KIERKEGAARD AND WITTGENSTEIN: TWO STRATEGIES FOR UNDERSTANDING THEOLOGY

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I. THE POINT OF DEPARTURE

> One must start with error and from it approach the truth.
> That is, one must discover the source of the error, otherwise we gain nothing from hearing the truth.
> The truth cannot press in if something else is occupying its place.
> In order to convince someone of the truth, it does not suffice to state the truth, rather one must find the *way* from error to truth.
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> L. W. "Remarks on Frazer's 'The Golden Bough'"

The philosophical strategy of "start(ing) with error and from it approch(ing) the truth" is characteristic of a long and distinguished Socratic tradition. Two recent philosophers have articulated this tradition with rare clarity and a depth of passion. These philosophers were Soren Kierkegaard and Ludwig Wittgenstein. Though a century apart there is a remarkable similarity in their modes of inquiry and the demands each made for honesty. I will develop these similarities in a moment.

The way from error to truth for Wittgenstein was, as he might have said, "the bloody hard way" – a way that required a rigourously descriptive approach to philosophy's knotted problems and a sensitive awareness to the many "deep disquietudes" of life. Kierkegaard demanded seriousness and honesty regarding ourselves and the Christian gospel. The concept of "passion" was at the heart of understanding both self and world for Kierkegaard. *Truth*, for Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard, was primary but it was *not* the object of inquiry. Rather, discovering the source of error cleared the way for truth – truth, each felt, made itself known only when its obstacles were removed and not when such obstacles were simply bypassed in haste to grasp truth as an object.

Kierkegaard described his strategy as that of being "a spy in a higher service," or that of a "delaying" tactic so that one might think before he "jumped." Wittgenstein approached the problems of philosophy as if they represented a deeper human malady in need of cure.

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Thus he called his philosophical strategy a kind of "therapy" or a "cure by alteration" – that of changing one's "mode of thought and life."

In this essay I wish to explore a particular aspect of the contributions Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard have made toward understanding theology, namely, the *descriptive strategies* employed by each in their approach to philosophical and religious issues. The descriptive strategy of each forces upon us a new awareness of our present intellectual surroundings, and brings us to the fundamental questions of life without giving us a new philosophical system. The results of their respective strategies provide us with some new angles of vision for understanding the religious life and a fresh start toward understanding the language used by theologians and by men of faith.

II. Kierkegaard's Strategy

Understanding theology or philosophy may entail the comprehension of a number of new ideas, teachings, and doctrines, but to understand those, in themselves, is not to understand theology. Understanding theology, according to Kierkegaard, involves two essential qualities: the possession of a *quality of inquiry* and *passion*. These may best be characterized with the help of Kierkegaard's own words. In the *Fragments* he notes relative to the quality of inquiry: "The condition for understanding the Truth is like the capacity to inquire for it: the condition contains the conditioned, and the question implies the answer."[1] This first possession for Kierkegaard is the Socratic principle that we learn the truths of theology and philosophy by virtue of the manner we inquire into them, and that any ideas, teachings or doctrines and the teachers of such are merely "occasions" for discovery.

The biblical injunction, "You shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free," seems to imply the Socratic principle but it also suggests Kierkegaard's second possession, the passion. In this biblical injunction the process of knowing *is* freeing, but the truth must already exist and by virtue of it we know our freedom. The process of knowing is a capacity which requires individual "training" and "upbringing"; within the Christian faith the "training" and "upbringing" leads to the second possession, that of the passion of *existing as* a Christian, i.e. being free.

In an 1848 Journal entry Kierkegaard spoke of man's passion in existing as a Christian: "Christ has not inaugurated assistant professors—but imitators: Follow me. It is not *cogito ergo sum*—but the opposite, *sum ergo cogito*. It is not: I think self-renunciation, therefore I

[1]Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, trans. D. Swenson (Princeton: Princeton U. Press, 1962), p. 17.

am self-renouncing; but if I truly am self-renouncing, then I must certainly have also thought self-renunciation."[2] Assistant professors are usually poor "imitators" and at their best are only "occasions" for discovery. To *be* self-renouncing contains an understanding of self-renunciation; to *be* like Christ contains an understanding of Christianity. Later in the *Fragments,* it became clearer that the center of the Christian faith, the "what" (the truth of Christianity, the Paradox, the Incarnation), is to be found through the "how" (subjectivity, inwardness, passion). This is possible only to one who actually experiences the "how" of being a Christian, thereby showing he understands the "what."[3] In an entry in his diary for the year 1849 Kierkegaard wrote:

