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ARTICLE



‘Meaning-dawning’ in Wittgenstein’s *Notebooks*: a Kierkegaardian reading and critique

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ABSTRACT


In this paper, I am going to propose a new reading of Wittgenstein’s cryptic talk of ‘accession or loss of meaning’ (or the world ‘waxing and waning’ as a whole) in the *Notebooks* that draws both on Wittgenstein’s later work on aspect-perception, as well as on the thoughts of a thinker whom Wittgenstein greatly admired: Søren Kierkegaard. I will then go on to argue that, its merits apart, there is something existentially problematic about the conception that Wittgenstein is advocating. For the renunciation of the comforts of the world that Wittgenstein proposes as a way of coping with the brute contingencies of life seems only to come as far as what Kierkegaard calls ‘infinite resignation’, and this falls far short of the joyful acceptance of existence that appears necessary for inhabiting what Wittgenstein calls a happy world. That is to say, I will show that what Wittgenstein’s proposal lacks is a way of reconnecting with the finite after one has renounced it – the kind of transformation of existence achieved by the person Kierkegaard calls the ‘knight of faith’.

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1. Introduction

Contrary to the *Tractatus* (TLP), there is a plethora of remarks pertaining to God and the meaning of life in Wittgenstein’s *Notebooks* (NB), and while the former is notoriously compressed and hard to understand, Wittgenstein, in the latter, develops in comparatively greater detail some of the themes left only implicit in his published work. The NB, therefore, often provide us with better insight into what is going on in Wittgenstein’s treatise than does the TLP itself – something that is particularly true of the famously elusive ‘mystical’ passages that conclude the latter.

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One of the focal points of our discussion is going to be the journal entry dated 5.7.1916, which acts as a precursor to TLP 6.43. The relevant passage reads:

If good or evil willing affects the world, it can only affect the limits of the world, not the facts, what cannot be portrayed by language but can only be shown in language.¹

In short, it must make the world a wholly different one.

The world must, so to speak, wax or wane as a whole. As if by accession or loss of meaning.

(Anscombe's translation emended, 73e)

The last phrase – 'as if by accession or loss of meaning' – is left out in the TLP in favour of 'the world of the happy person is a different world to that of the unhappy', which occurs much later in the NB (not until 29.7.1916). Consequently, we lose, in TLP, an important clue that helps us understand what Wittgenstein might have meant when he speaks of the world 'waxing and waning as a whole', or good or evil willing affecting only the 'limits' of the world, and not the facts (what is describable by means of language).

What I am going to propose in this paper is that what Wittgenstein has in mind in these cryptic-sounding passages is a phenomenon that one might, slightly anachronistically perhaps, call 'meaning-dawning': the transformation of one's entire perspective on the world. That is to say, when Wittgenstein speaks of 'accession or loss of meaning' in the NB, he is anticipating – wittingly or unwittingly – what his later self calls 'aspect-dawning': being able to see novel dimensions in the world (or in an object). And this does not constitute a peculiar kind of perceptual experience (as one might think), but is rather the result of acquiring a new point of view that is made possible by the development of a certain kind of ability or know-how. As Wittgenstein puts it in Part II of *Philosophical Investigations* (PI): 'The substratum of this experience [of "aspect-dawning"] is the mastery of a technique' (§222). If we cultivate certain habits of thought and ways of life, we can become the kind of person who is able to see the world's 'joyful countenance', and who will, therefore, cease to perceive life as a 'problem' (TLP 6.521).

It is important to understand what 'meaning-dawning' consists in, as it enables us, among other things, to solve the mystery of Wittgenstein's speaking of the good will only being able to affect 'the limits of the world', but not the facts. For while a new or a different configuration of how things are can be cashed out propositionally, the acquisition of a new perspective is not adequately describable in propositional form (since it is much more akin to

¹In TLP the second clause reads 'not the facts; not the things that can be expressed in language' (Ogden translation).

developing a new skill or know-how²). But there is nothing mysterious or substantially 'ineffable' about this difference. Consequently, we do not need to appeal to a metaphysics about what lies beyond the limits of the world in order to understand Wittgenstein's point here, and my reading, if correct, should be acceptable to most scholars of Wittgenstein's work. That is to say, I regard it as a strength of the reading developed in this paper that it remains neutral on the question regarding whether one should espouse an 'ineffabilist' or a 'resolute' interpretation of TLP, as it is in any case impossible to do justice to such a complex topic in a single paper.³

Finally, a word about overall strategy. I will begin by presenting a synoptic overview of Wittgenstein's conception of God and the meaning of life in the NB. In order to gain a deeper understanding of what Wittgenstein means by 'accession or loss of meaning', or the world 'waxing and waning' as a whole, appeal will not only be made, as already mentioned, to Wittgenstein's later work on aspect-perception, but also to the thoughts of a thinker whom Wittgenstein greatly admired and showed some striking intellectual affinities with: Søren Kierkegaard.⁴ This will enable us to recognize that, its merits apart, there is something existentially problematic about the conception that Wittgenstein is advocating. For the renunciation of the comforts of the world that Wittgenstein proposes as a way of coping with the brute contingencies of life seems only to come as far as what Kierkegaard calls 'infinite resignation', and this falls far short of the joyful acceptance of existence that appears necessary for inhabiting what Wittgenstein calls *a happy world* (NB 29.7.1916; italics Wittgenstein's). In other words, we will come to see that what Wittgenstein's proposal lacks is a way of reconnecting with the finite after one has renounced it – the kind of transformation of existence achieved by the person Kierkegaard calls the 'knight of faith'.

