is, rather, like the case of orthography, which deals with the word ‘orthography’ among others without then being second-order” (PI §121). To have a logic of logic is simply logic. A “meta-language” is simply a language. No matter what, if one is seeking to discuss what is beyond the world, one is merely doing so with something bounded within the world.

This is why the understanding has got bumps “by running its head against the limits of language” (PI §119). We are bound to encounter conceptual confusion when trying to grasp a logic which is transcendental. Which is not to say there *is* no such thing, merely that we cannot—and ought not—speak of it. We should not expect to be able to systematize it. To attempt to do so will simply yield deep trenchant philosophical problems. It generates false, misleading pictures of the world, which later philosophers will need to come and help us dispose of.

None of this makes any sort of sense if Wittgenstein has abandoned a belief in the mystical—there would be nothing which is outside the limits of language for the understanding to bump up against. Had Wittgenstein rejected the mystical, he would lack

⁶ Alongside many other philosophical pictures.

grounds to criticize the notion of a universal logic, except perhaps on empirical grounds.⁷ Indeed, it is his very belief in the mystical—and particularly the unspeakableness thereof—which grounds much of the critical work of PI.

Why then does Wittgenstein not address the mystical in PI? Indeed, the word “mystical” never appears, “God” appears only as an argumentative expedient, and the word “theology” appears only once (which shall be addressed in Chapter 4). If, as I have suggested, the critical work of PI is grounded in Wittgenstein’s notion of the mystical, then one might well expect him to dedicate at least as much space to it as he did in TLP.

The explanation for this lies in exactly the two statements I have focused on in this section: To attempt to speak or write of the mystical is to create philosophical problems. On Wittgenstein’s account, good philosophy⁸ will not only avoid speaking of the mystical, but chastise those who *do* speak of it. Wittgenstein’s position on the mystical has not changed between TLP and PI; he is simply more methodologically committed to the injunction to remain silent whereof he cannot speak. Put differently, what has changed regarding the mystical between TLP and PI is not a matter of substantive theory, but of increased methodological rigour.

2.3.3 The Mystical Elsewhere in Wittgenstein’s Writing

Elsewhere in his writings, it is clear that Wittgenstein continues to hold to a belief in the mystical—particularly in those works never intended by him for publication. This should be unsurprising; if the reason for Wittgenstein’s reluctant to discuss the mystical in PI is increased methodological rigour, we should not expect to encounter such rigour in his notebooks.

In his *Lecture on Ethics* (given on November 17th, 1929), Wittgenstein is concerned to show that when we speak in ethical terms (much as when we speak in aesthetic or religious terms), we are attempting to articulate the notion of an *absolute* good, rather than a relative good (LE 5). That means that we use words such as “good” in an ethical sense

⁷ Though I can think of no empirical grounds that would be sufficient for this purpose.

⁸ Wittgenstein’s goal was certainly to write good philosophy.

only in similes; when we speak of (e.g.) generosity being “good,” we mean something very different than we do in speaking of a football player being “good” (LE 9). Indeed, all our ethical (aesthetic, and religious) language consists of these sorts of similes—we describe the absolute as being like the finite in various ways. The trouble is that, unlike finite matters described in metaphor or simile—where we can also say what the simile means in plain language—with language intended to describe the absolute, we cannot do without the simile—it is indispensable. It is for this reason that Wittgenstein holds that “a certain characteristic misuse of our language runs through *all* ethical and religious expressions” (LE 9, emphasis in original). And of course this is the case—it is to attempt to put into language—which arises from creatures in the world—that which is necessarily outside the world. We endeavour to make claims about values, yet value claims are non-factual. This echoes a fragment from CV written at around the same time: “What is good is also divine. Queer as it sounds, that sums up my ethics”. The moral sense of “Good”, on Wittgenstein’s account, can only refer to something outside the world. This has the implication, as he continues, that “Only something supernatural can express the Supernatural” (CV 3). Indeed, in attempting to speak of the mystical, “we are struggling with language. We are engaged in a struggle with language” (CV 11). Claims about value are claims about the mystical; they are not claims about matters of fact, yet in language we can *only* articulate claims about matters of fact. Our only hope to linguistically express what is higher would be a sort of meta-language, and this is impossible; a meta-language is still simply a language, and therefore bounded in the ways any language must be.⁹

Why must there be the inexpressible? In CV, Wittgenstein offers this tantalizing suggestion: “Perhaps what is inexpressible (what I find mysterious and am not able to express) is the background against which whatever I could express has its meaning” (CV 16). Why might we think this is the case?

There are, of course, two senses of “meaning”: the ordinary sense (such as “the meaning of the word ‘chair’ is something upon which one sits”), and the absolute sense (such as in the question “what is the meaning of life?”). Just as with ethical terms, we may be inclined to think of the latter as a sort of simile. “When we ask about the meaning of

⁹ Cf. PI §121

life, we are asking about that thing which is related to life in a way not entirely unlike the way a chair is related to the word “chair”, one might say. Of course, just as with ethical terms, we encounter the problem that we cannot say *what* that relationship of meaning to that which means is. It is *inexpressible*.

In his *Remarks on Frazer’s Golden Bough*, Wittgenstein is at pains to make clear that the “magical and religious notions of men” are not mistakes—for they do not put forward theories (RF 1). Indeed, such practices and notions simply aren’t concerned with facts—they do not make claims about how the world is.¹⁰ Religious language often shares its grammatical structure with claims about matters of fact, but to understand it as such is a mistake. Instead, it seeks to express what cannot be said.

We may be inclined to think then that we ought to reject the expressions of the mystical as meaningless gibbering—as worthless nonsense. Given Wittgenstein’s philosophical project of tearing down false pictures presented to us in our language, there is reason to think that he would urge us to do just that. In general, Wittgenstein thinks the job of philosophy is to find the precisely correct way of saying things, of avoiding nonsense, so that we avoid the creation of philosophical problems. Yet in the case of this sort of nonsense—that which arises when we attempt to describe the mystical—it seems that there simply *is* no non-nonsensical way to utter it. In that case, all we can do is recognize them for what they are. Wittgenstein writes:

[T]hese nonsensical [religious and ethical] expressions were not nonsensical because I had not yet found the correct expressions, but [...] their nonsensicality was their very essence. For all I wanted to do with them was just *to go beyond* the world and that is to say beyond significant language. My whole tendency and I believe the tendency of all men who ever tried to write or talk Ethics or Religion was to run against the boundaries of language. This running against the walls of our cage is perfectly, absolutely hopeless. Ethics so far as it springs from the desire to say something about the ultimate meaning of life, the absolute good, the absolute valuable, can be no science. What it says does not add to our knowledge in any sense. But it is a document of a tendency in the human mind which I personally cannot help respecting deeply and I would not for my life ridicule it. (LE 11-2)

¹⁰ The nature of religious language and practice is explored in detail in Chapter 4.

2.4 THE PROBLEM OF MYSTICISM

Wittgenstein's mystical position, I have argued, remains unchanged throughout his work; there is indeed the mystical. It is inexpressible. The mystical consists in God, ethics, aesthetics, the metaphysical subject, and more. We have in us, for some reason, a tendency to attempt to capture it in words, and this is something we inevitably fail at. It is not only the case that we always *do* fail to capture the mystical in words; we *must* fail to capture the mystical in words. Language does not quantify over the mystical. To "run against the wall of our cage" of language "is perfectly, absolutely hopeless". Yet *everything of importance* is outside the walls of that cage. Philosophical problems, on Wittgenstein's account, arise when we attempt to treat of what is outside the walls as though it were within.

Moreover, in both TLP and PI, Wittgenstein gives us reason to think that what cannot be *said* also cannot be *thought*. "We cannot think anything unlogical, for otherwise we should have to think unlogically. It used to be said that God could create everything, except what was contrary to the laws of logic. The truth is, we could not *say* of an 'unlogical' world how it would look" (TLP §§3.03-3.031, emphasis in original). On the Tractarian view, thought consists in propositions, while language consists in sentences, which in turn *express* propositions. What is outside the bounds of language, then, is outside the bounds of thought. On the Tractarian view, thinking is essentially a kind of speaking. In PI, a similar problem arises; what is unspeakable remains unthinkable, though not because thought is a species of speech. Wittgenstein considers the possibility of a private language—of developing words for an inward experience that is essentially unsharable, and concludes that this is a meaningless notion. "Suppose everyone had a box with something in it: we call it a 'beetle'. No one can look into anyone else's box, and everyone says he knows what a beetle is only by looking at his beetle" (PI §293). The word "beetle" could have no meaning in our language, except perhaps "what is in the box," because there is no way of knowing if what is in someone else's box even remotely resembles what is in one's own. "Beetle," then, is a word without meaning, it cannot *refer*. "That is to say: if we construe the grammar of the expression of [private] sensation on the model of 'object and designation' the object drops out of consideration as irrelevant" (PI §293). The

mystical, being inexpressible, would be necessarily private (“inexpressible” and “private” being in this sense synonymous). What is private is not only unsayable, but *unthinkable*.

This creates a problem—not a philosophical problem, of the sort which Wittgenstein would have us free ourselves by getting our language straight—but a pragmatic problem. Everything of importance is outside the world—is mystical—and we cannot get outside the world by means of the tools of language and logic. What then are we to do?

It would seem that Wittgenstein’s answer must be to abandon the pursuit of the mystical—to allow that it is outside the world, but not to pursue it, lest we create unnecessary philosophical problems. However, this is clearly *not* the course of action he endorses. In LE, he is fully engaged in thrusting against the walls of language. Throughout CV, he does the same, and in RF and LE, he is at pains to warn against the dismissal of those thrustings (which, while he himself is not engaged in in RF, he does *describe* at length). The struggle against language is valuable, even if in an important sense, it is futile.

This is the problem occasioned by Wittgenstein’s (and indeed, any) mysticism: There is the mystical; it is of paramount importance; it is utterly inaccessible to our reason. What then, are we to do? Wittgenstein himself does not ever resolve the problem. Perhaps this is because he does not think it resolvable; perhaps this is because he does not think it is the job of philosophy to resolve problems, merely to dissolve pseudo-problems. And this is not, according to Wittgenstein, a pseudo-problem.

2.5 CONCLUSION TO CHAPTER

In this chapter, I have outlined Wittgenstein’s mystical position—one which is present in TLP, and carries through his late works. In §2.2, I defended a “deep nonsense” read of TLP, whereby the nonsense of the book must be taken as *important* nonsense which *shows* something deep—whether this be the remarks about the nature of logic, or indeed those explicitly regarding the mystical. In §2.3, I traced this mysticism through Wittgenstein’s late work—whether where it is explicitly present in CV and LE, or where it is under the surface in PI. I argued in §2.4 that Wittgenstein has established a perspective whereby

what is important and deep in life cannot be said, for it lies outside the world, yet this does not reduce its importance at all. This is the problem of mysticism.

Wittgenstein's position regarding the mystical can be summed up by one verse from the Biblical book of Ecclesiastes: "Be not rash with your mouth, nor let your heart be hasty to utter a word before God, for God is in heaven and you are on earth. Therefore let your words be few" (5:2).

CHAPTER 3 THE CHRISTIAN PLATONISM OF SIMONE WEIL

There is the same difference between Simone Weil and a purely speculative philosopher as there is between a guide and a geographer. The geographer studies a region objectively; he describes its physical features, evaluates its riches, etc. The guide, on the other hand, leads the way to a given spot by the shortest route. From his point of view, everything which shortens the distance to the goal is good, everything which increases it is bad. Simone Weil is, before all things, a guide to the road leading the soul to God, and many of her phrases gain by being interpreted not as a description of the country she is crossing, but as *pieces of advice to travellers*. (Perrin and Thibon 143, emphasis in original)

3.1 INTRODUCTION TO CHAPTER

Gustave Thibon's remark brings to light the single largest difficulty in any philosophical treatment of the work of Simone Weil: it is unclear at any given point to what extent "philosophy" is the correct category to apply to her work. At times her writing may be more accurately understood as theology, which gives a priority to revealed texts (i.e. the Bible, and particularly the New Testament) in a way which philosophy does not. At other times, her writing may be best described as devotion, which seeks not to communicate truths, but to glorify God and edify the reader.

The question of whether or not Weil is best understood as a philosopher is significant because it determines what is or is not an appropriate way of critiquing and responding to claims she makes. In a work of Christian theology, the fact that the Bible asserts something may be enough to establish the truth thereof; in a work of philosophy such a claim would still need defending. In a work of devotion, factual accuracy simply isn't the goal—to reject a claim, one would be better-served in dismissing it as *unhelpful*.

Thibon's assertion is that Weil's writing is best understood as work of *devotion*; it is then not primarily concerned with the establishing of facts, but with guiding the soul of the reader towards union with God. To this extent, we might think that Weil is *not* a philosopher, and the methods of philosophy are simply not appropriate in responding to her work. There is, however, reason to reject this. As a matter of history, Weil's education

was in philosophy (Pétrément 52), and much of her work which we have access to today takes the form of notebooks she composed while teaching philosophy (Pétrément 77). Perhaps more compelling than these historical facts (after all, it is entirely possible for a philosopher to write things other than philosophy) is that Weil locates herself within a philosophical tradition that understands edification to be the appropriate *telos*¹ of philosophy: she is a Platonist.

In Book VII (514a-520a) of the *Republic*, Plato has the character of Socrates present the allegory of the cave—an image to which Weil returns time and again (particularly in *Gravity and Grace*). Plato presents the philosopher as one who has been dragged out of the cave and beheld the sun (i.e., the Form of the Good), and has returned to the cave, appearing for all the world a fool, to try to guide others to the light. Weil’s Platonism (after her conversion) is of a distinctly Christian variety—she equates the Form of the Good with the Christian God. Given this, when Thibon describes Weil as “a guide to the road between the soul and God,” he is describing exactly the Platonic conception of the philosopher’s vocation. This, then, is how we ought to understand Weil’s writing: it is philosophy which has as its goal edification.

A robust Platonism is a philosophy which is necessarily mystical: the Forms are, for Plato as for later Platonists, both transcendent and transcendental. Yet Weil’s mysticism is in many ways the inversion of what one expects from a Platonist—whereas Plato suggests that the world in which we live barely exists at all, and it is only the Forms which have being, Weil insists that the material world is very much real, and God (who is the Good) is essentially non-being.