> In all that is usually said about Johannes Climacus being purely subjective and so on, people have forgotten, in addition to everything else concrete about him, that in one of the last sections he shows that the curious thing is: that there is a 'how' which has this quality, that if *it* is truly given, then the 'what' is also given; and that it is the 'how' of 'faith.' Here, quite certainly, we have inwardness at its maximum proving to be objectivity once again. And this is an aspect of the principle of subjectivity which, so far as I know, has never before been presented or worked out.[4]

A certain "capacity to inquire" and the passion of being a Christian (imitating Christ) are decisive for understanding theology. Let us probe further into this quality and the passion.

One way in which Kierkegaard works out this dual aspect of understanding is through his principle of subjectivity. An important, but neglected, part of the principle of subjectivity is found in a proposed lecture on "indirect communication."[5] In the lecture, Kierkegaard refers to the loss of "primitivity" in our "modern age" (Hegel's philosophical age). "Primitivity," here, refers to the need to re-examine the

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[2]Kierkegaard, *AN,* p.66f. Abbreviations used in this paper:

AN *Armed Neutrality and An Open Letter* by Soren Kierkegaard, ed. and trans. with an intro. by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, New York: A Clarion Book, 1969.

AR *On Authority and Revelation* by Soren Kierkegaard, trans. by Walter Lowrie, New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1966.

Inv *Philosophical Investigations* by Ludwig Wittgenstein, translation of *Philosophische Untersuchungen,* trans. by G.E.M. Anscombe, ed. by Anscombe and Rhees, New York: The Macmillan Co., 1953.

Z *Zettel* by Ludwig Wittgenstein, trans. by Anscombe, ed. by Anscombe and von Wright, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1967.

[3]I am grateful to my friend, Andrew Burgess, Case-Western Reserve University, for making this point clear to me in conversations and through reflections from his doctoral dissertation, Yale University, 1969.

[4]K, X^2 A299, in Dru 1021.

[5]*Soren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers,* Vol. I, A-E, trans. and ed. H.V. Hong and E. H. Hong (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana U. Press, 1967), sections #654-657. pp. 290ff.

fundamental questions—the questions which force upon the examiner and the examined the intensively personal rather than seeking the 'objective' *What!* Primitivity has to do with what it means to be a *human being.* And being a human being does not come naturally; it demands a *How.* Primitivity is the passion which accompanies the quality of inquiry. Whether a man communicates or not depends on whether his existence *shows* his deepest humanness. The quality of his inquiry and his passion must go together. Men can easily *say* the same thing and *be* quite different. But, "the distinguishing characteristic in life," said Kierkegaard, "is not what is said but how it is said."[6] He goes on to explain:

> ... the distinction is whether one *speaks* or whether one acts by speaking, whether one uses the voice, facial expression, arm gestures, a single word thrice ,perhaps ten times underscored, etc., for emphasis in order to make an impression or whether one uses his life, his existence, every hour of his day, sacrifices, etc., for emphasis. This emphasis is the elevated emphasis which transforms what is spoken into something entirely different, even though a speaker says literally the same thing.[7]

Kierkegaard frequently warns us about the misleading character of words and the importance of "elevated emphasis" – emphasis made with one's *life.* Kierkegaard has called language "thieves' cant (Tyvesprog)," noted a current commentator, "for language does not always express our thought adequately. Language may distort our ideas and 'steal,' i.e. hide, the real meaning of the activity of our consciousness."[8]

We become alienated from ourselves and the world and must find a way of overcoming this alienation – a way from error to truth. The *way* Kierkegaard shows us is the way of *indirection,* involving a new kind of emphasis in addition to words. Thus, his various modes of "indirect communication" give us patterns for the 'how' – ways in which we might move from error toward truth. Indirect communication is a form of action, a way of being and becoming more human.