II. Infinite resignation and aspect-seeing

More than half of Wittgenstein's *Notebooks* contain virtually no intimation of anything other than his deep preoccupation with logic. Then, suddenly, on 11 June 1916, Wittgenstein writes:

What do I know about God and the purpose of life?

I know that this world exists.

That I am placed in it like my eye in its visual field.

²And while the acquisition of an ability can, of course, be described, the ability itself – being a knowing how – cannot be exhaustively captured in a set of propositions.

³For a discussion of the different ways of reading Wittgenstein's early work, see my *A Confusion of the Spheres*, chapter 3.

⁴See my *A Confusion of the Spheres* for more on this.

That something about it is problematic, which we call its meaning.

That this meaning does not lie in it but outside it.

That life is the world.

That my will penetrates the world.

That my will is good or evil.

Therefore that good and evil are somehow connected with the meaning of the world.

The meaning of life, i.e. the meaning of the world, we can call God.

And connect with this the comparison of God to a father.

To pray is to think about the meaning of life.

I cannot bend the happenings of the world to my will: I am completely powerless.

I can only make myself independent of the world – and so in a certain sense master it – by renouncing any influence on happenings.

Various themes emerge from this dense passage: that the meaning of life lies 'outside' the world; that it is connected with the good will; that there is an opposition between will and world, which can only be conquered by renouncing one's influence over what happens. These themes are developed in greater detail in a passage that occurs roughly a month later, and which foreshadows Wittgenstein's claim, in TLP, that 'the facts' belong merely to 'the task', and not the 'solution' (TLP 6.432):

To believe in God is to see that the facts of the world are not the end of the matter. To believe in God is to see that life has meaning. The world is *given* me, i.e. my will approaches the world completely from the outside as something finished ... That is why we have the feeling that we depend on an alien will ... and what we are dependent on, we can call God. God would, in this sense, simply be fate or, what is the same: the world independent of our will. I can make myself independent of fate ... In order to live happily, I have to be in agreement [*Übereinstimmung*] with the world ... I am then, as it were, in agreement with that alien will on which I seem dependent. This means: 'I am doing the will of God'.

(NB 8.7.1916; translation mine)

What Wittgenstein seems to be saying here is that since I did not choose the way the world is constituted, and my ability to change it is limited, all I can do is to try and make myself independent of the facts (of the way things are). That is to say, I can choose not to depend on the comforts of the world, which could, as in the *Book of Job*, at any moment be taken from me. For 'even if everything we desired happened, this would only be the luck of the draw, as there is no logical connection between will and world' (NB 5.7.1916; my translation).

According to the vision endorsed by both NB and TLP, we are thrown into a brutally contingent world of value-free facts⁵ over which we have no control. By practising the art of renunciation, however, we can break down the opposition between will and world, and attempt to bring them into alignment ('agreement') with each other. Consequently, for the author of NB, 'only that life is a happy one which is able to renounce the comforts of the world. For such a life these comforts are just so many mercies of fate' (NB 13.8.1916; my translation).

Given that Wittgenstein identifies what we are dependent on as God, taking this renunciatory stance also means ceasing to rebel against 'the will of God' and to stop regarding life as a 'problem'. For as long as our will continues to be 'rebellious' in the sense of refusing to accept how things are, we are going to regard life as inherently problematic and possibly even as entirely devoid of meaning (if, for example, we cannot get what we want most). If, on the other hand, we give up trying to impose our will on God and the world (Wittgenstein seems, in some sense, to equate the two), then the 'problem of life' dissolves (TLP 6.521).

The thought that a renunciation of the comforts of the world – or, to put it in more religious terms – a 'dying to immediacy' is a necessary condition for happiness appears strongly reminiscent of Kierkegaard's notion of 'infinite resignation'. Johannes *de Silentio*, the pseudonymous author of Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* (FT) describes this attitude in the following way:

In infinite resignation there is peace and rest ... [It is] that shirt mentioned in an old legend. The thread is spun with tears, bleached by tears, the shirt sewn in tears; but then it also gives better protection than iron and steel.

(FT 45)

Why is this shirt a better protection than iron and steel? Because once we have renounced all relative ends (once we have 'infinitely resigned' ourselves) and have sublimated our desires into a love of God, we can never be touched in the same way again by the loss of what we have already willingly given up before. In this respect, if one manages to bring about this existential feat, infinite resignation inoculates one against further suffering and loss.