In this chapter, I will outline Weil’s mystical position, in contrast to Plato’s. I will also contrast her position with Spinoza’s pantheism—indeed Weil’s mystical position may perhaps be best summarized as a Christian Platonism which addresses the problems raised by Spinozan pantheism. I will consider some of the political implications of this position (for political concerns were central to much of Weil’s thought). I will then outline the problem of mysticism as it arises on Weil’s account: on the one hand, God is absolute non-being, on the other hand, we exist. Therefore, it would seem then that in proportion

¹ *Lit.* “end” or “goal”.

to the extent that we exist as beings in the world, we cannot know God. This would be lamentable.

3.2 ANTI-SPINOZIST PLATONISM

Weil's mysticism can largely be understood as a way of maintaining a Christian Platonism in light of Spinoza's philosophy. While she does not often refer directly to Spinoza, it is clear at various points that a desire to repudiate his position is at least a partial motivation for her arguments. She is eager to do this because on Spinoza's account, Platonism is not only absurd, but literally *inconceivable*.

Proposition XIV in Part I of Spinoza's *Ethics* is "Except God, no substance can exist or be conceived." As proof of this, he offers the following:

As God is a being absolutely infinite, of whom no attribute expressing the essence of substance can be denied (Def. 6), and as he necessarily exists (Prop. 11), if any other substance than God exist, it must be explained by means of some attribute of God, and thus two substances would exist possessing the same attribute, which (Prop. 5) is absurd; and so no other substance than God can exist, and consequently not even be conceived. For if it can be conceived it must necessarily be conceived as existing, and this by the first part of this proof is absurd. Therefore except God no substance can exist or be conceived. *Q.e.d.*

Spinoza's position is essentially that because God is necessarily existent and infinite, there can be only one substance (i.e. God); all apparent diversity is simply the function of God's various *attributes*. In many ways, Spinoza offers a modern, semi-Christianized version of the Parmenidean position that

what-is is ungenerated and imperishable,
a whole of one kind, unperturbed and complete.

Never was it, nor shall it be, since it now *is*, all together,
one, continuous. (Graham 215-7).

This position is not terribly esoteric, though Pantheism certainly may seem so on the surface. Intuitively, if we grant the existence of an infinite thing, then it follows that there can be nothing that is not that thing. If there is, then the supposedly-infinite thing is bounded. We have imposed a limit upon it; it is finite. If God is infinite, then, there can be nothing which is not God. Intuitively, it would seem that Pantheism is the natural consequence of God's infinity.

Yet this is unacceptable for the Platonist. The Platonist is by necessity a dualist—there are Forms,² and there is matter; these two must be different. While the Christian Platonist holds that the Form of the Good is God, and therefore infinite, they cannot hold the monism that Spinoza derives from God’s infinity—for if there is no distinction to be made between the Form of the Good and those sensible objects we encounter in the world, then there is no real sense in which we are being Platonists. Weil’s solution is to present a sort of inverted Platonism which is grounded in a theology of Creation by means of renunciation.

3.2.1 Creation as Renunciation

We are faced with what is both a philosophical and theological puzzle: If God is infinite, how can there exist a world which is not God? Put another way: How can an infinite and perfect God create a world which is other than Himself?³ Surely any positive addition would simply be encompassed within God’s infinity?

Sylvie Courtine-Denamy summarizes Weil’s solution in this way:

So that the world might exist...God had to withdraw into Himself, leaving an empty space. Creation is contradiction, self-limitation, abdication...Hence the creation by no means involves, for God, an extension of His being, the production of something beyond Himself; rather, by withdrawing, God enables a part of being to be ‘other than God.’ (213)

What is infinite cannot add something finite to itself—that would merely be an extension of the infinite; creation must consist in a *renunciation* or self-affliction on God’s behalf.

Since God is infinite, where God withdraws, what is not God must come to be. Weil sees God’s self-offering on the cross as written into the very act of creation. For God to make possible the existence of that which is not God, He must withdraw so as to “make room”

² There is, at least, the Form of the Good, even if the Platonist in question does not hold there to be other Forms.

³ It is worth here noting Winch’s suggestion that we should consider Weil’s use of the phrase “the creation of the world” “not as expressing something analogous to a physical making, but rather as expressing something like the making possible of a certain conception, a certain sort of understanding” (198). Winch is suggesting, and rightly so, that Weil’s notion of “creation” is as much grammatical as metaphysical.

for that which is not God. “God could create only by hiding himself. Otherwise there would be nothing but himself” (GG 33). Creation, then, is not a function of God’s *power*, but of God’s *love*; it is only because of the divine love that we are not subsumed in the divine essence (Hermida 131). Insofar as power is a form of self-assertion, creation represents God’s *abdication* of absolute power. Insofar as love is a willingness to suffer or be harmed for the good of the beloved,⁴ creation and the crucifixion, as mirrors the one of the other, are the twin pinnacles of divine love.

This is the basis of Weil’s mystical position: If creation consists in God’s withdrawal that the world may come to be, then God is *necessarily* and *definitionally* not to be found in the world. Thus we get the assertion which opens her “Draft for a Statement of Human Obligations”:

There is a reality outside the world, that is to say, outside space and time, outside of man’s mental universe, outside any sphere whatsoever that is accessible to human faculties.

Corresponding to this reality, at the centre of the human heart, is the longing for an absolute good, a longing which is always there and is never appeased by any object in this world. (SE 219)

What Weil is describing here is in many ways an orthodox Platonism—there is an utterly transcendent realm, and yet there exists something (or some things) which are related teleologically to the occupants of that transcendent realm. What is different is that Plato considers the Forms to be intelligible, but Weil insists that what is transcendent must be beyond the reach even of our thoughts.

3.2.2 An Inverted Platonism

Weil’s conception of creation as divine withdrawal yields a Platonism where the hierarchy of being is inverted from how it is understood by Plato. In the allegory of the cave, the shadows upon the wall—all that those who are not freed from the cave ever know—are held to correspond to the normal beliefs that the majority of people form on the basis of their senses, whereas the things that are *real*—outside of the cave—are held to correspond to the Forms. The sun, which provides the light by which any other real thing can be seen,

⁴ Cf. John 15:13: “Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.”

corresponds to the Form of the Good. As Plato presents it, it is the intelligible realm which is real—the perceptible is but shadows and reflections thereof. To the extent that the perceptible may be said to exist, it does so only partially, and as a function of the existence of the Forms.

Weil distinguishes between two senses in which something may be said to be real: “Things of the senses are real if they are considered as perceptible things, but unreal if considered as goods” (GG 45). This is a grammatical remark. There are two senses in which we may speak of something good as being “real.”⁵ There is the sense in which it is “*really* good”: one might assert (*contra* a moral skeptic, for example) that it *really* is good to be kind to strangers. On the other hand, we may say that something *really* does exist in the world—my desk is *real*, one can see and touch it. The importance of this distinction is this: Nothing that is “really good” (in the first sense) is “real” in the second sense. That is to say, what is

Appearance has the completeness of reality, but only as appearance. As anything other than appearance it is error.

Illusions about the things of this world do not concern their existence but their value. The image of the cave refers to values. We only possess shadowy imitations of good. It is also in relation to good that we are chained down like captives (attachment). We accept the false values which appear to us and when we think we are acting we are in reality motionless, for we are still confined in the same system of values.

... *We are subject to that which does not exist.* Whether it is a question of passively borne duration—physical pain, waiting, regret, remorse, fear—or of organized time—order, method, necessity—in both cases that to which we are subject does not exist. But our submission exists. We are really bound by unreal chains. Time which is unreal casts over all things including ourselves a veil of unreality. (GG 45-6, emphasis in original)

Weil is at pains to make this clear: what is significant is not to be found in the world. What is good is outside the world.⁶ Furthermore, the Marxist influence upon her thought is here on display: what oppresses us is not primarily *force*, which is physical, but *ideology*, which is

⁵ Cf. the discussion of LE in §2.3.3.

⁶ It is worth here noting an interaction recorded in in the Gospel according to both Mark and Luke: “...a man ran up and knelt before [Jesus] and asked him, ‘Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?’ And Jesus said to him, ‘Why do you call me good? *No one is good except God alone.*’” (Mark 10:17-18, emphasis added. Cf. Luke 18:18-19)

not among the facts in the world. Nonetheless, the facts of oppression are everywhere evident.

Moreover, Weil is clear that “the Good” is not the sort of thing of which we can predicate “existence” or “non-existence.” “The good certainly does not possess a reality to which the attribute ‘good’ is added...its only being consists in being the good...It makes no sense to say the good exists or the good does not exist; one can only say: the good” (FLN 316). There is here a contrast with ordinary objects, which may be said to be good—that is, they have that attribute.

Thus what is *really* good (in the first sense discussed above) does not have the *attribute* of goodness. Those things which have the attribute of goodness are *real* things in the world. Reality and goodness are, as a matter of grammar, interrelated. “Just as the reality of this world is the sole foundation of facts, so that other reality is the sole foundation of good” (SE 219).

There exists in us a temptation to think that to describe a relationship as grammatical is to dismiss it as unreal or unimportant. This is a temptation which must be fought. Could Weil have constructed her metaphysical apparatus such that goodness and reality did not oppose in such a way? Perhaps, but then *all* of her thought would be different.

This grammatical point follows Weil’s conception of creation as divine withdrawal. If the world exists as a function of God’s withdrawal, then it exists in every way in contrast to God. Since God is the Good, the world must then be the real.

3.3 LOVE, JUSTICE AND THE GOOD

In the preceding sections, I have presented Weil’s mystical position as a way of reconciling God’s infinity with Weil’s Platonism. While it is clear that Weil is at many points responding to Spinoza in an attempt to avoid his monism, this is not at any point how she presents her own philosophical project. Instead, she begins with real, lived political and moral experience.

3.3.1 Love as an Orientation Towards the Good

The Good is transcendent; God is the Good, and since the world is definitionally that which is not God, the Good is not to be found in the world. What then is the relationship one ought to bear towards the Good? “[S]ince the things of this world contain no good, I simply detach from them the faculty which is related to the good, that is to say, the faculty of love...All I can do is desire the good” (FLN 316). It is unclear what Weil thinks the relationship between love and desire is. It may be that love is a species of desire, or *vice versa*. It may be that she is using the two terms interchangeably. We can be sure the two are closely related, and bear a teleological relation to the thing loved or desired.

Indeed, love is not only the appropriate relationship to the good, but the love of God is imperative—variations on the commandment “thou shalt love the LORD thy God” (Deuteronomy 6:5) are described in all three synoptic Gospels⁷ as “the greatest commandment.” Here we encounter the problem Weil addresses in “Forms of the Implicit Love of God”: “God is not present to the soul and has never yet been so” (WG 83). We do not know God, and how can we love what we do not know? In fact, because we do not (and cannot) know God, if we think we love Him, what we love is instead an *idol*—a false image of God. Fortunately, Weil suggests that while we cannot love God explicitly—if we think we do, we are committing idolatry—we may love God *implicitly*. That is to say, we may love other things—specifically “religious ceremonies, the beauty of the world, and our neighbour” (WG 83)—in such a way that God is the *indirect* object of our love.

The implicit love of God is always, on Weil’s account, a sort of self-effacement. For example, the love of the beauty of the world consists in

giv[ing] up our imaginary position as the centre [of the world], to renounce it, not only intellectually but in the imaginative part of our soul, that means to awaken what is real and eternal, to see the true light and hear the true silence... To empty ourselves of our false divinity, to deny ourselves, to give up being the centre of the world in imagination, to discern that all points in the world are equally centres and that the true centre is outside the world, this is to consent to the rule of mechanical necessity in matter and of free choice at the centre of each soul. Such consent is love. The face of this love...turned toward matter is

⁷ I.e., the Gospels according to Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

the love of the order of the world, or love of the beauty of the world which is the same thing. (WG 100)

Such love has as its implicit object God, because it imitates God. Just as God, in creation, withdraws Himself that what is not-God may come to be, when we withdraw ourselves—as creatures in the world—we are “making room” for God. To love the order of the world is to de-centre oneself, recognizing that one is merely one thing among others in the world.

The love of religious ceremonies has God as its implicit object for a different reason. Religious ceremonies bear the same relationship to the mystical as geometric drawings do to a proof in geometry. “The church may be ugly, the singing out of tune, the priest corrupt, and the faithful inattentive...It is as with a geometrician who draws a figure to illustrate a proof. If the lines are not straight and the circles are not round, it is of no importance” (WG 121). To love religious ceremonies is *symbolic* of loving God. We may love God only by means of loving those things in the world which enable us to have God as the implicit object of that love.

Most importantly, the love of others—of our neighbours—is a means by which we may love God. Weil understands human interaction, much like the rest of nature, to be governed by the laws of necessity.⁸ Necessity has it that the stronger dominate the weaker (WG 86). Compassion, then, is to disobey necessity in this regard—and this is supernatural. To love supernaturally is to love God. Yet, “[w]e have invented the distinction between justice and charity” (WG 85). To love our neighbour is a moral imperative, for it is what is required by justice.

3.3.2 Justice and the Love of God

In her 1943 paper “Human Personality”, Weil addresses the interrelationship of love, justice, and the mystical. She opens the paper with this simple observation:

‘You do not interest me.’ No man can say these words to another without committing a cruelty and offending against justice.

⁸ Though on her account, these laws may be as much social and political as physical.

‘Your person⁹ does not interest me.’ These words can be used in an affectionate conversation between close friends, without jarring upon even the tenderest nerve of their friendship. (SE 9)

This seems true enough. What is important to me about my friend is *them*, not their “personhood.” Indeed, if that were what is of significance to me, it would seem to make me a bad friend. What then, we may wonder, is important in a person?

Weil insists that “[t]here is something sacred¹⁰ in every man” (SE 9). There is something of incredible import in each person. Were this not the case, we would expect no abhorrence at the notion of inflicting incredible harm on an individual—particularly when such harm might benefit others. However, we sense that there is something in an individual which ought not to be harmed. Most of us could not, “without infinite scruple,” put out the eyes of a stranger on the street (SE 9). We have the sense that we would be violating something inviolable. It is from this sense that we develop a theory of human rights—an individual, by dint of being human, is entitled to be treated in certain ways and not in others. Weil thinks this is a mistake—one I will return to once I have outlined what she thinks the explanation for this sense of the sacred in the other person is.

It cannot be his personhood, for “[i]f it were the human personality in him that was sacred to me, I could easily put out his eyes. As a blind man he would be exactly as much a human personality as before” (SE 9). What then is it about the individual which is sacred? “So far from its being his person, what is sacred in a human being is the *impersonal* in him. Everything which is impersonal in man is sacred, and nothing else” (SE 13, emphasis mine).