In his *Book on Adler,* Kierkegaard concisely analyzes the skills needed to understand theology and their accompanying possession, the passion of faith. After an extended discussion of how Adler received, juggled, and 'blurted out' his 'revelation' in order that all might be shown the *plausibility* of having a revelation (*AR,* p. 172f.), Kierke-

[6]*Ibid.,* section #678, p. 317.
[7]*Ibid.,* P. 317f.
[8]Adi Shmuëli, *Kierkegaard and Consciousness* (Princeton: Princeton U. Press. 1971), p. 6.

gaard moves to head off what he feels is one of a Christian's greatest liabilities: that being moved by a revelation or a genuinely religious emotion, a person "begins to talk in a language which stands in no relation to his emotion. . ." (*AR*, p. 165). If such a man "is not strictly disciplined in the language of the concepts in which he expresses his emotion – then he is like one who talks too fast and does not articulate clearly . . . it is twaddle" (*AR*, p. 165).

How does Kierkegaard move to check this liability? When dealing with the Christian faith we cannot simply make appeals to all religious emotions: mystical experiences, "peak experiences" (as the new humanistic psychology might say),[9] "mountain tops," and so forth, for "not every outpouring of religious emotion is a Christian outpouring" (*AR*, p. 163). Kierkegaard is not the first, of course, to note this.[10] But he was the first, perhaps, to see the close connection between the emotion and the concepts used in its expression, and how these two were tied to the quality of a man's life, and this is the important point. He writes:

> . . . emotion which is Christian is checked by the definition of concepts, and when emotion is transposed or expressed in words in order to be communicated, this transposition must occur constantly within the definition of the concepts (*AR*, p. 163).
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> In order to express oneself Christianly there is required, besides the more universal language of the heart, also skill and schooling in the definition of Christian concepts, while at the same time it is of course assumed that the emotion is of the specific, qualitative sort, the Christian emotion (*AR*, p. 164).
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> For a Christian awakening what is required, on the one hand, is being grasped in a Christian sense, and, on the other hand, conceptual and terminological firmness and definiteness (*AR*, p. 165).

Adler's fault, and I dare say the fault of many a contemporary theologian struggling with a dozen new concepts to change or modernize the Christian expression, was that he was "not sufficiently and thoroughly acquainted with the language of Christian concepts. . ."; he did "not have them under his control" (*AR*, p. 165). Conceptual and terminological firmness are essential ingredients for a Christian awakening when they are properly united with human emotions.

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[9]The notion of "Peak experiences" is developed in A. Maslow, *Toward a Psychology of Being*, second ediion (Princeton: Van Nostrand Co., Inc., 1968), see Part III.

[10]I am thinking here of Jonathan Edwards, *Religious Affections*, first printed in 1746, ed. John E. Smith (New Haven: Yale U. Press, 1959). This treatise is an unusually penetrating analysis into what "are no certain signs. . ." and what "are distinguishing signs of truly gracious and holy affections." A remarkable psychological and phenomenological analysis of Christian emotions.

To promote conceptual and terminological firmness Kierkegaard adopts a philosophical strategy which is descriptive and neutral. He explores all sides; he prods, awakens, and forces us to look hard at the concepts we use and how they relate to a wide range of experiences – aesthetic, ethical, religious, Christian. He provides us with a 'conceptual map,' so to speak, of the human emotions – forever reminding us of the required skill and schooling involved in the right use of concepts related to these emotions.

Kiergegaard once introduced the notion of "armed neutrality." It was first conceived as the title of a periodical, of which he said, "In it I would scrutinize Christianity piece by piece and get the coil spring in place" (*AN.* p. 29). The periodical never formed but an essay by that title did, and it explored the relationship of *'speaking about'* and *'acting as'* a Christian. It was always the latter which was more important to Kierkegaard – being a Christian was always the more difficult task, a task which took much preparation. Being a Christian was a form of communication, it involved a kind of personal grammar which interwove speaking and acting, "professing" and "imitating," as he would say.

In matters of philosophy and faith, Kierkegaard conceived of his task in a limited and modest way. This is not to say that his scope of philosophical concern was limited nor that modesty implied a lack of depth or seriousness in matters of faith. Rather, his 'piece by piece' scrutiny, his descriptive strategy, unearthed an unusual quality of depth and a richness in the varieties of human thought and life. Kierkegaard wished to halt so many philosophical pretensions and 'religious' advances beyond faith. He wished rather to 'delay' his readers just long enough in their religious and philosophical journeying to allow them to reset the 'coil spring' and reassess their starting point in life. Paul Holmer makes this point nicely:

> Kierkegaard could scarcely restrain himself on the pretensions of systematic philosophy–like Plato who says in one of the dialogues, "Where the promise is so vast a feeling of incredulity creeps in." Kierkegaard's examples show instead a variety of ways of life, all kinds of similarities and differences; but he does not pretend that these differences are being resolved in a new and subtle synthesis; he does not invent a higher or more transparent way of relating these opposing views: he does not suggest that philosophy gives prognoses for the future. No, the wisdom of life is to be gained only when one sees in detail how men exist, how they make up their minds, how bereft they are then of philosophy's help. Wis-

dom has to be purchased with effort, passion, deep caring; and it cannot be summarized and disseminated at second-hand.[11]

Finally, let me comment on a paragraph from *Fear and Trembling:*

> In our time nobody is content to stop with faith but wants to go further. It would perhaps be rash to ask where these people are going, but it is surely a sign of breeding and culture for me to assume that everybody has faith, for otherwise it would be queer for them to be . . . going further. In those old days it was different, then faith was a task for a whole lifetime, because it was assumed that dexterity in faith is not acquired in a few days or weeks. When the tried oldster drew near to his last hour, having fought the good fight and kept the faith, his heart was still young enough not to have forgotten that fear and trembling which chastened the youth, which the man indeed held in check, but which no man quite outgrows . . . except as he might succeed at the earliest opportunity in going further. Where these revered figures arrive, that is the point where everybody in our day begins to go further.[12]

Faith, then, is the right appropriation of Christian concepts – the practice of a theological grammar, a grammar combining language and life, concepts and emotions; it is "existing as a Christian" and not "going further." Because faith is "a task for a whole lifetime," there is no absolute measure of its adequacy or even certainty that one's practice enables one to share in some form of Ultimate Reality. Ultimate Reality is to be found in the quality of inquiry and the passion if it is to be found anywhere. As that "tried oldster," Augustine, said: "*. . . quia plus loquitur inquisitio quam inventio. . .*" (. . . because the search says more than the discovery. . .).[13] We now turn to Wittgenstein's strategy.

III. Wittgenstein's Strategy

Wittgenstein used to say to Rush Rhees, "Go the bloody hard way."[14] By the "hard way" Wittgenstein was referring to a whole way of life, as Rhees said, ". . . the 'hardness' was really a criterion of the sort of life that was worth while."[15] The "hard way" for Wittgenstein was not unlike Kierkegaard's desire to return to "primitivity," the need to reexamine the fundamental questions in an intensively personal way. The "hard way" made better "human beings" (a term often used by

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[11]P. L. Holmer, "Kierkegaard and Philosophy," unpublished essay, p. 8.

[12]Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling,* trans. W. Lowrie (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1954), p. 23.

[13]As found in Wittgenstein, *Z,* 457.

[14]R. Rhees, *Without Answers* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969, p. 169.

[15]*Ibid.,* p. 170.

Wittgenstein to commend a person's genuineness and deep honesty). Rhees further commented:

> Part of what (Wittgenstein) meant (I think) was that in philosophy there are no 'means of transport' by which you can reach your objective. No developments *outside philosophy, for* instance, can make philosophy easier. Nor are there any developments which will make it possible to reach results which were impossible before. There can be nothing like the service which computers bring to mathematics. But neither can we hope for the development of new and simpler techniques which will enable us to carry out the whole thing much more simply, without having to go through all the trouble which used to beset us before.
>
> The philosophical difficulties have to be met and worked through. There is no sort of 'simplification,' which will make them any less difficult.[16]

Primitivity" and the "hard way" call us back to a philosophical maxim that never loses its force: "The unexamined life is not worth living." Philosophy's difficulties like life's difficulties must be "met and worked through." Theology's difficulties, too, require a similarly "hard way." And, as in philosophy, there are no developments *outside* theology (no 'means of transport') which can make theology easier!

Going "the bloody hard way" gives philosophy and theology its quality of *depth* – it renews the spirit of the "tried oldster" who saw his faith, even the classical good life, as "a task for a whole lifetime." Wittgenstein's philosophical life-style had this 'hard,' passionate quality about it. Such a quality armed him, like Kierkegaard, with a similiarly "neutral" and indirect stance. Nothing is new under the sun; only the way one sees things is new. Wittgenstein's stance is also a *descriptive* one; it enables him to look closely at the fundamental questions. His strategy, like Kierkegaard's, combines rigorous intellectual and personal passion with an analytically descriptive method. Together they give us a new means by which we can scrutinize theology "piece by piece and get the coil spring in place." Let us now see something of Wittgenstein's strategy.