By practising the art of renunciation, in other words, it is possible to transform the world into a meaningful one without changing any of the facts about it. The world of the good (or happy) person – early Wittgenstein seems to think the two amount to the same thing – is a different world to that of the unhappy, as the good will, which has relinquished the desire to get its own way, alters the willing subject's perspective on the whole world.⁶ Not, however, by changing any of the facts (and making them better, say), but rather by modifying

⁵This is the way natural scientists tend to view the world and early Wittgenstein may have been over-impressed by this perspective. Later Wittgenstein certainly rejects such a conception, but it seems uncontroversial that he accepts it in TLP (for otherwise all talk of meaning and value would not have to be confined to the inexpressible). Also see TLP 6.4-6.41.

⁶Also compare Verbin, 'Religious Beliefs and Aspect-Seeing'.

the agent's attitude to the world as a whole.⁷ We can turn to Wittgenstein's later remarks on aspect-seeing to help illuminate this distinction:

Two uses of the word 'see'. The one: 'What do you see there?' – 'I see *this*' (and then a description, a drawing, a copy). The other: 'I see a likeness in these two faces' – let the man to whom I tell this be seeing the faces as clearly as I do myself. What is important is the categorial difference between the two 'objects' of sight.

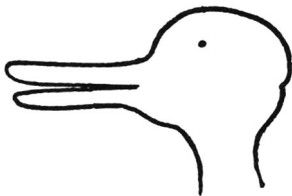
(PI II, §111, emphasis in original)

The difference between, as it were, 'ordinary seeing' and what Wittgenstein calls 'aspect-perception' throws light on the distinction between apprehending a fact – i.e. becoming conscious of a particular configuration of the world – and taking up a perspective on the world or the facts as a whole, something that cannot be described merely by making a reproduction of what one sees:

I observe a face, and then suddenly notice its likeness to another. I see that it has not changed; and yet I see it differently. I call this experience 'noticing an aspect'.

(PI, II, §113, emphasis in original)

Noticing an aspect is not, for example, like noticing an object's colour, for while I can draw the object with or without this colour, and by doing so, show you what I have noticed, I cannot, in the same way, 'show' you the 'likeness' that I perceive between two faces without simply reproducing the two faces themselves.⁸ Neither can I show you, merely by pointing to the figure itself,⁹ how I perceive it differently, when I suddenly see the 'rabbit-aspect' of the 'duck-rabbit' 'light up':



Rather, if asked what I now see, 'I would have explained by pointing to all sorts of pictures of rabbits, would perhaps have pointed to real rabbits, talked about their kind of life, or given an imitation of them' (PI, II, §120). It is necessary, as it were, to go 'beyond' the figure itself in order to explain what I see, as the rabbit aspect is not a property of the lines on the page in the same way

⁷This seems to contradict TLP 5.5423, where Wittgenstein speaks of seeing a cube in two different ways, and claiming that 'we really see two different facts'. If my interpretation of the NB passages is correct, this claim has to be taken metaphorically as constituting an expression of – as later Wittgenstein would say – how things *strike* me. See discussion below.

⁸Although I could show you other similar faces to facilitate understanding.

⁹Although I could point to particular parts of the figure and prompt you to see them in a certain way; e.g. the 'appendages' as ears (but this would of course already constitute an exercise of aspect perception).

that the shape of the 'appendages' or the colour of the dot are distinct material properties of the object drawn. Instead, and in the words of Stephen Mulhall,

describing something as a picture-rabbit relates to the perceived object considered as a whole, identifying it as a particular kind of thing (i.e. a drawing) rather than to specifiable parts or elements of it considered as a material object (i.e. as an arrangement of marks).

(Mulhall, *On Being in the World*, 28)

It is for this reason that Wittgenstein says that 'seeing as' is not part of perception (PI, II, §137). Although in one sense, we 'see' the drawing in a different way when we see the rabbit-aspect light up – which is why we continue to use the word 'see' – in another sense we do not see anything different, because the arrangement of marks on the page has not changed. Consequently, what I am noticing is not an additional visual feature of the object, but rather 'an internal relation between it and other objects' (PI, II, §248).

But learning to see internal relations between things is not a matter of honing one's eye-sight; it is much more akin to developing a new skill or conceptual capacity. This is why Wittgenstein says that 'only of someone *capable* of making certain applications of the figure with facility would one say that he saw it now *this* way, now *that* way' (PI, II, §222, emphasis in original). For example, someone who had never seen any rabbits – either in real life, picture books or virtual reality (say on YouTube) – would not be able to see the duck-rabbit as a rabbit. Neither would someone who had no experience with seeing two-dimensional pictures as representations of three-dimensional objects be able to see either the duck- or rabbit-aspect of the duck-rabbit figure. Instead, such a person would perhaps only be able to see what we see in an abstract drawing. Wittgenstein calls the inability to see 'something as something' 'aspect-blindness' (PI, II, §257). This is not a matter of having defective perceptual organs, but more akin to a lack of imagination, say.