What does this mean? Given that “[t]he good is the only source of the sacred,” (SE 10) “the impersonal in man” is the trace of the Good—i.e., God—in him. Yet this is a problem—God is not in the world, people are. If the impersonal in someone

⁹ *Personne*, here understandably rendered as “person,” in this context means something more like “personhood.”

¹⁰ While Weil certainly intends religious overtones in her use of the word “sacred,” nothing much is lost if this is substituted with “treasured,” “precious,” “important,” or “inviolable.” If “sacred” is to be preferred, it is only because it encompasses all these other terms.

is God, then we appear to have a contradiction—we have said that that which is outside the world is in something inside the world.

Here, there are two responses which are called for. The first would be a reminder not to give too much credence to the spatial metaphor involved in the word “in”. While it is true with (e.g.) matryoshka dolls that if A is in B, and B in C, then A is in C, we may think that this is not the sense in which a human being is “in” the world; it almost certainly is not the sense in which the impersonal is “in” a human being. The spatial metaphor may be inapt. The second response to the objection of contradiction is more complex.

Someone has the impersonal “within themselves” in this sense: it is by the individual that the impersonal can be manifest. On the one hand, what is good, or true, or beautiful¹¹ has, it would seem, a sort of universality—something cannot be “true for me”—it is or it is not true. If a child makes a mathematical error, that error is a result of their personality. If the mathematical operation is performed correctly—perfectly—it bears no sign of the child at all—it is impersonal. Indeed, “[p]erfection is impersonal” (SE 14).

If the personal is at a remove from the impersonal, the collectivity is doubly so. A collectivity cannot appreciate beauty, cannot determine truth—only the individuals *within* that collectivity may do so. We speak of a collectivity doing so only as shorthand for the individuals within that collectivity doing so.¹² The collectivity is twice removed from the Good (SE 14). That the individual can manifest the impersonal has already been seen in §3.3.1 in the discussion of the love of order of the world—when the individual withdraws themselves from primacy, there God is manifest. I will return to this in Chapter 6.

Why is this important? Because injustice is offence against the impersonal in a person—and thus against God. Injustice is not a harm against a person *qua* person, but against *perfection*—against the Good. We have an expectation that we will be subject to

¹¹ Truth and beauty are for Weil, as for Platonists in general, functions of the Good.

¹² Indeed, Weil thinks that individuals subsumed within a collectivity find themselves less able to appreciate truth, beauty, and goodness, for they inevitably find themselves oppressed as members of a collectivity.

good and not harm, and so when we are wronged we cry out (aloud or in silence, in words or inarticulately) “Why am I being hurt?” (SE 11); this is the universal sign of injustice. The Good is being marred, and we know implicitly that that is *wrong*, whether we can provide reasons for it or not.

We might then want to say that we have a *right* not to be hurt, which this cry recognizes, but Weil argues that this is wrong-headed. To claim a right to something is to *assert* oneself. “I have a right to X, because of who or what I *am*.” Most commonly we may think that we have rights because we are human—or because we are *people*. But we have already seen that personhood cannot be that which is offended against in what we might consider paradigmatic cases of wrongdoing (the putting out of a stranger’s eyes). The notion of rights, on Weil’s account is misguided because it leads precisely *away* from the Good. The Good is impersonal. It is manifest when we withdraw our selves. Rights, on the other hand, *assert* our selves. The notion of “rights” will not lead an individual (much less a society) to justice, but away from true justice. This notion is a falsehood—perhaps a falsehood to be preferred to others (e.g., racial superiority, or capitalist ideology)—but a falsehood nonetheless.

Justice demands that we value those around us, as they are, in their entirety, but not in their *particularity*. It is thus that we may love God. In recognizing that others are beyond our power—in refusing to subject them to our power even where we may be more powerful than they—we imitate the renunciation of God who enables creatures to exist independent of Himself by refusing to assert Himself. In this way the impersonal loves itself in the other through us (GG 9).

3.4 THE PROBLEM OF MYSTICISM

“There is a reality outside the world, that is to say, outside space and time, outside of man’s mental universe, outside any sphere whatsoever that is accessible to human faculties” (SE 219). This reality is the Good; it is the impersonal; it is God. The human longing for and expectation of goodness is a function of this reality. However, this reality is by necessity *utterly* other than the world. In part, this is because Weil holds to a sharp fact/value distinction: “Just as the reality of this world is the sole foundation of facts, so

that other reality is the sole foundation of good” (SE 219). But this difference is not posited by Weil as a mere description of how things *happen* to be—it is necessarily the case, else we are driven to Spinozist monism. If we want to be able to say of the world that there is more than one kind of thing, then we must say that the good is utterly beyond the world. For there to exist non-God creatures (e.g., you and I), God must delimit Himself. For anything that is not God to exist, God (i.e., the Good), who is the ground of value, must not be present in the world *whatsoever*.

We face a further alienation from God by dint of language.

At the very best, a mind enclosed in language is in prison. It is limited to the number of relations which words can make simultaneously present to it; and remains in ignorance of thoughts which involve the combination of a greater number. These thoughts are outside language, they are unformulable, although they are perfectly rigorous and clear and although every one of the relations they involve is capable of precise expression in words. So the mind moves in a closed space of partial truth, which may be larger or smaller, without ever being able so much as to glance at what is outside. (SE 26)

Language is concerned with facts; it is finite and particular. What is infinite cannot be contained in language, and thus a mind which is steeped in language is capable only of grasping particulars.¹³ Language imprisons us, erecting a wall between us and what is infinite (i.e., God). We cannot break through this wall. We may think that a growing facility with language may bring us closer—to be able to hold more and more complex relations in language must surely bring us closer to the infinite? But the distance between “small” and “infinite” is not greater than the distance between “less small” and “infinite”—in both cases the distance is infinite. Weil likens the difference to being locked in a bigger or smaller prison cell; either way, you ought to desire to be outside the cell altogether (SE 27). In a way, the archetypical village idiot has an advantage: he runs no risk of thinking himself free, while geniuses may not see that they are imprisoned.

However, Weil clearly doesn’t think this is tantamount to claiming that we must live as though God does not exist. “Although [the reality beyond the world] is beyond the reach of any human faculties, man has the power of turning his attention and love towards it” (SE 219). So while we cannot perceive, or even conceptualize, God, we can

¹³ I am not aware of any place where Weil considers the possibility of a human mind that has never learned language. It is unclear what she would make of such a possibility.

love Him. I have suggested (in §3.3) that this love is only ever *implicit*, for we cannot directly love that which is not in the world.

Twice in his Gospel (7:23; 25:12), Matthew recounts Jesus telling a parable which concludes with him chastising some group with “I never knew you.” What is striking is that he does not say the inverse: “You never knew me.” Weil gives us a good reason why this might be: *no one* knows Him, by necessity. Yet we are commanded to love Him, by both scripture and justice. This seems to be a problem. It is imperative that we love God, but we cannot know God. How then are we to love what we cannot know? This is the problem of mysticism as it arises in Weil’s work.

3.5 CONCLUSION TO CHAPTER

In this chapter, I have outlined Weil’s mystical position. I have considered her understanding of creation as the withdrawal of God in order to allow what is not God to exist, thus avoiding a Spinozist monism. This yields a sort of Platonism in which the Good is centrally what does *not* “exist,” because what exists is utterly other than God. The ground of truth, beauty, and goodness is beyond the world of facts, and (in contrast to Plato’s view) is not only imperceptible, but also inaccessible even to the intellect. What exists then, cannot rightly be said to be good. The appropriate response to this is to have an attitude towards what exists which does not treat it as the Good, and to love the Good (i.e., God). But this yields the problem of mysticism: God is utterly unknowable, being beyond any human faculty. How then are we to love what we cannot know?

Wittgenstein and Weil are both mystical thinkers. Both at pains to hold that there is something—the mystical—which is utterly transcendent, and not within the realm of facts. Both want to insist that the mystical not only *is*, but is of the utmost importance. And yet, as a function of its transcendence, we cannot grasp the mystical; we cannot capture it in thought or language. This is the problem of mysticism: we want to, indeed for anything to be of value, we *must* grasp the mystical, yet it seems we cannot do this.

Having seen how the problem of mysticism arises, with slight variation, in the work of both Weil and Wittgenstein, we will go on to consider some possible ways in which it might be resolved.

CHAPTER 4 RELIGION AND THE MYSTICAL

A society like the Church, which claims to be divine is perhaps more dangerous on account of the *ersatz* good which it contains than on account of the evil which sullies it. (GG 145)

4.1 INTRODUCTION TO CHAPTER

Both Wittgenstein and Weil leave us with a conundrum: what is of genuine importance is the mystical. Beauty, truth, and goodness are a function of the mystical; a life without such things would be literally *without value*. However, we cannot simply choose to incorporate the mystical into our lives; what is mystical is definitionally *outside the world*, and we are *within* the world. We cannot grasp what is outside the world—we cannot think it, we cannot say it. Moreover, this inability of ours to transcend the world is not merely contingent (if it were, we might have reason to think that we simply haven't yet figured out how), but it is a definitional necessity. What we mean by “the mystical” *just is* that which we can neither say nor think. Were we able to do so, we might think that what we had discovered simply *isn't* the mystical; the discovery would only be that the world of facts is a bit bigger than we had previously thought.

How then ought we to live? If all that is goodness, truth, and beauty ranks with the mystical, how can we respond? Both Weil and Wittgenstein recognize the human drive towards the mystical; they recognize that we all possess a doomed desire to comprehend what must by necessity remain incomprehensible, and furthermore hold that desire in high esteem.

One way—the pre-eminent way—in which that desire is enacted is religion. Certainly religions spring at least in part from this universal longing for the mystical. This gives rise to the question: Can religion resolve the problem of mysticism? Can religion provide the way by which we may come to know the mystical?

Both Weil and Wittgenstein would answer this in the negative. The reason, in both cases is fairly simple: It is not that a given religion is insufficient for the task—that we need to discover the *true* religion—but that a religion is the wrong *sort* of thing for this task.

In order to see why this might be, I will examine in turn what Weil and Wittgenstein think a religion is, and why that is not something which can resolve the problem of mysticism. For Weil, this is because a religion is necessarily something *social*, and therefore something which lacks the universality which is a necessary precondition of the mystical. For Wittgenstein, this is because a religion is a *grammar*, and a grammar is the sort of thing which structures the world, and by definition cannot transcend it.

4.2 WEIL, UNIVERSALITY AND THE SOCIAL BEAST

Weil loved the Catholic Church (WG 8),¹ yet she was also deeply critical of it. In her letters to Fr. Perrin on the subject of her baptism (which she refused), this criticism comes to light. While the main thrust of this criticism is not relevant to the topic at hand, it hinges on the *sort of thing* that the Church *is*; the Church is simply not the sort of thing which has any access to the mystical. Moreover, given Weil's Catholic inclinations, she understands to be religious as to have membership in a religious community; to be a Christian *just is* to be a member of the Church.

What then is the Church? The Church is first and foremost, a collectivity; it is a particular organization of people, with a specific set of teachings. In this way, the Church is the same *sort of thing* as a political party.

In her "Reflections Concerning Technocracy, National-Socialism, The U.S.S.R. And Certain Other Matters," Weil writes a scathing critique of Lenin's "Materialism and Empiriocriticism." She writes that "[Lenin's] method of thought is not that of a free man. And yet in what other way would Lenin have been able to think? As soon as a party finds itself cemented...by unity of doctrine, it becomes impossible for a good militant to think otherwise than in the manner of a slave" (OL 29). Weil is concerned with revolutionary politics; she is concerned (and history would vindicate her in this concern) that Russian socialism would fail to give rise either to freedom or justice. The reason for this lies in the fact that it is grounded in the institution of the party—a particular organization of

¹ Weil's theology is largely Catholic. When considering and writing about Christianity, she always speaks of Catholicism, and is not concerned with other branches of the Christian Church. Nothing of significance in her thought changes, however, if "Catholicism" is replaced throughout her work with "Christianity."

people, with a specific set of teachings. So long as the party maintains a sort of orthodoxy—so long as it demands that we accept a certain set of purported facts, a specific methodology, or specific theories it does not allow for freedom of thought. This much seems almost tautologically true—thought which is restricted to think only certain things, or to refrain from other things, is definitionally not completely free.

What is significant, though, is the way a group can restrict freedom of thought through prescription of doctrine. One is not a member of the party, or the Church, simply as a function what one believes; what one believes is determined (in large part) by the group of which one is a member. One may join a group because one's beliefs are generally in line with those espoused by that group, but that is not where the story ends. It is incredibly difficult (if not impossible) to be part of a social group without that group exercising significant influence over how one thinks. This may be because of sanctions (material or social) which come from straying from the espoused orthodoxy, but it needn't be such a clear function of power; it is simply true of human experience that we tend, to varying degrees, to conform to the views of those with whom we are surrounded.

Indeed, so long as universality of thought is not a valid option, unfreedom of thought follows. And where thought is unfree, access to truth is hindered. The surprising consequence is this: the party, by imposing doctrine, destroys universality of thought, and thus truth. And in this respect, the Church is not unlike the party.

Moreover, the Church, because of its nature as a collectivity, cannot possibly be universal. "...[T]he Church must inevitably be a social structure; otherwise it would not exist. But in so far as it is a social structure, it belongs to the Prince of this World" (WG 12). Leaving aside the specifics of Weil's possibly hyperbolic phrasing ("Prince of this World" is a euphemism for "Satan"), one comes to see what she is saying: the Church is necessarily a group of people, or else it is nothing, but by its nature as a group of people—a collectivity, an "us"—it must be defined by opposition to a "them". For the church to be something which one can be "in" requires others to be "out". It is a dialectical concept. A group of people cannot, by definition, be universal.

If universality is a necessary precondition for access to truth, then *no group*, as a function of what a group *is*, can ever have access to truth. This is the philosophical grounding for the position explained previously in §3.3.2: that the group is doubly

removed from the impersonal. The group, in order to exist *qua* group, cannot rescind its particularity, or else it ceases to be a group. Since the Church—or indeed, any religious community—is first and foremost a *community*, it must necessarily fail to be universal, and thus the impersonal cannot be found there.

Indeed, Weil thinks the religious community presents a great risk. In addition to the Church’s inability to be universal, because it is a social group, the Church may lead one to mistake the Good. While God may be the indirect object of the love of religious ceremonies (as established in §3.3.1), the religious community is instead a potential stumbling block.