Since aspect-perception, therefore, depends on being in possession of certain skills and capacities, it follows that improving and developing these abilities will allow us to see new dimensions in the world. So, for instance, while a novice would painstakingly have to transcribe Japanese signs into Latin script before being able to read them, the more their competence with directly recognizing the signs increases, the less transcription becomes necessary until, eventually, it is rendered entirely superfluous and one can just 'see' the word in the signs.¹⁰ The 'experience' of having the word come into one's mind immediately and without transcription is thus made possible by much previous training, which is why Wittgenstein says that

¹⁰In other words, once I am in possession of certain capacities and skills, I can, *pace* Reese, 'Religious "Seeing-as"', see certain features directly – that is to say, without interpreting (or transcribing etc.).

only of someone who *can* do, has learnt, is master of, such and such, does it make sense to say that he has had *this* experience. And if this sounds silly, you need to remember that the *concept* of seeing is modified here.

(PI, II, §224, emphasis in original)

In other words, aspect-perception is not a purely visual experience in the sense that it depends only on how one's perceptual capacities are constituted. Rather, it depends on much more, namely, on the development of competence in the application of a certain technique or skill.¹¹ It is for these reasons that Wittgenstein says that 'seeing-as' 'is like seeing, and again not like seeing' (PI, II, §137).

We can now apply these lessons to the conception advocated in NB (and TLP). To practise infinite resignation does not change the way the world is constituted, and yet it allows me to see the world in a different way. A perception of 'accession or loss of meaning' is therefore similar to being able to see either the duck or rabbit aspect of the duck-rabbit figure in the following sense. In the case of the former, it is the development of our spiritual capacities – our ability to renounce the comforts of the world – that makes seeing the one or the other possible, while the configuration of the world itself – just like the arrangement of marks on the page (in the case of the duck-rabbit) – remains the same. This is why Wittgenstein says that the world must wax and wane as a whole: the 'accession of meaning' as it were makes the world 'bigger' – but not in the sense of adding more items to it – while the loss of meaning makes it 'smaller'. 'Meaning-dawning' consequently changes the 'limits of the world'¹² in the sense that it enables the willing subject to see the world in a new, positive manner – for example, as a purposive whole that I no longer regard as something that is intrinsically opposed to my will and that I must constantly battle against.¹³ In other

¹¹And it is a natural fact about us that we are the kinds of creatures that can develop such capacities. The biological causes that enable us to develop them are of interest to neuroscientists.

¹²When speaking of 'limits of the world', Wittgenstein must therefore be using 'world' in a different sense to when he speaks of the world as being all that is the case (TLP 1) – otherwise the good will *would* be changing the facts and this is what Wittgenstein denies. We can solve this problem by remembering that Wittgenstein also says in NB (11. 6. 1916) that 'life is the world'. In other words, Wittgenstein uses 'world' in two different senses – mostly as referring to the world of facts, but, sometimes, in 'ethical' contexts as referring to 'life'. And 'life' also includes the attitude that I take towards my life which shows itself in how I live. In this respect, my perspective on my life can change its 'limits' by being either a positive or a negative attitude: the duck-rabbit looks different to the person who sees it as a duck, but this difference cannot be explained merely by pointing to the look of the lines (the 'facts').

¹³Sometimes Wittgenstein speaks of aspect perception as something that would seem to require certain innate capacities and talents, such as a 'musical ear', for example (PI, II, §260). This might seem to cause problems for my view that 'meaning-dawning' requires the development of certain spiritual capacities (I would like to thank an anonymous referee for pointing this out). But I think this remark is compatible with my reading. For although we all begin from different starting-points – i.e. we are all naturally endowed with different capacities and skills – it is nevertheless possible to acquire, through training and exposure, capacities that one previously lacked. Of course, if one is, say, tone-deaf, developing a sensitivity to music will be an uphill struggle (and may, in some cases, be impossible). But, then, becoming a knight of faith may be similarly difficult (or verge on the impossible) for some people. Nevertheless, it is a perspective that is potentially available.

words, where before I saw only brute facts in tension with my desires, I am now able to perceive an internal relation between my life and the world conceived as an expression of the will of God.

These considerations also help us to see why Wittgenstein says, in TLP, that God does not manifest himself in the world (TLP 6.432).¹⁴ For God, for Wittgenstein, is not just another object in the world. Consequently, God's 'existence' (or 'non-existence') is not a fact whose obtaining (or not obtaining) can be described.¹⁵ Rather, to apprehend God's reality is to see the world as a whole in a new way ('to believe in God is to see that life has meaning' (NB 8.7.1916)). One might say that aspects are real in the sense that one can only see the aspects the world makes available (for otherwise one is deluded or mistaken¹⁶), but to discover a new aspect is not like discovering a new object, nor is it akin to having a peculiar kind of perceptual experience ('seeing-as' is not part of perception).¹⁷ Rather, I am learning to see new dimensions in the world – it is not a matter of becoming aware of new empirical facts that had hitherto escaped one's notice.¹⁸

My reading of what is going on in these parts of the NB (and TLP) consequently does not by itself require attributing any 'substantially nonsensical' theses to Wittgenstein,¹⁹ but neither would I want to follow Stephen Mulhall's

¹⁴And here Wittgenstein means 'the world of facts', not 'life' (see footnote 13).

¹⁵Wittgenstein thought, in TLP, that only the factual – what is the case (and what is not the case) – can be rendered in propositional form (TLP 6.4–6.41). Later Wittgenstein rejects this notion.

¹⁶See also Kellenberger "Seeing-as" in Religion'.

¹⁷This does not commit me to the thought that God is an 'aspect' of the world, whatever that might mean. Rather, I am contending that becoming aware of God's reality is *akin* to aspect-perception in the sense that it enables one to see the world as a whole in a new way. It is not a matter of discovering a new super-empirical object. This does not detract from God's reality, as it were, unless we believe that the only way for God to be real is to be a super-empirical object. But this is a conception that both early and later Wittgenstein rejects.

¹⁸Although some of the things that he says chime with the interpretation developed here, I reject Rudd's suggestion that Wittgenstein, in NB and TLP, identifies God with Schopenhauer's noumenal Will (see Rudd, 'Logic and Ethics as the Limits of the World', 53). Wittgenstein was influenced by Schopenhauer, no doubt, but there is no evidence that he endorsed this part of Schopenhauer's view. For example, in the passage from NB quoted above, he says, 'God would, in this sense, simply be fate or, what is the same: the world independent of our will.' If anything, the equating of God and world is more reminiscent of Spinoza. The notion that God is not just one more object in the world – however powerful – and that we consequently need to develop our spiritual capacities if we are to understand the significance of religious concepts, are themes that Wittgenstein picks up and explores in much more detail in his post-Tractatus writings. The later work also has the advantage of no longer being hampered by the TLP conception that only facts are expressible, which means that ethical and religious matters can now straightforwardly be spoken about rather than remaining confined only to altering the 'limits' of the world. Nevertheless, in his later remarks on religion, Wittgenstein focuses mainly on how one is to conceive of religious belief and never again takes up the theme of 'meaning-dawning' as we find it in NB. For this reason, I have focused on Wittgenstein's later thought on aspect-perception and on Kierkegaard's distinction between the knights of infinite resignation and faith in order to explore this dimension of Wittgenstein's early work, as these discussions throw more light on what Wittgenstein was up to in NB (and TLP) than his own later remarks on religion do. For an in-depth discussion of Wittgenstein's later conception of religious belief see my *A Confusion of the Spheres*, chapter 4.

¹⁹Regardless of whether or not he actually believed, in the TLP, that there are 'ineffable truths'. I suspect that he did – although not in the sense that these are *propositional* ineffable truths; i.e. they are not, *pace* what the 'resolute readers' claim that the 'standard' readers hold, nonsensical propositions with a sense that is 'nonsensical'. Rather, if there are such things for the author of TLP, they are much more akin to

recent suggestion – who develops an idea from Cora Diamond (see Diamond, ‘Ethics, Imagination’) – that the good will, for Wittgenstein, is ‘transcendental’ in the sense that a proponent of such a notion would wish to resist *any* attempt intelligibly to articulate what such a will might consist in:

In order to intuit its presence [of the good will] in another, which presumably means being compelled to characterize that other in terms of a kind of piety in action, an ability to look with a clear eye at the world’s vicissitudes and to acknowledge unconditionally its independence from his will, one necessarily resorts to nonsense phrases, and so registers a kind of resistance to the understanding in such goodness. But that resistance to sense also involves a perception of the miraculousness of such goodness, the sheer incomprehensibility of its realization in the world, the utter inexplicability of such radical self-abnegation in terms of our best naturalistic patterns of moral and psychological explanation.

(Mulhall, *The Great Riddle*, 34)

Of course, Mulhall is right that the kind of self-abnegation that Wittgenstein is recommending is in a certain sense ‘miraculous’. But this is not because it defies ‘naturalistic’ forms of explanation.²⁰ Rather, the ‘miraculousness’ is a function of the extreme spiritual exertion necessary to bring infinite resignation about. To recall Kierkegaard’s words, it is a shirt whose thread is spun in and bleached by tears. Consequently, it may well be beyond the powers of most people, but then so are many exceptional skills that human beings have managed to develop.²¹ Be that as it may, there certainly are some serious problems with the renunciatory stance that Wittgenstein is proposing, and we will address them in the next section.

III. A better perspective: Kierkegaard’s knight of faith

Wittgenstein himself seems to have qualms about the conception he is advocating at various points in the NB.²² So, for example, he writes on 29.7.1916:

Is it possible to will the good, to will evil, and not to will?

Or is only he happy who does *not* will?