There are two goods of the same denomination but radically different from each other: one which is the opposite of evil and one which is the absolute [i.e., the mystical]. The absolute has no opposite... That which we want is the absolute good. That which is within our reach is the good which is correlated to evil... It is the social which throws the colour of the absolute over the relative.
(GG 144-5)

The religious community, because of the particularity that is a grammatical necessity for its *being* a community, has no access to the impersonal (which is the mystical). Groups, however, yield many good and desirable things; the danger lies in that they lead us to consider these finite goods as absolute. It is this that gives rise to what Weil (alluding to *Republic* Book VI 493 a-d) calls “The Great Beast”. In the *Republic*, Plato is offering a double-headed critique of democracy and sophism: the mass of people is like a great beast, and to control the beast one must simply treat what it likes as good and what it dislikes as bad. We make a mistake when we consider knowledge of this sort of “good” and “bad” as genuine wisdom—as knowledge of absolute “good” and “bad”—for it is grounded only in what pleases and displeases the beast. The social beast may deceive us into thinking we have discovered a universal good, when the “good” we have discovered is only particular to the group.

The good offered by social groups may only ever be *this* sort of good, and never absolute good. The Church is just such a social beast. And while it may be able to offer a sort of “good”—this good can never be the absolute good; it cannot be the impersonal, it cannot be the mystical. This is not a *failing* on the Church’s part, it is simply that the

Church is the wrong *sort of thing* for this purpose. This is one reason why religion cannot resolve the problem of mysticism.

4.3 WITTGENSTEIN AND THE PUZZLE OF RELIGION

Wittgenstein does not set out to resolve the problem of mysticism, nor to define what “religion” is. Instead, characteristically, he begins with a puzzle:

Suppose someone were a believer and says: ‘I believe in a Last Judgement,’ and I said: ‘Well, I’m not so sure. Possibly.’ You would say that there is an enormous gulf between us. If he said ‘There is a German aeroplane overhead,’ and I said ‘Possibly I’m not so sure,’ you’d say we were fairly near (LC 53).

Disagreement about religious matters seems wildly different from disagreement about ordinary material facts (e.g., the presence or absence of enemy aeroplanes), yet religious claims (e.g., “there is a Last Judgement”) certainly *seem* to be claims about matters of fact—that is to say they seem to share a surface *grammar* with claims about matters of fact. When we encounter these sorts of situations—where one thing shares a surface grammar with another, while seeming importantly different—it is usually because we are thinking of that thing as serving a different role in our language than the one it does. This is what Wittgenstein would call a “false picture.”

When Wittgenstein read Frazer’s *Golden Bough*, he found that Frazer was attempting to make comprehensible the magical² practices of other peoples—for when one encounters such practices without any familiarity, they are baffling at best. Frazer’s conclusions are essentially that magical practices are various interesting sorts of mistakes, “but it never does become plausible that people do all this out of sheer stupidity” (RF 1)—indeed if so many people were so mistaken about something they focus on so much, this would be even more baffling than the practices themselves. Something else must be going on.

² I will throughout this chapter use the terms “magical” and “religious” interchangeably, because Wittgenstein understands them as continuous.

4.3.1 Religion as Expression

On Wittgenstein's account, to call a religious belief false, or a religious practice grounded in error is to commit a category mistake. The sorts of things which can be mistaken are explanations, but religious practices are not explanations—though they may have the surface grammar of explanations—they are *expressions* (RF 3).

It would be absurd to respond to someone's exclamation of "Ow! That hurt!" with "You are mistaken." This is the case even though "That hurt!" appears to be a statement of fact—it has the grammar of a statement about the world. Despite this misleading surface grammar, "That hurt!" *expresses* one's pain—it does not describe it (i.e. it serves the same role crying would for an infant; PI §244). Expressions do not have truth values.³ While one may be inclined to think that there is a matter of fact about whether or not "that" did, in fact, hurt, this would be to mistake the expression of pain for an assertion of fact. *Contra* Jacobsen (133-4), it is not as though an utterance can be evaluated as true or false regardless of what its illocutionary force is. If I were to promise to be early to a future meeting, the utterance "I will arrive early!" is neither true nor false—it is a promise which is either kept or not kept. To evaluate it as true or false is simply to be mistaken as to the kind of utterance it is.

On Wittgenstein's account, religious practices are expressions in much the same way, and so it is absurd to declare religious practices mistaken. Expressions simply aren't the sorts of things which can be mistaken, or which can be grounded in mistakes—this is because they are not meant to explain facts, but to express. Expressions, rather than being true or false, are appropriate or inappropriate; appropriateness is judged on altogether different criteria from truth.

This raises the question of just what it is that religious practices are meant to express. Wittgenstein considers the example of a priest-king "The King of the Wood at Nemi," whose life (permeated as it is with religious significance at every level) Wittgenstein describes as expressing "the majesty of death" (RF 3). There is something about the life of the people at Nemi which is expressed by the King of the Wood's life in the same way that "That hurt!" expresses pain. Yet this is not satisfactory. In the *Remarks*,

³ An infant's tears can be neither true nor false.

it is not clear what all religious practices are meant to express. Not *all* religious practices express “the majesty of death”. I shall return to this point.

4.3.2 Religious Beliefs and the Impossibility of Genuine Disagreement

In LC, Wittgenstein considers someone who not only believes in a Last Judgement, but holds that belief as foundational—basing her life upon it, having it before her in all the decisions she makes,⁴ and compares himself (who does not believe in a Last Judgement) to this person (LC 53-6). From this one can note several things. First, the belief in a Last Judgement does not have grounds in the way that other beliefs do, for it instead serves as a ground for other beliefs—in this way it is neither well-established nor poorly-established, for it is not established at all.⁵

Furthermore, if a non-believer were to attempt disagreement with this individual, she would find that what she ends up with is not a disagreement, *per se*. When the non-believer denies that there will be a Last Judgement, she is not asserting the negation of what the believer asserts in declaring that there will be a Last Judgement, for she cannot even understand the concept being used by the believer.

I give an explanation: ‘I don’t believe in...’, but then the religious person never believes what I describe. I can’t say. I can’t contradict that person... You might say: Well, if you can’t contradict him, that means you don’t understand him. If you did understand him, then you might.’ That again is Greek to me. My normal technique of language leaves me. I don’t know whether to say they understand one another or not (LC 55).

⁴ Certainly, no-one is actually like this. The religious believer whose religion serves this sort of role in their life is guided by a set of many beliefs, which may interact in complex ways. However, it is simpler to imagine the case when it is just one belief, and the conclusions are no different if we substitute the complex set of beliefs which more accurately characterizes real religious people.

⁵ It is not even clear what it would mean for such a belief to be established, or what the criteria would be for it being established, for in this individual’s life, beliefs are established with reference to this particular belief.

This again is explained by religious language, much like religious ceremony,⁶ being an *expression*, and not an explanation. In this case, it is clear that the phrase “There shall be a Last Judgement” is an expression of a religious belief (namely, that there shall be a Last Judgement), yet if “There shall be a Last Judgement” is merely an expression of the belief that there shall be a Last Judgement, it remains possible to claim that, while the expression itself may not be wrong (or, indeed, inappropriate), the belief (which after all shares the superficial grammar of beliefs about matters of fact) may be.

4.3.3 Religious Belief, Disagreement, and Rules

In the case of the believer being considered, however, the belief that there is a Last Judgement is serving a peculiar sort of role—it acts as the keystone for how she interprets her life. It offers reasons for actions. Indeed, it seems to be absolutely disanalogous to other beliefs—i.e. beliefs about facts in the world such as German aeroplanes. This believer’s belief in a Last Judgement will serve for her to determine what other sorts of beliefs may be held. It is not so much that the belief in a Last Judgement is one item in the believer’s “mental furniture”; it is instead the room, which is in turn furnished. In fact, the believer’s belief in a Last Judgement is functioning as a *rule*⁷, guiding her other beliefs. It functions something like “Ensure that any other belief you hold, or any action you take is consistent with the coming of a Last Judgement.” It is the nature of rules, then, which explains why the nonbeliever’s assertion that there is not a Last Judgement does not contradict the believer’s assertion that there is a Last Judgement.

In §§352 & 516 of PI, Wittgenstein considers the question of whether or not there are four consecutive sevens somewhere in the decimal expansion of π . We are inclined to think that the proposition “There are four consecutive sevens in the decimal expansion of π ” (much like the proposition “There shall be a Last Judgement”) must be either true or false. Because of the law of the excluded middle, there is no third possibility. But this is to fall victim to a false picture, one on which “There are four consecutive sevens in the

⁶ Religious language and religious ceremony (but not religious belief) together form what I shall call religious *praxis*.

⁷ Nowhere in Wittgenstein is this explicit; everywhere it is entailed.

decimal expansion of π ” is a statement of fact. However, on Wittgenstein’s account it is not—given that no-one has yet expanded π to the point where there are four consecutive sevens. Instead, it is a *rule*, one which means, in essence, “if you keep expanding π forever, at some point you need to make sure you get four consecutive sevens.”

The negation of this rule would be “If you keep expanding π forever, you don’t need to make sure you ever get four consecutive sevens.” It is worth noting, then, that it is *not* “If you keep expanding π forever, you need to make sure you *never* get four consecutive sevens.” The negation of a rule, then, is permission, *not* a rule of the negation.

If the believer’s belief in a Last Judgement is a rule, then, of course the nonbeliever doesn’t contradict her. When the nonbeliever attempts to deny the Last Judgement, he simply fails to assert the opposite of what the believer asserts. “Suppose someone believed in the Last Judgement, and I don’t, does this mean that I believe the opposite to him, just that there won’t be such a thing? I would say: ‘not at all, or not always’” (LC 53). This is not because of something special about the nature of religious beliefs, but instead because of the role they play—they are not beliefs in the ordinary sense, but *rules* that shape the life of the believer. The negation of a religious belief (i.e. a grammatical rule) isn’t a rule of the negation, it’s a permission. It is this last point which is important, whether or not one agrees with Wittgenstein about math: the negation of a rule isn’t a rule of the negation, it’s a permission.

This only applies to religious beliefs which serve this function in the believer’s life. “The ceremonial (hot or cold) as opposed to the haphazard (lukewarm) is a characteristic of piety” (RF 5).⁸ Wittgenstein is careful to note that only religious beliefs which serve this kind of role are properly *religious* in the sense that he intends. Beliefs which are vestigial to the individual’s life are not rules, and thus function much as any other belief.

We come to an island and we find beliefs there, and certain beliefs we are inclined to call religious.... They have sentences, and there are also religious statements. These statements would not just differ in respect to what they are about. Entirely different connections would make them into religious beliefs, and there can easily be imagined transitions where we wouldn’t know for our life whether to call them religious beliefs or scientific beliefs (LC 58).

⁸ Cf. Revelation 3:16

We see that religious beliefs are not some *sui generis* kind of belief, but instead beliefs which serve a particular *role* for the believer (a role which it may or may not be clear to an external observer that a given belief is serving). We may easily consider beliefs of the sort which one might presume to be religious (e.g. the creation *ex nihilo* of the world by God) which are held in the way that “normal” beliefs (e.g. about the presence or absence of a table in the room) are held—such that they are thought to have evidence supporting them, for example, and nothing much in the individual’s conceptual scheme would be lost in rejecting the belief. These beliefs would then be evaluated in much the same way as other beliefs are evaluated. If the belief in divine creation is treated as a scientific belief, then it ought to be held to the standards of scientific beliefs. These sorts of “religious” beliefs, then, will tend to be merely bad science. Moreover, they simply aren’t religious in the sense that Wittgenstein intends—they don’t function in the way religious beliefs function (i.e., they aren’t grammatical rules).

Moreover, it is impossible to speak of religious beliefs without religious *praxis*. The relation between a rule and instances of its being followed is, on a Wittgensteinian account, an *internal* relation—without that relation, it simply wouldn’t *be* that particular rule. Following Baker and Hacker (98-136), if one understands what a given rule is, one will necessarily understand what it is to follow that rule. “It is widely held to be a conceptual truth that to understand a proposition is to know what would be the case if it were true. The parallel for rules is at least as plausible, namely that to understand a rule is to know what would count as acting in accord with it” (Baker and Hacker 101). Since religious beliefs are rules for the life of the believer, those beliefs (*qua* religious beliefs) cannot be separated from *praxis*. A “religious” belief which does not affect the life of the believer is not (properly speaking) a religious belief. Such a belief can only be a belief about matters of fact.⁹ Religious *praxis*, then, expresses religious beliefs, which in turn are rules which guide the acting and believing of the believer.

⁹ This has the implication that one who has ceased religious *praxis* would be mistaken to think they believe the same as those who continue in that *praxis*. Moreover, it would mean those who have lapsed in their religious belief do not believe the *opposite* of what they once did; they merely *do not* believe what they once did.

A typical expressivist position in the philosophy of religion—namely that religious utterances express the moods or feelings of the believer—fails to be faithful to the phenomena (i.e., the believer sure doesn't think that what they are doing is expressing a feeling when they say something like "God created the Heavens and the Earth"). However, if religious utterances express *religious beliefs*, this problem does not arise.

Religious beliefs are rules which guide the believing and acting of the believer. These rules are expressed by religious *praxis*. The role that religious beliefs play is that of determining what is or is not an appropriate belief to hold or *praxis* to perform. Furthermore, religious beliefs determine the sense of and relations between other beliefs and *praxes*.

Religions aren't the sort of things that *have* a grammar—they are the sorts of things that *are* grammars.

It may be asked to what extent this conception is indeed Wittgenstein's, or whether I am attributing to him a view that he himself did not hold. PI §373 suggests that he did indeed hold this view, though he had not yet determined how to phrase it: "Grammar tells what kind of object anything is. (Theology as grammar.)" One's religious beliefs serve the grammatical role of shaping one's world.