‘To love one’s neighbour’ would mean to will!

what Kierkegaard calls an ‘ethical’ truth. But whatever the facts on the ground, as it were, it is possible to make sense of the passages that are the focal points of discussion in this paper without attributing a ‘substantial’ metaphysics to Wittgenstein. In this respect, my reading of these passages (which is indebted to Wittgenstein’s later work on aspect-seeing) is perhaps similar to the ‘proto-grammatical’ reading that Moyal-Sharrock attributes to TLP as a whole, although I would not want to endorse her claim that grammatical remarks are nonsensical (see Moyal-Sharrock, ‘The Good Sense of Nonsense’).

²⁰Unless we have an extremely restrictive conception of what a ‘naturalistic’ explanation might consist in, a debate I cannot go into here.

²¹For example, composing like Mozart, dancing like Osipova, painting like Rembrandt.

²²Compare Wiggins, ‘Wittgenstein on Ethics and the Riddle of Life’, 380.

But can one want and yet not be unhappy if the want does not attain fulfilment?
(And this possibility always exists).

(Anscombe's translation emended)

In other words, Wittgenstein seems to be asking, do we really have three options here – willing the good, willing the bad and not willing at all – and is infinite resignation tantamount to not willing? The question appears at least partly rhetorical, for Wittgenstein anticipates the answer in the last two lines of the above passage. It is clearly impossible for a human being not to will *at all*, as a complete cessation of the will would be a form of self-annihilation (so much, so Schopenhauerian²³). Consequently, infinite resignation cannot be a matter of achieving a quiescence of the will, but rather consists of the spiritual practice of learning to accept the non-fulfilment of one's wishes. And this, as we have already seen in the previous section, requires enormous effort – an effort, however, that *de Silentio*, with characteristic severity, thinks that everyone ought, in principle, to be able to make:

Through resignation I renounce everything. I make this movement all by myself, and if I do not make it, it is because I am too cowardly and soft and devoid of enthusiasm and do not feel the significance of the high dignity assigned to every human being, to be his own censor, which is far more exalted than to be the Censor General of the whole Roman Republic.

(FT 48)

Despite being full of admiration for the 'knight of infinite resignation', however, *de Silentio* nevertheless believes that there is a serious problem with this perspective. For the complete renunciation of the finite – if, indeed, such can be achieved – turns its practitioner into someone who can no longer feel at home in the world, and that seems like a high price to pay:

It is supposed to be the most difficult feat for a ballet dancer to leap into a specific posture in such a way that he never once strains for the posture but in the very leap assumes the posture. Perhaps there is no ballet dancer who can do it – but this knight does it. Most people live completely absorbed in worldly joys and sorrows; they are benchwarmers who do not take part in the dance. The knights of infinity are ballet dancers and have elevation. They make the upward movement and come down again; and this, too, is not an unhappy diversion and is not unlovely to see. But every time they come down, they are unable to assume the posture immediately, they waver for a moment, and this wavering shows that they are aliens in the world. It is more or less conspicuous according to their skill, but even the most skilful of these knights cannot hide this wavering. One does not need to see them in the air; one needs only to see them the instant they touch or have touched the earth – and then one recognizes them. But to be able to come down in such a way that instantaneously one seems to stand and to walk, to change the leap into

²³Compare Rudd, 'Logic and Ethics as the Limits of the World', 55.

life into walking, absolutely to express the sublime in the pedestrian – only that knight can do it, and this is the one and only marvel.

(FT 41)

What *de Silentio* seems to be suggesting here is that the life of the knight of infinite resignation contains an egregious flaw: it turns the knight into an alien in the world, for whom the finite can no longer hold any interest. In other words, and to stay with Johannes' metaphor, although knights of infinite resignation possess elevation, the fact that they vacillate when they come out of their jump, shows that they are effectively lost to the world. This renders their perspective close to a form of nihilism: their renunciation has been such that worldly things have become a matter of complete indifference to them. Consequently, this cannot be the best way of responding to human suffering and the 'problem of existence'.

But what is the alternative? Who are these accomplished dancers that *de Silentio* contrasts the knights of infinite resignation with, who can leap straight into position? According to Kierkegaard's pseudonymous author, they are the 'knights of faith', and what distinguishes them is the ability 'absolutely to express the sublime in the pedestrian'. That is to say, the most significant difference between the knight of infinite resignation and the knight of faith is that the latter regains the world after having renounced it. In other words, after having confronted the possibility that all of his heart's desires may come to nought, he nevertheless manages to believe, through his love of God, that they are still worth pursuing – that finitude, transience and suffering are not, in the end, an 'objection' to existence: 'Every moment to see the sword hanging over the beloved one's head, and yet to find, not repose in the pain of resignation, but joy ... this is wonderful' (FT 50).