4.3.4 Grammar, Belief, Rules, and *Praxes*

To understand a religion, then, is to understand the way in which it connects things; this is how one understands a *grammar*. Of course, to treat of "religion" or "religious beliefs" in the abstract is to invite the creation of just such a false picture as Wittgenstein is perpetually eager to free us from. Instead we must consider specific religious beliefs, and see whether they can be parsed as grammatical rules.¹⁰

In RF (4), Wittgenstein considers the *praxes* of baptism and a particular form of adoption, in which the adoptive mother pulls the adopted child through her clothes in a simulation of birth. In this latter case, it is absurd to think that the woman believes that

¹⁰ We would do better to consider *religions*—i.e., complex sets of interwoven religious beliefs—rather than individual religious beliefs which never actually exist in isolation, however the space, time, and expertise required to do so all escape me.

she has borne the child in the same way she would have borne a biological child. Surely the two experiences are more than a little different. Instead, this adoption practice—which symbolizes natural birth—establishes a new grammatical rule: “From now on, we shall speak and act as though I had given birth to this child.” Not only does this explanation work, it is much more plausible than the interpretation which holds this magical practice to be merely bad science. It would be one thing to suggest the onlookers are deceived, it would be altogether another to suggest the woman herself does not know the difference.

The case of baptism as washing (about which Wittgenstein says “There is a mistake only if magic is presented as science,” RF 4) is similar. Surely the Christian does not believe that their sin comes off in the water in the same way that dirt does.¹¹ They do not fear that if the same water touches them again they will get sin back on them (if they did, they would surely be mistaken). Instead the practice of baptism establishes a new grammatical rule: “From now on, we shall speak as though you are without sin, and you shall act as a person who is cleansed from sin.” Hence the baptized believer is expected to act in a different, non-sinful way in the future.

So it seems clear that magical *praxes* can establish new grammatical rules. And this fits with the notion that they express pre-existing religious beliefs (i.e., rules)—there may be a rule that (e.g.) “Once the adoption ceremony is performed, then we shall speak and act as though the woman had given birth to the child.” But this leaves the question of how religious beliefs themselves may function as grammatical rules. For this, consider the doctrines of the Trinity and of transubstantiation, which seem to be paradigmatic cases of religious beliefs.

The doctrine of the Trinity is the belief that there is one God in three persons. More specifically, it is the belief that the Father = God, the Son = God, and the Holy Spirit = God, but the Father \neq the Son, the Father \neq the Holy Spirit, and the Son \neq the Holy Spirit. In essence, it posits a non-transitive identity between each of the three persons of the Trinity, and God.

¹¹ *Cf.* 1 Peter 3:21

While “a non-transitive identity” certainly seems to be a paradigmatically metaphysical claim, this is perhaps most easily understood as a conjunction of the grammatical rule “If and only if you would say something of one of the persons of the Trinity, you may and must say it of God, and *vice versa*,” and the denial of the grammatical rule “Anything you may say of one of the persons of the Trinity you may say of any of the others.”

Thus, the doctrine of the Trinity requires the believer to say that “God lives in me,” for they would say “The Holy Spirit lives in me”; it does not require the believer to say “The Father lives in me,” even though they would say that of the Holy Spirit. It does not require the believer to say “The Holy Spirit is begotten of the Father,” even though they would say “The Son is begotten of the Father.” It also forbids saying that “God hates sinners,” because Jesus loved them. It means the believer can’t say that God hates the enemies of the faithful, because Jesus forgave them. The believer cannot say that God is distant because the Holy Spirit is near, or that God forsakes those who forsake Him, because Jesus sought out those who forsook God. They cannot say that the Holy Spirit is unable to do something, because God is omnipotent.

The doctrine of the Trinity is eminently more comprehensible as a set of rules about what must and mustn’t be *said*, *believed*, or *done* than as a bizarre pseudoscientific claim about identity. The doctrine of transubstantiation is similar. This is the belief that the elements (bread and wine) in a Catholic Eucharist *become* the body and blood of Christ.

The doctrine of transubstantiation can be understood as the rule that “Once the elements have been blessed, they are to be treated, spoken of, and thought of in every way as the very body and and blood of Christ, with all that that would entail.” This is not to deny that anything actually happens in the Eucharist—indeed, what more could *becoming* the body and blood of Christ mean? In this way, consuming the elements is understood to unite the Church, to be a means by which the individual partakes in the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, and to bestow grace upon the individual. To call this a grammatical rule is not to deny that something “real” is happening, any more than to call something a

picture is to call it false.¹² But the rule is *grammatical*. It is a rule which governs the interrelation of facts, actions, and beliefs.

These paradigmatic cases of religious beliefs—ones which seem most clearly to be making substantive, metaphysical claims—are seen to be rules which govern the beliefs and *praxes* of the believer. They shape the believer's world.

It is a mistake, then, to assert that religion has its own grammar; religions *are* grammars.

4.3.5 Grammar and Real Belief

There is a temptation to insist that a belief which is grammatical is *merely* grammatical—that is that it cannot be a *belief* at all. Surely, one may insist, this is unacceptable: when Christians declare that they believe in the resurrection of Jesus, surely this is a belief like any other—they believe there *really was* a body in a tomb, and that that body *really did* start to live again on the third day. Surely, one may insist, this is not compatible with the idea that a belief in the resurrection is merely a grammatical rule.

This is true; a religious belief is not *merely* a grammatical rule. It is a belief, which is in turn a rule. Wittgenstein considers such beliefs in *On Certainty*, where he refers to them as “world-pictures” and “hinge propositions.”

It is clear that our empirical propositions do not all have the same status, since one can lay down such a proposition and turn it from an empirical proposition into a norm of description.

Think of chemical investigations. Lavoisier makes experiments with substances in his laboratory and now he concludes that this and that takes place when there is burning. He does not say that it might happen otherwise another time. He has got hold of a definite world-picture - not of course one that he invented: he learned it as a child. I say world-picture and not hypothesis, because it is the matter-of-course foundation for his research and as such also goes unmentioned. (OC §167)

Wittgenstein is here explaining that our beliefs¹³ do not all serve the same sort of role. Lavoisier has certain beliefs about how chemistry works, and insofar as he is a chemist,

¹² Cf. LC 71

¹³ He is speaking of propositions, but what he says applies as well (*mutatis mutandis*) to beliefs.

these beliefs are not subject to questioning. Moreover, they are not *grounded* in any other sort of belief. It is the beliefs about how chemistry works that enable Lavoisier to carry out chemical experiments.

That is to say, the *questions* that we raise and our *doubts* depend on the fact that some propositions are exempt from doubt, are as it were like hinges on which those turn.

That is to say, it belongs to the logic of our scientific investigations that certain things are *in deed* not doubted.

But it isn't that the situation is like this: We just *can't* investigate everything, and for that reason we are forced to rest content with assumption. If I want the door to turn, the hinges must stay put. (OC §341-3, emphasis in original)

Why can we not doubt these “hinge propositions”? It is not because of some special logical status these propositions hold; it is a pragmatic matter. It is simply not possible to doubt *everything*. Some beliefs will be foundational; they determine how all other beliefs interrelate—in a very real way, they provide the context in which other beliefs are the beliefs that they are.

This is the role that religious beliefs serve. They are the fundamental beliefs which are not open to question in the way beliefs about matters of fact normally are precisely because they serve as the grounds of the believer's world. They are, in this sense, grammatical rules for the believer's life, just as Lavoisier's beliefs about chemistry are the grammatical rules for his doing chemistry. This does not entail that they are not also very much beliefs about what is the case, but they are beliefs about what is the case which *work* in a way which is utterly unlike the majority of our beliefs about what is the case.

4.3.6 Grammar and The Mystical

In this section, I've outlined what I take to be Wittgenstein's position with regard to religion: a religion is a grammar; religious beliefs are grammatical rules, which are expressed by (and bear an internal relation to) religious *praxis*. “What,” one would be justified in asking, “does this have to do with the mystical?”

Just as Weil's conception of what it is to be religious has it that this is the wrong *sort* of thing to resolve the problem of mysticism, so too Wittgenstein's conception of what religion *is* leaves us without a solution to the problem of mysticism.

“Grammar tells us what kind of object anything is. (Theology as grammar.)” (PI §373). A grammar structures the interrelations of facts and objects in the world of a given language-game. A religion, then, structures the interrelations of facts and objects in the believer’s world; it constitutes the structure of their world. To expect a religion to grant access to the mystical is exactly to ask it to transcend itself; this is an absurdity.

A religion cannot resolve the problem of mysticism, on Wittgenstein’s account, specifically because a religion describes the very world which would need to be transcended in order to resolve the problem of mysticism. Nothing more, nothing less.

4.4 CONCLUSION TO CHAPTER

In this chapter, I have considered what seems like an obvious route to a solution to the problem of mysticism: religion. However, this proves fruitless. Religion does not seem to be up to the task. The problem is not simply that we have not discovered the “true” religion, or that existing religions are somehow not “good enough”; instead I have argued that to expect a religion to resolve the problem of mysticism is like expecting a novel to explain how to file your taxes—it is simply a matter of looking in the wrong place.

Weil considers the defining characteristic of a religion to be membership in a religious community—she is particularly concerned with the Catholic Church. A religious community is, by necessity, a community. Just as a community needs members who are “in” in order to exist, it needs non-members who are “out.” A community which includes everyone is the same as a community which includes no-one—it cannot exist. This means that a community—a religious community as much as any other—is necessarily marked by particularity. This particularity alienates the community from the impersonal. A community cannot be universal, and thus has no access to the Truth which is the mystical. To look to a particular community for the mystical is to look in entirely the wrong place, simply because it is not to be found by a community at all.

Wittgenstein, on the other hand, is primarily concerned with the way the believer and non-believer seem often to employ entirely different concepts when employing the same terms. This leads him to a view by which a religion is not merely a set of beliefs like any other, but a *grammar* which serves to structure the very world of the believer. A

grammar, however, simply isn't the sort of thing which could resolve the problem of mysticism. A grammar determines the world by structuring the interrelation of facts and objects therein. A grammar *delimits* the world, but it is nonsense to think of a grammar *transcending* the world. Indeed, this fact is part of what gives rise to the problem of mysticism in the first place.

Weil's and Wittgenstein's positions are not incompatible. It is simply the case that neither religion *qua* participation in a religious community, nor religion *qua* grammar can resolve the problem of mysticism.

Having ruled out one intuitively appealing solution to the problem of mysticism, I turn to glimpses and hints of the mystical we encounter; I turn to the ways the mystical reveals itself.

CHAPTER 5 REVELATION

The heavens declare the glory of God,
and the sky above proclaims his handiwork.
Day to day pours out speech,
and night to night reveals knowledge.
There is no speech, nor are there words,
whose voice is not heard.
Their voice goes out through all the earth,
and their words to the end of the world. (Psalm 19:1-4)

5.1 INTRODUCTION TO CHAPTER

There are many things in life of which we become aware without having to reason our way to awareness of them. We see something in front of us and—regardless of the neurological process involved—we don’t have to *think* about seeing, we simply see it. Barring extreme circumstances, I don’t have to *think* in order to know that this is *my* body. Unless I am under extreme psychological duress, I *just am* feeling the emotions I am feeling.

Much of our experience is like this—it is unmediated by our reason. Because of this, we may be hesitant to call the result “knowledge.” Nothing much hangs on this semantic decision. What is significant in the context of this investigation is that what we encounter in this way is present to us in a way which bypasses the reason. If there were a category of things which were inaccessible to our reason (e.g., the mystical), there is no *prima facie* reason why they might not be accessible in this other sort of way.

This other way is what Wittgenstein refers to in TLP as something “showing itself,” a concept remarkably similar to what Weil, in her “Essay on the Concept of Reading”¹ refers to as “reading”—both of which I subsume together under the category of “revelation.” What is striking and significant about instances of revelation in the current investigation is that the initiative or agency—unlike in traditional instances of

¹ Weil’s “Essai sur la notion de lecture” is not currently available in English translation (though one will be available in the forthcoming *Simone Weil: Late Philosophical Writings*). All translations are therefore my own; page numbers refer to the original French publication.

reason-involving-knowledge—is with that which is revealing itself, and not with the knower.

In this chapter, I examine some of the various phenomena which fall under the umbrella of “revelation,” both of the mystical, and the mundane. To this end, I will primarily focus on ECR and TLP.

5.2 ON READING

In ECR, Weil is at pains to articulate a concept (which she terms “reading,” and which I would subsume under “revelation”) which captures how we come to know a great deal of what we learn from the world. She is particularly interested in articulating that this does *not* work the way we are inclined to think it does.

Sensation is immediate. We feel something hot, we see something blue. We do not need to consider, to ponder, in order to come to the conclusion that that thing is hot or blue (at least not under suitable conditions). *Meaning*, however, we might intuitively think involves contemplation, deliberation. Yet Weil suggests that in paradigmatic cases, this is not so.

A few black marks on a white paper—this is quite different from a punch in the gut, but on occasion, the effect is the same. We have all to some extent experienced the effect of bad news that we’ve read in a letter or newspaper; we feel seized, even knocked over, as if by a blow before we’ve even ascertained exactly what the news is, and later even the sight of the letter remains painful. ... It isn’t sensation, but meaning which seize[s us] in reaching [our] spirit immediately, brutally, without [our] participation, in same way sensations seize [us]. This all happens as though the sorrow resided in the letter, and leaped from the letter to the face of the one who reads it. As for the sensations themselves—the colour of the paper or the ink—these don’t even present themselves. What is given in the sight is sorrow. (ECR 13-14)

This much seems true. I have certainly experienced exactly what Weil describes. And while no-one would straight-facedly assert that the sorrow does *in fact* reside in the letter, it can certainly *seem* that way when one stumbles across it in the bottom of a box which had been hidden in the back of a closet. That this letter causes sorrow isn’t something we come to believe on the basis of contemplation; it is something we simply experience. The meaning is almost foisted upon us. This phenomenon, whereby meaning is immediately apparent to us, Weil terms “reading”, because it is in cases of literal reading where it is

most clear. A child, learning to read for the first time (or indeed, an adult learning to read a new language) may have to grapple, one character at a time, to think about which sound is indicated by each character, and form words piecemeal. This takes a great deal of mental effort; it requires a lot of *thought*. However, once we have obtained a reasonable degree of literacy, “we cannot see a text printed in a language we know, appropriately located, [and under fitting lighting conditions,] and read nothing of it; at most we could maybe manage this if we practiced it for a long time” (ECR 14). I simply cannot fail to know what the title on the cover of a book on my desk is. No matter how hard I try, I cannot make it appear to be only shapes. The meaning of the words is not something I *craft*, but something which is immediately *present* to me.

When we read meanings in this way, their immediacy makes them practically indubitable. Cases of disagreement about meaning—about value—are deeply troubling for us when they occur.

If I see a book bound in black, I do not doubt that there is something black over there—unless I am a philosopher. If I see at the top of a newspaper “June 14th”, I no more doubt that it is labelled “June 14th”. If something I hate, dread, despise, or even love approaches me, I do not doubt that I have before me something hateful, dangerous, despicable, or lovable. If someone looks at the same newspaper in the same conditions seriously tells me multiple times that they don’t read “June 14th”, but instead read “June 15th”, this would trouble me; I would not understand. If someone doesn’t hate, dread, despise, or love as I do, this also troubles me. How? They see these things—or if they’re far away, the indirect signs of their existence—and they do not read “hateful,” “dangerous,” “despicable,” and “lovable”? It’s impossible; they’re acting in bad faith, they’re lying, they’re crazy. (ECR 15-16)

Weil draws our attention to a parallel we would most likely miss on our own: that between a disagreement about the date printed on the page in front of us, and a disagreement about whether something is (e.g.) dangerous. The first case is simply incomprehensible! How on Earth can you not see that it says “June 14th”? The case of values is similar. When we read danger from something, we have not constructed for ourselves an argument about why that thing is dangerous—we perceive danger in the thing itself. This explains (e.g.) why Canadians find American gun laws so baffling—we read danger in guns in a way they seem not to. But of course, this makes no sense to us. We don’t *think* guns are dangerous, we simply *see* that they are. The danger is present to us in the firearm.

It seems that we don't *impute* meaning into what we encounter in the world. Instead, it seems that meaning presents itself to us, brute and unmediated. Crucially, it seems that it does so without involving our reason.

5.3 ON LOGICAL STRUCTURE

I have already (in Chapter 2) discussed the Tractarian distinction between saying and showing: facts can be said, but the mystical cannot be encompassed in words; it can only be shown, and “What *can* be shown *cannot* be said” (TLP §4.1212, emphasis in original). What is important to note is that what can be shown is not something that (e.g.) *I* can show you. It must show *itself*. At best, I may direct your attention, and help you to notice that which is showing itself.

5.3.1 Frege's Insight

In TLP, Wittgenstein acknowledges few philosophical influences. One which he does acknowledge is Frege, who clearly articulates in “On Concept and Object” what would go on to be the basis of Wittgenstein's mysticism: the structure simply cannot be encapsulated in language; when we try, we simply fail. However, in trying to do so, we may be able to induce someone to notice the way the logical structure shows itself.

In the concluding paragraphs of “On Concept and Object”, Frege acknowledges that there is a quite peculiar obstacle in the way of an understanding with my reader. By a kind of necessity of language, my expressions, taken literally, sometimes miss my thought; I mention an object, when what I intend is a concept. I fully realize that in such cases I was relying upon a reader who would be ready to meet me halfway—who does not begrudge a pinch of salt. (179)

The problem to which Frege refers is this: In his logic, the *Begriffsschrift*, a term in a logical function can be one of two things; it can be a concept, or an object. This is entirely determined by its position in a logical function. Objects are what a logical function is *about*; concepts are predicated of objects. This has the implication that one can never, strictly speaking, make claims *about* concepts; definitionally, whatever a claim is about is an object. That is its logical role. The trouble is, throughout “On Concept and Object”, Frege is at pains to describe this very distinction, which necessitates saying a great deal

about concepts. In the passage quoted above, he acknowledges this difficulty. His response is to dismiss the difficulty—it amounts to saying “Sure, it’s impossible to actually say what I mean, but you know what I mean.”

What seems to have been intended as mere hand-waving, however, reveals something incredibly important. It seems incredibly significant that something which, strictly speaking, *cannot be said* can nonetheless be understood by the reader. Regardless of whether or not we accept the *Begriffsschrift*, Frege has stumbled upon an incredibly important insight: the structure of logic is such that it cannot be articulated linguistically. Language is logic-bound, and delimits what is sayable. To attempt to capture the structure of logic in language is to attempt to speak “on both sides” as it were of that delimitation, and is bound to fail. Yet the structure of logic can still be known—it can still be apprehended. In our failure to articulate what cannot be said, we can still draw our hearer’s attention to a structure which reveals itself.

It seems that this is the insight which informs TLP’s saying/showing distinction.

5.3.2 Tractarian Revelation

In §2.2, I advocated a “deep nonsense” read of TLP, whereby much of it is nonsense, but it is *important* nonsense which, while it does not strictly speaking *say* anything, it does *show* a great deal. Upon reading the sections of TLP which are concerned with the mystical, one feels as though one has come to understand something,² even though one cannot (strictly speaking) *say what*. It is because what is shown is nonsense that Wittgenstein (in)famously urges: “My propositions are elucidatory in this way: he who understands me finally recognizes them as [nonsense], when he has climbed out through them, on them, over them. (He must so to speak throw away the ladder, after he has climbed up on it.) He must surmount these propositions; then he sees the world rightly” (TLP §.54). Crucially, though, the ladder must be climbed before it is to be discarded.

In TLP §4.022, Wittgenstein tells us that “The proposition *shows* its sense. The proposition *shows* how things stand, *if* it is true. And it says, that they do so

² Assuming one doesn’t simply feel confused, which is perhaps the more common experience.

stand” (emphasis in original). In essence, he is here suggesting that a proposition can say “this is how things are,” but it cannot *say* what “this” is, any more that a picture *says* what it represents. It simply depicts a state of affairs as obtaining.

Even if we want to reject the analogy drawn between pictures and propositions, the significance for the notion of showing remains: logical structures cannot be articulated *in toto* without encountering contradiction. Like Frege, Wittgenstein finds he cannot properly speaking *say* all he wishes to say about the limits of the world and what lies beyond without uttering nonsense, yet he can trust his reader to “get it.” This is because the logical structures show forth. In the same way, a tautology *says* nothing (it is not a picture of possible facts), but it still may *seem* to be informative; it shows us something of import.

What is important to notice is that those things throughout TLP (such as “what solipsism means”, “The limits of my world”, “The mystical”, and so on) which can only be shown, in fact show *themselves*. It is not that we reach out with our minds and grasp these things. Instead, much like the meanings Weil is concerned with in ECR, these unspeakable, unthinkable things force themselves upon us. We are seized, as if from without.

5.4 THE SIGNIFICANCE OF REVELATION

In the preceding sections, I have sketched a concept which arises in both Weil and Wittgenstein: revelation. What I have not yet established is why this concept is important—what philosophical “work” it is doing.

The first is this: While in Chapters 2 and 3 I presented Wittgenstein’s and Weil’s arguments for the transcendence of the mystical, the lived phenomenon of revelation gives yet another reason for this. It seems that with regard to the various things I have subsumed under the category of “the mystical” there are three possibilities: either they are facts in the world like any other, or they are imposed by us upon the world, or they are transcendent.

The first possibility is rejected by both Wittgenstein and Weil—indeed, by most philosophers since (at least) Plato. If I were to take an inventory of all the things I might

encounter in the world, my inventory would surely include atoms and planets, people and plants, desks and couches; surely it would not include goodness, justice, beauty, truth, or even the law of the excluded middle.

This has led many to accept the second possibility: those things that I have called “mystical” are imposed by thinking agents upon the world. What Weil is at pains to make clear in ECR (and which is also at work in TLP) is that this simply isn’t true to the lived phenomena. I do not look at a gun pointed at me and make the judgement “This is scary”; I see a gun pointed at me, and I am afraid of it. It is fearsome. It is *clearly* imposed on me from without. So too with the mystical in TLP; it shows *itself*. We do not impose logical order upon the world; the logical order of the world is revealed *to* us. So then we must conclude that such matters are transcendent.

Of course, it is the very transcendence of the mystical which gave rise to the problem of mysticism in the first place. And just as the phenomenon of revelation gives us reason to think that the mystical is transcendent, so too it provides the seeds of a solution to the problem of mysticism.

The problem of mysticism, you will recall, is this: since the mystical is outside of the world, it is not within the scope of reason or language. We cannot capture the mystical in language, nor in thought. However, “the mystical” encompasses everything of genuine value: value, truth, beauty, justice, and the nature of logic and reason. What then are we to do?

What the phenomenon of revelation offers is an experiential ground for thinking that, while the mystical may be literally *unthinkable*, it may not be completely *inaccessible*. We are finite, and contained within the world. We are subject to necessity and to reason. The mystical, definitionally, is not. To be able to think outside the limit of thought—to be able to comprehend the mystical—would require that we think what cannot be thought (TLP 27). The very nature of thought—of logic—is such that we cannot think the mystical.

The nature of this problem, however, contains the seed of a solution: The problem arises because the mystical is definitionally outside the scope of logic. There is no reason, then, to think that limitations which arise on account of the structure of logic

limit what the mystical itself can do.³ I have shown that we—who are within the world—cannot reach outside of it. This does not mean that that which is outside the world cannot reach *in*. There is no reason to think that the mystical is bound by the same rules we are; indeed, there is every reason to think it is *not*.

That a door cannot be opened from one side tells us nothing about whether it can be opened from the other.

5.5 CONCLUSION TO CHAPTER

In searching for a solution to the problem of mysticism, I have considered two parallel phenomena investigated by Weil and Wittgenstein respectively: the first, what Weil calls reading; the second, what Wittgenstein refers to as something showing itself. These two, I have suggested, are different versions of the same phenomena, whereby something non-factual is *revealed* to the thinking subject—us.

This seems to be the key to a solution to the problem of mysticism. That we cannot in language or thought grasp the mystical is the source of the problem. Yet this does not entail that the mystical cannot present itself to us, so long as the initiative is on the part of the mystical, not us. Indeed, this is the belief at the core of the Christian religion—“...the Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:14).

And yet, if Weil is right, and the mystical is the foundation of justice—if Wittgenstein is right, and the mystical is the foundation of ethics and aesthetics—then this should strike us as an unsatisfactory “solution” to the problem of mysticism. Truth, beauty, goodness, justice—these are things to be pursued. All that revelation offers us is the chance that, if we are very lucky, such things might be revealed to us. This may offer an intellectual solution to the problem of mysticism—how we can come to know what we cannot reach out and grasp of our own accord—but it does not answer the altogether more important question: “What then should we do?” Are we merely to wait in hopeful expectation that the mystical may deign to reveal itself to us?

³ I recognize that ascribing agency to the mystical is not quite right. It may be, however, the closest we can get within the limits imposed by language.

We have both a drive and a duty to attend to the mystical. Wittgenstein's mysticism does not give us the tools with which to do that, for he considers that outside the realm of philosophy. Weil, on the other hand, would consider the whole aim of her philosophy to be to attend to the mystical. In the following chapter, I will consider how one might do so.

What I have said in this chapter is captured by Jan Zwicky in the conclusion to her poem "The Death of Georg Trakl":

*When the answer cannot be put into words,
Neither can the question be put into words.
There are, indeed, things that
Cannot be put into words. They make
Themselves manifest.*

*We will never know
Whether it is a strength or a weakness
To have survived where others could not.*

Only what is simple is hidden:
the leaf in spring
this gesture, the mind
of God.

(Zwicky 1986, 34. Italics in original.)

CHAPTER 6 MYSTICAL *PRAXIS* AND THE PROBLEM OF MYSTICISM

The infinity of space and time separates us from God. How are we to seek for him? How are we to go toward him? Even if we were to walk for hundreds of years, we should do no more than go round and round the world. Even in an airplane we could not do anything else. We are incapable of progressing vertically. We cannot take a step toward the heavens. God crosses the universe and comes to us. (GG 79)

6.1 INTRODUCTION TO CHAPTER

Throughout this work, I've been attempting to engage with the problem of mysticism: all that is of genuine value is mystical, and thus language and reason do not quantify over it, yet we *want* to know it—indeed, justice may well *require* of us that we know it. In the previous chapter, I considered some of the ways that what is mystical may show itself *to* us; that we cannot reach out of the world to it does not entail that it cannot reach into the world to us. Yet “wait and hope the mystical reveals itself to us” does not seem to be a satisfactory “solution” to the problem of mysticism. If the mystical is all that is good, beautiful, true, or just, then we would seem to have good reason to, if at all possible, do more than just wait and hope. If the mystical can be revealed to us, it would seem we ought to *actively* look for it.

To change sensory metaphors, if we have reason to think that something incredibly important might be said at any moment, we do well to listen with rapt attention, even if in the moment we hear nothing.

Before going any further, it is worth drawing attention to one thing. Weil seems to believe (though as far as I am aware, she never makes this claim explicit) that God is *always* revealing Himself to us, and thus we only need to take heed. This seems right to me, but it needn't be the case. Even if the mystical were only noticeable in fits and starts, on occasion, the appropriate response on our part would be the same. If what is mystical is literally all that is of value, it is worth putting everything on hold for even a glimpse thereof.

I suggest that a sort of “active listening” is the appropriate posture to take towards the mystical. Of course, “listening” is only a metaphor—it seems unlikely that one will catch an angelic choir, even if one pays close attention. What then does this active listening consist in? With Weil, I suggest it consists in the mystical *praxis* of decreation.

6.2 DECREATION

Weil suggests that deeply embedded in our experience of life is an unavoidable confusion.

Just as God, being outside the universe, is at the same time the centre, so each man imagines he is situated in the centre of the world. The illusion of perspective places him at the centre of space; an illusion of the same kind falsifies his idea of time and yet another kindred illusion arranges a whole hierarchy of values around him. This illusion is extended even to our sense of existence, on account of the intimate connection between our sense of value and our sense of being; being seems to us less and less concentrated the farther it is removed from us. (WG 99)

We make a mistake—we construct our world around us. Yet this mistake is entirely understandable. It is in a sense, unavoidable, for we *are* at the centre of the world as we experience it. That I am at the centre of space and time as I experience them is a necessity of the sort Weil calls “geometrical,” and Wittgenstein calls “grammatical.” However, while it is necessarily the case that I experience myself at the centre of the world-as-I-experience it—i.e. of *my* world—I would be greatly mistaken if I took that to tell me anything substantive about the world. That I am the centre of my world is tautological.

Clearly, in TLP, Wittgenstein argues something quite similar. “*The limits of my language mean the limits of my world...I am my world...The subject does not belong to the world but it is a limit of the world*” (§§5.6, 5.63, 5.632, emphasis in original). That I experience my world in certain ways is just a function of what it means for me to be a subject. That is, I experience the world in certain ways, but this tells me nothing more than *that I experience the world*.

This way of experiencing the world, which follows naturally from us as experiencing subjects, alienates us from the mystical, for it is fundamentally an orientation towards the facts in the world. Moreover, Weil considers it an *illusion*. In the passage

quoted above, she suggests that the illusion consists in putting ourselves in the place of God—not as a function of hubris, but of unavoidable confusion.