Wittgenstein's account in the *Notebooks* (and TLP) seems to lack this dimension of a joyful acceptance of existence,²⁴ thus rendering his conception closer to that of the knight of infinite resignation than the knight of faith. And although *de Silentio* would agree that the dying to immediacy that early Wittgenstein proposes – renouncing the comforts of the world – is a necessary condition for faith, it is not the same as faith itself, but rather located on an existential rung below it. For the spirit of faith does not just tolerate the way the world is from the lofty heights of resignation, it has the courage to learn to *love* the finite in spite of (or because of?) its finitude. To have faith, in the words of Kierkegaard's

²⁴A 'joyful acceptance of existence' is not a *moral* acceptance; it is not to accept existence because it is 'good' or because the existence of the world is 'morally justifiable' (whatever that means). Hence, it makes no sense to ask, in the moral sense, whether one *should* joyfully accept existence (or whether one should not). Rather, it is merely a question of whether one *can* – or whether one can become the kind of person who can. A 'joyful acceptance of existence' is its own reward (as Wittgenstein also recognized in NB), and surely, better, for all sorts of non-moral reasons, than a 'rejection' of existence. But, again, none of this implies that 'joyfully accepting existence' is any kind of moral imperative or something one should refrain from for moral reasons.

pseudonymous author, is 'to exist in such a way that my opposition to existence is expressed as the most beautiful and assured harmony with it' (FT 50²⁵).

But how, one might ask, does one learn to live in such a way, given that it sounds even more impossible than the life of renunciation previously recommended? Indeed, *de Silentio* himself believes that the life of the knight of faith is impossible for *him*. 'I can swim in existence', he says, 'but for this mystical soaring I am too heavy' (FT 50). Why is this?

The main reason appears to be that infinite resignation provides, as already discussed, a certain peace and security. If I have renounced my stake in worldly matters, I will, no longer, be at the constant mercy of the vagaries of an uncertain, and often cruel, fate. But this security comes at the price of being lost to the world – of the finite no longer holding any interest for one. The perspective of the knight of faith, on the other hand, requires a courage that the knight of infinite resignation seems to lack: this knight has the strength to acknowledge the full extent of worldly impossibility, but rather than taking this as reason to return the lottery ticket, he continues, joyfully, to play in the knowledge that, at any moment, he could lose. *De Silentio* puts it thus:

With infinite resignation he [the knight of faith] has drained the cup of life's profound sadness, he knows the bliss of the infinite, he senses the pain of renouncing everything, the dearest things he possesses in the world, and yet finiteness tastes to him just as good as to one who never knew anything higher, for his continuance in the finite did not bear a trace of the cowed and fearful spirit produced by the process of training; and yet he has this sense of security in enjoying it, as though the finite life were the surest thing of all.

(FT 40)

In other words, the knight of faith continues to will (to strive), but has nevertheless found a way of accepting what happens regardless of the outcome. He still desires, for example, to come home to a feast, but he will not be disappointed if he only finds a frugal meal there (FT 40). In this respect, the knight of faith continues to want, but 'not be unhappy if the want does not attain fulfilment' (NB 29.7.1916). He (or she) is able to do this because infinite resignation has taught the knight not to place an absolute value on finite ends. In this respect, not to rebel against the will of God means not to regard one's own will and the satisfaction of one's own desires as of paramount importance and as something that one somehow has a right to.

But the knight of faith goes beyond infinite resignation: by placing his life in the hands of God, the knight of faith is able, in principle, to accept whatever possibilities (or impossibilities) life may provide, as he (or she) regards life as a whole as a 'gift'²⁶ – i.e. as something freely given that should be accepted in a

²⁵All references to the Hong edition; this and the following translations by Walter Lowrie. This is also reminiscent of Nietzsche. See the discussion in the conclusion.

²⁶In this respect, I have a minor disagreement with Hanson's otherwise excellent recent reading of FT (see his *Kierkegaard and the Life of Faith*). Hanson claims that the knight of faith is reconciled to the frugal

spirit of gratitude and trust. It is for this reason that the knight of faith is able to say with Job, 'The Lord has given, the Lord has taken away, blessed be the name of the Lord' (*Job* 1:21).²⁷ Perhaps it is also this stance that Wittgenstein had in mind when, in the *Lecture on Ethics*, he speaks of feeling 'absolutely safe'. For although the knight of faith knows that he can be harmed in any worldly sense, he nevertheless feels 'safe' in the hands of God – he feels that, from a spiritual point of view, he can never come to grief.

IV. Conclusion

It seems, then, that it is the perspective of the knight of faith that we should try to emulate as an existential ideal, not the viewpoint of the knight of infinite resignation. The former perspective also appears much closer to what Wittgenstein actually wants (rather than to what he in fact recommends) in the NB, given that he says that the world of the happy person is a *happy world* (29.7.1916). For contrary to his counterpart's, the knight of infinite resignation's world seems a world well lost; not one whose joyful aspect one could perceive.