In §3.2, I examined Weil’s understanding of creation: for an infinite God to create that which is not Himself would be an act of withdrawal and self-delimitation; rather than being an exercise of divine power, creation is to be understood as an act of divine self-giving love. God, being infinite, fills all the space of possibility, and thus the creation of anything other than God’s own self requires for God to withdraw, to create a void in which creation may be.

This notion of creation as renunciation forms the bedrock for Weil’s mystical *praxis*. For us to come to know God—to encounter the mystical—we must as it were run creation in reverse; we must engage in the *praxis* of *decreation*. Just as an infinite God creates the world by withdrawal, so we may “make room” for God by having that aspect of creation which is subject to our own will (i.e., our very selves) withdraw. It is thus that Weil defines “decreation,” drawing an explicit contrast with destruction: “Decreation: to make something created pass into the uncreated. Destruction: to make something created pass into nothingness. A blameworthy substitute for decreation” (GG 28). It is as though God, uncreated and infinite, were the background over which the world rests, and when we peel back parts of the world, God shows through.

For of course, as finite creatures we cannot simply run creation in reverse—we lack the capacity to do so. The closest we may come in decreating the universe is what Weil tells us is a blameworthy substitute: destruction. A thing destroyed (e.g., a forest burned or a person murdered) is no more; it has not “passed into the uncreated.” We may not decreate those things in the world around us, nor may we decreate other people. We may only decreate ourselves.

If Wittgenstein is right to suggest that I am the limit of my world, then this makes sense. To the extent that I draw back from my own experience—to the extent that I recognize that it is only an illusion caused by the grammar of perception that places me at the centre of the world—to this extent “my world” ceases to be. It is this that allows me to glimpse the mystical, for it is this what allows my world to cease to be.

Decreation is the practice of de-centring the self, in order that the world of facts we cannot help but construct around ourselves may cease to obscure the revelation of the mystical. Decreation is a *practice*, however, not merely something to which one can offer mental assent. The illusion by which we are at the centre of the world is one we have built up, unavoidably, over the course of our entire lives. While it may take but a moment to offer mental assent to the notion that this is not reflective of a truth of the universe, it will take substantially more to *live* as though we believe this to be the case. There are two main ways one may come to do this. The first is to undergo *malheur*.¹ The second is the mystical praxis of attention.

6.3 MALHEUR

What is *malheur*, and how might it lead one to decreation? *Malheur* is to the soul what extreme physical pain is to the body. Just as great physical pain makes coherent thought impossible—one in agony would do *anything* to make it stop—so too does *malheur*. To describe the experience of *malheur* is difficult (perhaps impossible), yet it is easy enough to recognize.

To acknowledge the reality of *malheur* means saying to oneself: ‘I may lose at any moment, though the play of circumstances over which I have no control, anything whatsoever that I possess, including those things which are so intimately mine that I consider them as being myself. There is nothing that I might not lose. It could happen at any moment that what I am might be abolished and replaced by anything whatsoever of the filthiest and most contemptible sort.’ (SE 27)

This, then, is the sign of affliction: one has come face-to-face with the fact that one does not exist on one’s own.² *Malheur* comes when one is faced with one’s own finitude, when that asserts itself forcefully and cannot be ignored. Chronic pain may well come with attendant *malheur*—as one is faced with constant agony, and even the simplest of tasks

¹ The French word *malheur* is usually translated as “affliction,” yet this does not do justice to the concept. *Malheur* connotes suffering, unhappiness, misfortune, and more—all bundled together. The exact meaning which I (following Weil) give the term will be explained in the following section.

² Cf. §3.2.2

come to require Herculean fortitude, one cannot but stare down the fact that one's body is subject to forces—internal and external—beyond one's will. And even our minds—our very souls—are what they are and do what they do largely because of the play of circumstances entirely beyond our control. Who has not found themselves utterly miserable as result of some unforeseen slight done to them? Who has not wished they may have been raised differently, that they might fear, hope, or desire otherwise than they actually do?

6.3.1 The Cry

Malheur is obviously (in at least one sense) a *bad* thing. It is the acutest sort of suffering. Moreover, it is more often than not the product of injustice. The sign of injustice which Weil seeks to draw our attention to is the cry—articulate or otherwise: “Why am I being hurt?” (SE 11).³

This cry—which we must distinguish from the similar, but petty and morally insignificant cry “Why has someone else got more than me?”—occurs when one is faced with the brute fact that one's expectation of good is not being met. Weil holds Christ's cry from the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46; Mark 15:34) as the archetypical example of this cry of injustice and affliction. Someone who has done *nothing* wrong is killed as a common criminal, and suffers horrifically. In this moment, Christ is not only subject to the horrific physical pain of crucifixion, but also to the social pain of abandonment by his closest friends, and the spiritual suffering of a sense of utter alienation from God.

The cry, which is brought forth from injustice, draws our attention to *malheur*. The cry is brought forth by a recognition that Good is not present, and makes that clear. The cry confronts us with *malheur*, because *malheur* confronts us with evil.

6.3.2 Evil, Non-Being, and the Good

That *malheur* forces us to confront our non-being may seem implausible to one who rejects Weil's anti-Spinozist Platonist metaphysics, but this need not be so. In §6.2, I examined

³ Cf. §3.3.2

the illusion we are all tempted to believe whereby we are the centre of the world. In many respects, this is simply the illusion of our own necessity. *Malheur* forces upon us the recognition that everything about us—including our very selves—is merely contingent. This may be easy to offer a mere mental assent to; it is eminently difficult to hold this fact in mind in our day-to-day life.

Weil insists that “...there is not real *malheur* unless the event that has seized and uprooted a life attacks it, directly or indirectly, in all its parts, social, psychological, and physical. The social factor is essential. There is not really *malheur* unless there is social degradation or the fear of it in some form or another” (WG 68). *Malheur* consists in the realization that in no sphere of life—not the personal, nor the social, not the physical, nor the psychological—is one safe to expect good and not evil. “To be aware of [*malheur*] in the depth of one’s soul is to experience non-being” (SE 27). There can be no denying that this experience of non-being is horrible, yet it is a horror which is redemptive, for it is the path to the mystical; it is, on Weil’s account, the path to the knowledge of God.

“[T]he existence of evil here below, far from disproving the reality of God, is the very thing that reveals him in his truth” (WG 89). In the midst of the existential horror that is *malheur*, one may choose either to conclude that there is no Good, or that the Good is not to be found anywhere in the world. One is faced with the absolute depravity of the world. If one chooses, this experience can pull the attention away from the world. *Malheur*, when experienced in fullness, can turn one’s gaze towards the mystical.

When

we fall to the point where the soul cannot keep back the cry ‘My God, why hast thou forsaken me?’ if we remain at this point without ceasing to love, we end by touching something that is not affliction, not joy, something that is the central essence, necessary and pure, something not of the senses, common to joy and sorrow: the very love of God. (WG 44)

Malheur confronts us with the truth that absolute Good is absent from the world, and leads us to seek it elsewhere. Moreover, *malheur* decreates our notion of our self; it decreates our very world. Someone in the grip of *malheur* cannot continue to believe they are the centre of the world—their construct of the world crumbles around them.

6.3.3 Wittgenstein, *Malheur*, and Decreation

Weil's understanding of *malheur* is echoed in a striking passage from CV, worth quoting here at length:

No cry of torment can be greater than the cry of one man.

Or again, *no* torment can be greater than what a single human being may suffer.

A man is capable of infinite torment therefore, and so too he can stand in need of infinite help.

The Christian religion is only for the man who needs infinite help, solely, that is, for the man who experiences infinite torment.

The whole planet can suffer no greater torment than a *single* soul.

The Christian faith—as I see it—is man's refuge in this *ultimate* torment.

Anyone in such torment who has the gift of opening his heart, rather than contracting it, accepts the means of salvation in his heart.

Someone who in this way penitently opens his heart to God in confession lays it open for other men too. In doing this he loses the dignity that goes with his personal prestige and becomes like a child. That means without official position, dignity or disparity from others. A man can bare himself before others only out of a particular kind of love. A love which acknowledges, as it were, that we are all wicked children.

We could also say: Hate between men comes from cutting ourselves off from each other. Because we don't want anyone else to look inside us, since it's not pretty in there.

Of course, you must continue to feel ashamed of what's inside you, but not ashamed of yourself before your fellow-men.

No greater torment can be experienced than one human being can experience. For if a man feels lost, that is the ultimate torment. (CV 45-6, emphasis in original)

Wittgenstein highlights several important elements of what Weil calls *malheur*. The first is that *malheur* is the way by which an *individual* comes to know the mystical. A group may undergo oppression, and this may induce *malheur* in one or more members of the group, but *malheur* is always a solitary experience. It is not understood by those who have not experienced it, and even among those who know *malheur*, there is at most a fellowship of solitude. One person's experience of *malheur* will be radically unlike another's. The companionship they may offer one another, then, is simply the understanding that they do not, in fact, understand.⁴ The solitary nature of *malheur* is explained by what I discussed in

⁴ The value of such an understanding, however, is not to be understated.

§3.3.2—the individual is separated from the impersonal, but the collectivity is doubly so. The individual can undergo decreation, but the collectivity *qua* collectivity simply cannot.

The second important aspect of *malheur* Wittgenstein highlights is its discontinuity with mere suffering. It is “*ultimate* torment.” It is because of this discontinuity that *malheur* has the effect of bringing one to a place of openness to the mystical—to God.

The third element Wittgenstein makes clear is this: when faced with *malheur* one has a choice, and it is the choice between destruction and decreation. Wittgenstein tells us that someone facing *malheur* may choose to open his heart or to close it. Weil tells us that someone facing *malheur* may continue or cease to love. In the case of the one who ceases to love—who closes her heart—such a one experiences the utter evil of *malheur* and concludes “there is no Good.” One who refuses to do this, is dragged towards a transcendent Good.

Malheur enables us to attend to the mystical—to notice the ways it is revealing itself to us—because it destroys the illusion that we are at the centre of the world. *Malheur* decreates our world. And while this process is never enjoyable, it is emancipatory. Confronting us with the absolute evil of the world, *malheur* enables us to attend to the Good where it really is—outside the world—in a way we simply cannot manage on our own.

Malheur is not a function of the will. We do not simply choose it, and it would be perverse to suggest we must seek it out. Perhaps self-flagellation is a means to attend to the revelation of the mystical, but I shall not endorse it as such. We choose how to *react* to *malheur*—with openness, and a continued yearning for the Good, or else with bitterness.

Yet *malheur* is an unavoidable fact of life—if not our own, that of those around us. We may imagine someone fortunate enough to go through life without experiencing *malheur* herself; the fact that she would encounter the *malheur* of others holds the key by which such a person might attend to the self-revelation of the mystical.

6.4 ATTENTION

The second route to the experience of decreation is through *attention*. Weil arrives at her conception of attention as a result of her understandings of justice and creation.

Attention—to fully and authentically attend to another person—becomes a form of decreation when in the exercise of justice we come to imitate God’s creative withdrawal.

6.4.1 Attention and Justice

Remember that for Weil, there is no distinction to be made between compassion and justice—supererogation does not exist. Anything less than perfect compassion, then, is injustice.⁵ Because of this, injustice is perfectly natural; it is to be expected. In a brief treatment of Thucydides’ Melian dialogue (WG 86), Weil considers the claim advanced by Thucydides’ Athenians that “...always, by a necessity of nature, each one commands wherever he has the power.” The argument is that where there exists an imbalance of power, the stronger simply *must* dominate the weaker. On the Athenian account, then, justice is only a relevant concern in interactions among equals.

While Weil ultimately disagrees with the Athenian position, she is careful to acknowledge that there is something about this which is right: the Athenian position captures something important about how drastic power imbalances work. She explains:

...when there is a strong and a weak [person], there is no need to unite their wills. There is only one will, that of the strong. The weak obeys. Everything happens just as it does when a man is handling matter. There are not two wills to be made to coincide. The man wills and the matter submits. The weak are like things. There is no difference between throwing a stone to get rid of a troublesome dog and saying to a slave: “chase that dog away.” (WG 87)

Weil’s insight is this: in cases of extreme power imbalance, the weak individual is absolutely subject to the stronger’s will, such that they are rendered a mere thing. Their will ceases to be efficacious; it is as though they are not even a person. The slave who chases away the dog is not meaningfully distinct from a thrown stone. The weaker party is oppressed by the stronger to such a point that their very self runs the risk of being obliterated.⁶ Here Weil’s Marxist influence is clear, as she draws on his analysis of oppression. Yet something else seems true: if the Athenians are correct, and it is “a

⁵ This has the consequence that the world is an incredibly unjust place. This does not seem untrue.

⁶ Indeed, it seems that this oppression may indeed, at least some of the time, constitute a form of *malheur*.

necessity of nature” that the strong enforce their will over the weak, then it is not only the weak who are rendered mere things, but also the strong. Where an operation is carried out as a result of a necessity of nature, the will is definitionally not involved, no more than a stone wills to fall towards the earth when it is unsupported.

To render a person a mere thing is to act unjustly. This does not seem to be a claim which is in need of much defending—what more is murder (for example), than to turn a person into the mere thing that is a corpse? While it may be possible to imagine exceptional situations where this is not unjust (e.g., a just a war, if there be such a thing), I take it as given that in the general case, it is unjust to render a person into a thing. If this is the case, injustice is the natural (indeed, according to the Athenian position, inevitable) consequence of imbalances of power. To treat one who is weaker as a person (instead of a thing), to somehow grant them agency—and thus personhood—in place of their objectification is an act of supreme compassion. And yet, against the Athenian position, Weil insists that this certainly is *possible*. It happens, if only rarely. Sometimes the powerful condescend to treat the weak not as objects, but as people. That this occurs is the key to compassion, and therefore to justice. This gives us reason to think, *contra* the Athenian position, that the oppression of the weak by the strong is not a *necessity* of nature, but rather a *tendency*.

The Athenian position is partly correct in that it is natural for the strong to oppress the weak—it is what will tend to happen. Where there is great imbalance of power, it is *normal* for the strong to treat the weak as mere things, even if it is not inevitable. This is clear in cases such as that under discussion in the Melian dialogue (i.e., military conflict), but it is no less true in our myriad of quotidian interactions: the employer demands of his employee that they produce, and they are like nothing more than another machine; the public official governs over a populace, and they are like nothing more than the numbers on a page; an orator gives a speech in order to stir a particular reaction from the audience. It is for this reason that many people are so reluctant to beg—it gives others absolute power over you, such that you become like a mere thing. In all these cases, the interactions develop a material, transactional quality—the one with power does something, and the one without power, as a matter of necessity, responds in a particular way.

Take the case of the beggar: when someone passing by deigns to give to someone who asks, there is no levelling of the power imbalance. If I give to one who asks, in the normal course of affairs, I am only entrenching the existing power dynamic. I choose whether or not to acknowledge the existence of the beggar, and if I give to them, it asserts that I am one with money, while they are one in need. My generosity asserts my superiority. They then are expected to mutter some words of thanks, while I may feel proud of my generosity—or at the very least, I may expect my class-guilt to be assuaged. What seems to be an act of charity seems instead to entrench the oppression in question.

The truly compassionate—and thus just—way to act, Weil would have us believe, is for the one with greater power to behave *exactly* as though they were equals. Of course, this is not a sort of make-believe in which we pretend there is no oppression (were this all that was required, justice would reign around the world). For the one in a position of power to behave *exactly* as though there were equality is to *create* equality. It is, in fact, to emulate Christ

who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.
(Philippians 2:6-8)

This is what is meant by “attention.” To attend to someone is to experience genuine compassion—to “suffer with” them. It is to take into oneself their position such that it becomes one’s own. This supreme act of understanding obviates the difference in power that leads naturally to oppression. The person who truly listens to the other, as if it were her own voice, expressing her own needs, desires, hopes, experiences, et cetera, the person who treats these things of another’s as if they were of equal weight to her own, is the one who is truly just.

6.4.2 Attention, Creation, and Decreation

“He who treats as equals those who are far below him in strength really makes them a gift of the quality of human beings, of which fate had deprived them. As far as it is possible for a creature, he reproduces the original generosity of the Creator with regard to them” (WG 88). Weil’s claim here may seem suspect, yet there is something to it. In cases

of significant power imbalance, it is (as established in §6.4.1) natural for the powerful to treat the weak as mere things. In refusing to do this, in recognizing that the situation could just as easily be reversed, and that there is nothing *essential*, nothing *necessary* that separates the strong from the weak, the powerful lower themselves to the position of the weak, which serves to elevate the weak from the position of mere thing to that of person. This consists in an acknowledgement of dignity. The weaker person was never *in fact* a mere thing (it is not as though they were a corpse), instead the existence of a power imbalance (a social construct) was such that they were *like unto* a mere thing. In an act of genuine attention, when the one with power condescends to understand the one who is weak *on their own terms*, their humanity is recognized and acknowledged, and they are able to embrace the fact of their personhood in a way which, in the midst of oppression, they could not. While the one with power does not *in fact* make the one who is weak into a person, it is very much *as though* they do.

Why does Weil think this “reproduces the original generosity of the creator”? Because the sort of attention which allows one who would otherwise be like a mere thing to be a person (Weil calls this sort of attention “creative attention”) requires a *renunciation* on the part of the one in power. If I am powerful I can exert my power over those who are weak. To allow them to have agency, and not merely respond to my will, requires that I withhold my power. Of course, this is exactly what God must do in order for us to have our own wills—by right, we, being made of mere matter, respond perfectly to His will. For us to have our own will—to be *people*—requires him to withdraw and withhold His power. Indeed, it is this that ultimately leads to the incarnation of Christ, in which He identifies with people, that He may have compassion upon us.

Weil explains this with reference to the parable of the good Samaritan.⁷ Those who pass by the wounded man see him as an object, to be avoided for fear of uncleanliness both physical and spiritual. The Samaritan, however, gives up his time, his

⁷ The parable, recounted in Luke 10:30-5, is this: a Jewish man lies near death beside the road. A series of Jewish religious functionaries pass by, avoiding his body, until eventually, a Samaritan (a member of a people who were not on terribly good terms with the Jewish people of the day) finds him, has compassion on him, and cares for him extravagantly, binding his wounds, taking him to an inn, and offering to pay for an indefinite stay for him. Jesus recounts this parable in answer to the question “Who is my neighbour?”

money, and even the prejudices of his cultural identity in order to restore the wounded man's dignity. He reduces himself, and in so doing exalts the one to whom he attends. "Creative attention means really giving our attention to what does not exist. Humanity does not exist in the anonymous flesh lying inert by the roadside. The Samaritan who stops and looks gives his attention all the same to this absent humanity, and the actions which follow prove that it is a question of real attention" (WG 92).

Genuine attention is a form of decreation for two reasons. The first is that in attention to the *malheur* of others, we emulate the divine renunciation in creation—we give of ourselves, and do not exercise our power in the way we are fully capable of. This is compassion to the highest degree, and is the demand of justice. The second is that in attending to the *malheur* of others, we experience our own.

To attend to one in a state of *malheur* requires that we acknowledge two things: firstly, the reality of their *malheur*. We cannot truly offer our attention to one in a state of *malheur* and tell ourselves "it's all in her head." If we do this, we maintain the power differential (claiming for ourselves epistemic authority in the matter of the other's subjective experience). The second acknowledgement that is forced upon us is this: there is nothing necessary which separates me from her. The *malheur* with which she is afflicted could just as easily afflict me.

To acknowledge the reality of *malheur* means saying to oneself: 'I may lose at any moment, though the play of circumstances over which I have no control, anything whatsoever that I possess, including those things which are so intimately mine that I consider them as being myself. There is nothing that I might not lose. It could happen at any moment that what I am might be abolished and replaced by anything whatsoever of the filthiest and most contemptible sort.' (SE 27)

This is why we are so reluctant to attend to those in a state of *malheur*. It is not only that the exercise of power is appealing, but to attend to those in *malheur* requires us experience *malheur* ourselves, and this is a form of decreation. "To be aware of this in the depth of one's soul is to experience non-being...It is a death of the soul. This is why the naked spectacle of *malheur* makes the soul shudder as the flesh shudders at the proximity of death" (SE 27).

Despite the distinct unpleasantness of attending to those in a state of *malheur*, it is something which is deeply valuable. It is valuable firstly because it is the pinnacle of compassion, and thus is demanded by justice, and it seems we all have an interest in meeting the demands of justice. Moreover, “[i]t is the state of extreme and total humiliation which is also the condition for passing over into truth,” (SE 27) and this too is desirable. To attend to those in a state of *malheur* is a means of decreation, and thus is a means by which we may address the problem of mysticism.

6.5 CONCLUSION TO CHAPTER

In Chapter 5, I considered various ways—elucidated by both Wittgenstein and Weil—in which the mystical may reveal itself. Crucially, this sort of revelation is not bound up with our reason, and so it promises a way in which we come to know—perhaps “experience” is a more apt term—that over which our reason cannot quantify. While this may resolve the problem of mysticism if it is understood merely as a theoretical problem (i.e., “All that is of genuine import is mystical, meaning outside the scope of our reason. How then can we know those things that truly matter?”), it does nothing to address the problem of mysticism *qua* practical problem (i.e., “All that is of genuine import is mystical, meaning outside the scope of our reason. What then should we *do*?”).

I accept the latter as a valid philosophical question. Having (in the previous chapter) answered the first question, in this chapter I have endeavoured to answer the second. I have suggested that if one wishes to hear something which may be said at any moment, it behooves one to *listen*. Weil offers an account of what such “listening” might look like in her mystical *praxis*.

What stops our ears (to continue the aural metaphor) from hearing the revelation of the mystical is the entirely natural illusion that what is accidental about us is necessary—we mistake the grammatical necessities of our experience of the world as absolute truths of the world. In essence, we think ourselves to be God. We are not God.

The *praxes* of *malheur* and attention, then, offer ways to destroy this illusion. They confront us with the uncomfortable truth that there is nothing necessary about us. In a very real sense, this destroys the illusion of “my” world. If I recognize that I am not, in

any real sense, the centre of the world, I undergo a sort of decreation, one which mirrors Weil's understanding of the divine act of creation.⁸

It is by means of this decreative act that we "listen" for the self-revelation of the mystical. When the illusion of "my world" is removed, I am able to attend to that which is not bound by my world.

The answer to "What then should I do?" is to decreate oneself, and a good place to begin with that is *malheur*, or attention directed to those who undergo *malheur*. This, of course, is a necessarily political mysticism, for the knowledge of God is to be sought in identifying with the wretched of the Earth. It is by this means that we may enter the cloud of unknowing, and encounter the mystical.

⁸ Cf. §3.2.1

CHAPTER 7 CONCLUSION

When philosophical talk turns to “the mystical,” one does well to exercise a healthy amount of skepticism. “What reason,” it is wise to ask, “do I have to think this is meaningful?” Much talk of the mystical, especially within the Wittgensteinian tradition, is self-consciously nonsensical. Any discourse on the mystical runs the risk of being, to employ a Shakespearean turn of phrase “a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing” (*Macbeth*, Act 5, Scene 5). Indeed, that is the very trouble with the mystical: it *signifies* nothing.

Yet according to a certain philosophical strain of thinking, while the mystical *signifies* nothing, it is incredibly *significant*. Mystical philosophers—a term which applies as comfortably to Ludwig Wittgenstein as to Simone Weil—think that everything which is of genuine importance in human life, everything which motivates us and makes a life worth living, is “mystical” in the sense that it does not fall within the world of facts, and is outside the scope of our reason. This mystical realm includes such things as Good, truth, beauty, justice, God, the foundations of logic, and more. Because such things are so important to us, it is unavoidable that we will try to know them. For this reason, we do well to attempt to philosophize about the mystical *well*.

Throughout this work, I have considered the striking convergence of thought as regards the mystical in the works of Wittgenstein and Weil. Immersed in their oeuvres, it is not uncommon to find a passage of Wittgenstein’s which reads like it was Weil writing in a Wittgensteinian idiom, or *vice versa*. This is all the more surprising given that there is no evidence whatsoever that either of them ever encountered the other’s work, nor do they appear to share particularly many influences, aside from Kierkegaard (and it would be disingenuous to suggest that their similarity as regards mystical matters is entirely due to a common reading of Kierkegaard).

Inspired by Winch’s statement that his text is not intended as a systematic comparison of Wittgenstein and Weil, I have herein endeavoured to provide exactly that: a comparison of—and perhaps a sort of dialogue between—Wittgenstein and Weil on the specific topic of the mystical. It is true that their philosophies are mutually informative on

a variety of subjects, but because of the foundational role mysticism plays in both of their philosophies, it strikes me as as good a starting place as any—and perhaps a better one than most.

7.1 SUMMARY

In Chapter 2 I outlined Wittgenstein’s mystical position. In TLP, Wittgenstein elucidates his position as a function of how logic works: logic delimits the thinkable and sayable, and from this it follows that there is the unthinkable and unsayable. Logic marks the barrier between the two. I furthermore argued that this mystical position is not a quirk of Wittgenstein’s early work, but in fact something to which he is committed throughout his later work as well. This mystical position gives rise to what I have called the problem of mysticism: “the mystical” is a category that includes, among other things, aesthetics and ethics. These are very important things about which it seems important for us to think, yet if they are mystical, they are unthinkable. What then should we do?

In Chapter 3 I outlined Weil’s mystical position. I suggested that her metaphysics is best understood as an attempt to preserve a Christian Platonist metaphysics in light of Spinoza. This leads to an understanding of the world of facts as that which is utterly other than the Good. The Good—i.e., God—is utterly transcendent. On Weil’s account, justice consists primarily in a certain sort of teleological relationship to this transcendent Good. Of course, the problem of mysticism arises just as inexorably here: we have a duty—it is the demand of justice—to pursue this utterly transcendent Good, yet it is utterly transcendent.

The similarity between Wittgenstein’s and Weil’s positions is striking. For both, the transcendence of the mystical is a grammatical necessity given the way we encounter the world. For both, language represents something which isolates us from the mystical. Both acknowledge this fundamental human drive to seek the mystical—a drive which, given the utter transcendence of the mystical, is bound to be foiled.

In Chapter 4, I considered one intuitive solution to the problem of mysticism: religion. Many people have turned to religious *praxes*, communities, and belief out of a desire to “know God.” Indeed, at first glance, that would seem to be what religion is *for*.

Unfortunately, on both the Weilian account and the Wittgensteinian account, religion is simply the wrong sort of thing to resolve the problem of mysticism. This is not to disparage the value of religion in (e.g.) providing community or aiding in devotion—it is simply that religion is not the venue for a solution to the problem of mysticism that it may intuitively appear to be.

In Chapter 5 I sketched the first half of a solution to the problem of mysticism. I elaborated two concepts (Weil’s notion of “reading” and Wittgenstein’s notion of something’s “showing itself”) which I suggested are crucially important in that they represent ways we can come to know something without the use of our reason. I refer to this as revelation, and it represents how it is that we may know the unthinkable.

In Chapter 6 I addressed the pragmatic aspect of the problem of mysticism: even if it is possible for the mystical to be revealed to us, what should we *do*? Here, I considered Weil’s mystical *praxes* of *malheur* and attention as ways of decreation. Decreation is the process by which one’s self—and more particularly, the illusions which place one’s self at the centre of reality and lead us to mistake our position as somehow necessary and objective—is taken apart. This allows us to perceive not only our world as we have constructed it around ourselves, but indeed to turn our focus beyond the world, that we may perceive the revelation of the mystical. *This* is what we should do, given the problem of mysticism

7.2 CONTINUATIONS

I have no doubt that there is more to be written on this subject. I have herein attempted a systematic treatment of Weil and Wittgenstein on a very particular subject. No doubt, there is fruitful work to be done in the juxtaposition of their views on almost any other matter about which they both write. Moreover, there remain gaps even in the treatment I have offered here: I have only mentioned Wittgenstein’s *On Certainty* in passing, and I have not addressed Weil’s final work *The Need for Roots* whatsoever—time and space to do so has eluded me. Further work on this subject would benefit from digging deeper into the corners of both authors’ *oeuvres*.

Furthermore, I have suggested that this investigation of Weil's and Wittgenstein's mystical positions is fruitful because it provides a grounding for their other philosophical work. No doubt an exploration of how that grounding works, and how the solution to the problem of mysticism I have offered plays out elsewhere in their thought would prove fruitful.

I have herein attempted to put in conversation two of the twentieth century's most influential mystical philosophers. I have examined their views, and the problem of mysticism whereby what is most important is beyond the reach of our reason. The solution I have sketched is perhaps complex, yet it amounts more-or-less to this instruction offered in the Biblical book of Jeremiah: "Call to me and I will answer you, and will tell you great and hidden things that you have not known" (33:3).

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