The knight of faith's fundamental attitude to the world also has the advantage of being available to someone who, like Nietzsche, would wish to eschew talk of dependence on an 'alien will' altogether:²⁸ 'I want to learn more and more to see as beautiful what is necessary in things; then I shall be one of those who make things beautiful. *Amor fati* (love of fate): let that be my love henceforth!' (*The Gay Science*, 276) This quotation presents a nice way of drawing together the different strands of this paper, as it makes the connection between the life-affirming stance of the knight of faith and aspect-perception particularly perspicuous. For learning to see as beautiful what is necessary in things – learning to bring into harmony one's own will with the will of God – is precisely to effect a fundamental change in aspects: what before had seemed opposed to one's will and consequently ugly, suddenly presents itself in an aesthetically pleasing light. Perhaps it is in this sense that 'ethics and aesthetics are one' (NB 24.7.1916; see also TLP 6.421) – the 'happy world' (NB 29.7.1916) is simultaneously a beautiful one.²⁹

meal because he loves his wife and regards everything she does as good. While I am sure that this is also true, I think it is more important to emphasize that the knight of faith is not disappointed, because he relates to everything that is given him as a gift and as something that he consequently has no right to expect (even if he wishes for it).

²⁷Also, see Kierkegaard's *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*.

²⁸I am not thereby suggesting that Nietzsche's conception is Kierkegaard's (or Wittgenstein's), merely that the attitude to life developed in this paper is also available to someone who would not wish to endorse a religious view. I am not taking sides on the question of which perspective is preferable, as my purpose was to propose a plausible interpretation of a difficult passage in NB, not to defend a religious conception of the world (or, indeed, the reverse).

²⁹This reading also chimes with Hanson's contention that faith is able to effect a marriage between the beautiful and the just.

Of course, as we have already seen, acquiring such an attitude (the perspective of the knight of faith) is extremely hard work, and requires not only the renunciation of finite ends – the aspect Wittgenstein stresses in the NB – but also the capacity as it were to ‘reconnect’ with the finite after one has given it up (the aspect Kierkegaard’s knight of faith makes perspicuous). In other words, renunciation alone is insufficient; one must also learn to take joy in the independence of God’s will rather than viewing this as a reason to rebel against it (as Job, for example, does in the beginning).

It is also worth pointing out that the kind of change in attitude that Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard speak of is not restricted to acquiring such demanding perspectives as those of the knights of infinite resignation and faith. More everyday examples can also be given of how an aspect-change might inform the acquisition of a new attitude towards things. For instance, a new mother, whose baby has just been born, might struggle with the fact that her child, which used to be a part of her, has now become something ‘external’ with a will of its own. This separation and independence depresses her at first and makes her wish that her baby were still inside her, its will to a large extent indistinguishable from her own. But after a while she starts seeing something necessary and beautiful in the separateness of her child and its ‘alien will’, and she stops regarding the baby as merely an extension of herself. In order to acquire this new attitude the mother had to give something up – her perception of her child as just another part of her; its will a mere reflection of her will – but she also gains something much greater through this act of renunciation: she learns to see her child’s independence not as a lamentable fact to be tolerated, but rather as something joyfully to be affirmed.

Naturally, all analogies also have their limits, and so not everything that later Wittgenstein says about aspect-perception in the duck-rabbit case is going to have application to the themes discussed in this paper. So, while the important similarity to note is that ‘meaning-dawning’ leaves the facts as they are, while fundamentally changing the subject’s perspective on these facts, this phenomenon (meaning-dawning) requires a spiritual transformation that is not necessary in the case of learning to see the duck in the duck-rabbit figure. In order to be able to do the latter a certain conceptual and visual competence is necessary, and once one has acquired it, one can move freely between seeing the duck-rabbit either as a duck or as a rabbit. Much more is required in the case of meaning-dawning-type cases – these demand spiritual (or ethical) work on oneself and the way one sees things. And once one has acquired the new perspective, it may be difficult to see things again in the old light.³⁰

³⁰ Once the new way of thinking has been established, the old problems vanish; indeed they become hard to recapture. For they go with our way of expressing ourselves and, if we clothe ourselves in a new form of expression, the old problems are discarded along with the old garment.

(*Culture and Value*, 48e)

Nevertheless, one can of course lose one's faith or become disenchanted with a particular attitude. For example, when one loses a loved one, one may suddenly become altogether 'blind' to the world's 'happy countenance', struggle to see meaning in anything.

Consequently, acquiring the attitude of the knight of faith – although deeper-going and in many ways more stable than learning to see a figure as something else – is not a permanent state, but rather something that requires continuous work on oneself. In this respect, the phenomenon of meaning-dawning mirrors Wittgenstein's ethical conception of philosophy more generally: 'Working in philosophy ... is really more a working on oneself. On one's own interpretation. On one's way of seeing things. (And what one expects of them)' (*Culture and Value*, 16e).³¹ Since one can neither solve philosophical problems nor the problem of life, on Wittgenstein's view, what one needs to do instead is to make the problems disappear – something that only taking up the right perspective can accomplish.

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³¹For more on this theme, see my *A Confusion of the Spheres*, chapter 2.

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