In mid-life, Wittgenstein once equated "brilliance" with "the riches of the spirit," and though he knew this was not "the ultimate good," he yet wished he "could die in a moment of brilliance."[17] To his death,

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[16]*Ibid.*, p. 170f.

[17]R. Engelmann, *Letters from Ludwig Wittgenstein with a Memoir*, trans. L. Furtmüller, ed. B. F. McGuiness (New York: Horizon Press, 1968), p. 55ff.

Beginning here, five paragraphs in the next few pages are revised from section I of my article "Wittgenstein and Descriptive Theology," *Religious Studies*, Oct., 1969, pp. 1-5.

Wittgenstein's philosophical career was filled with the riches of the spirit. As tormented as he may have been, he was deeply passionate and was continually forcing a reappraisal of current beliefs and the historical usefullness of traditional concepts. His call for a "changed mode of thought and of life" gave to us a new "way of looking at things" (Z, 461) or a new "way of seeing" (*Inv*, I, 144); it armed us with the tools to attack philosophical and theological problems without old presuppositions.

In a class lecture, Wittgenstein is reported to have said: "How much we are doing is changing the style of thinking . . . and how much I'm doing is persuading people to change their style of thinking."[18] In this remark the burden of intellectual honesty and integrity is placed squarely on the shoulders of those who engage in the process of thinking. He was not proposing an alternative thesis (or theses) – a new philosophy – to which we must change our thought. Rather, he was forcing us to rethink what we have thought – to reflect on what kinds of things shaped our original thinking. Wittgenstein's own style of 'persuading people' was not that of a Sophist, but that of a philosopher fully involved in the art of thinking: urging, prodding, chiding, impatiently scolding, holding us back, telling us to go on, and even pleading that all who would engage in the same art do so with the same involvement. "No one," remarked Drury speaking of Wittgenstein, "had such power to shake the pillars of one's complacency."[19]

In still another context, Wittgenstein remarked: "The philosopher is not a citizen of any community of ideas. That is what makes him into a philosopher" (Z, 455). One of the most unique characteristics of Wittgenstein's strategy was his rejection of theories, systems of ideas, or what he called "one-sided dogmatism" (following William James).[20] As a philosopher and citizen of the world, he was obliged to consider the analysis of "all facts,"[21] according to his friend Engelmann, and all facts make themselves known within what Wittgenstein called the "forms of life" of individuals and communities.

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[18]Wittgenstein, *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*, edited notes by students. Ed. Cyril Barrett (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1966), p. 28.

[19]M. O'C. Drury, "A Symposium: Assessments of the Man and the Philosopher," in K. T. Fann, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Man and His Philosophy* (New York: A Delta Book, 1967), p. 71.

[20]Cf. in Drury, *ibid.*, p. 68, and G. Pitcher, *The Philosophy of Wittgenstein* (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1964), p. 218. Cf. also *Inv*, I, 593.

[21]Engelmann, *Letters, op. cit.*, p. 79. His close friend, Paul Engelmann, reported that Wittgenstein "saw life as a task," and that "he looked upon all features of life as it is, that is to say *upon all facts*, as an essential part of the conditions of that task; . . ." (*ibid.*, italics mine). If for no other reason, this alone would confirm the unity of the man and his thought, and the importance of seeing that "all facts", religious ones included, make up the conditions of man's life.

With regard to the analysis of such facts – the forms of life of individuals and communities – Wittgenstein suggested that "The work of the philosopher consists in assembling reminders for particular purposes" (*Inv.*, I, 126). The assemblage of *linguistic* reminders was always his first move. Then one could see more clearly the many purposes for which those reminders could be used. In this essay, it could be said that we are assembling a host of reminders for the purpose of better understanding theology.

Wittgenstein's strategy comes as close to being purely "descriptive" as one can find. As a descriptive philosopher he avoided becoming "a citizen of any community of ideas." His neutrality made philosophy more difficult. But, as Rhees notes in discussing how Wittgenstein saw philosophy, you must "take the *difficulties* seriously. Contrast: 'There are some rather tortuous difficulties here, but we need not go into these. We just want to get the general idea.' Whatever else that is, it is not philosophy."[22]

Because of the difficulties, Wittgenstein saw that one must take very seriously the nature of language and more specifically, the use of concepts. Language and its concepts are the basic tools for communication in philosophy as well as in life. "A philosophical problem," he said, "has the form: I don't know my way about" (*Inv*, I, 123), which means "we do not *command a clear view* of the use of our words. – Our grammar is lacking in this sort of perspicuity" (*Inv*, I, 122). And by "words" Wittgenstein does not mean we need more definitions or a larger lexicon. Rather we need to know the larger context of the word's use, its grammar. By grammar he meant to imply both the ordinary "workings of our language" and the "deep disquietudes" of language use, that is, those situations where our language is used to express something deeply important about our life.

"Philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language" (*Inv*, I, 109). It is within this broad philosophical concern about language, that Wittgenstein sharpened many related issues. concept formation, the uses of ordinary speech forms, the function of rules and inference, and the understanding of human linguistic behavior as a "form of life." Even when concerned about such classical issues as perception, free will, aesthetic questions, ethics and religion, Wittgenstein was occupied with the understanding of the structure and function of language, its concepts and grammar.

In a letter to Engelmann in 1917, Wittgenstein advanced a thought which permeated his philosophical career. In commenting on

[22]Rhees, *Without Answers*, op.cit., p. 171.

a poem by Uhland, he said: "And this is how it is: if only you do not try to utter what is unutterable then *nothing* gets lost. But the unutterable will be – unutterably – contained in what has been uttered!"[23] He rethought this many times. He continually puzzled as to whether language could bridge the so-called gap from the effable to the *ineffable.*[24] Above all, the ineffable was real in every sense for Wittgenstein. Though propositions may have found limits in scientific expression (as was clear in the *Tractatus*), the ineffable remained imbedded in the stream of life. It was his later thought (from his 1930 lectures at Cambridge to his death) that penetrated the ebb and flow of that stream. He stressed that it was the *grammar of natural language* which is the fabric of life itself. The concept of "grammar" was introduced by Wittgenstein in order to emphasize both the patterns of speech-forms and the fabrics of human life into which these forms were woven. Norman Malcolm noted an aphorism of Wittgenstein's that he believed summed up a good deal of his philosophy: *"Ein Ausdruck hat nur im Strome des Lebens Bedeutung"* (An expression has meaning only in the stream of life).[25]

The stream of life for Wittgenstein was caught up, so to speak, in the grammar of our natural languages. This grammar is public, displaying our forms of life. At this point, Wittgenstein's philosophical strategy merged with his life-style. For him the ineffable is *shown* in the world; it is "contained in what has been uttered." The process of understanding the world is a process of understanding its grammar.

Wittgenstein's investigations of the grammar of natural language yielded at least two important conclusions. In brief, these conclusions show language to be, first, a unique interplay between ordinary speech-forms and human acts, and second, a highly conventional and creative social phenomenon. More importantly for theological purposes, Wittgenstein helps us get clear on the fact that words and concepts are learned through instruction rather than given to consciousness through any intrinsic means, i.e. where meanings are said to be intrinsic to reality or the world. A concept's meaning is the result of a social process and not dependent upon an inherent possession of the concept itself.

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[23]Engelmann, *Letters, op. cit.*, p. 7.

[24]I am grateful to professor Stephen Toulmin for the suggestion of the terms "effable" and "ineffable" in gaining a perspective on this point of continuity in Wittgenstein's career. In several conversations in New Haven (fall, 1967), Mr. Toulmin was also very helpful in confirming and sharpening my views on the relationship of Wittgenstein's philosophy to theology. On this later point, however, I owe the largest debt to my teacher and friend, professor Paul L. Holmer, Yale University.

[25]N. Malcolm, *Ludwig Wittgenstein, A Memoir,* with a Biography by Georg Henrick von Wright (London: Oxford U. Press, 1958), p. 93.

In another striking aphorism Wittgenstein said: "Philosophy unties knots in our thinking; hence its results must be simple, but philosophizing has to be as complicated as the knots it unties" (Z, 452). Theology, it could be said, should also be simple and untie knots in our thinking about God. But the knots in theology are complicated and demand the "hard way" for their solutions. Paul Holmer, in his essay "Wittgenstein and Theology," commented on one of theology's complications. He writes:

> Instead of knowing about God, via the theology, one gets a new kind of problem, namely, trying to understand theology and theologies. *One began trying to understand God and hoping that theology could help; one ends up trying to understand the theologies...*
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> ...the thought that Wittgenstein brings to all of this is not the possibility of a more subtle theology – one which will hold the field for a generation or two. Neither does he say such stupid and sweeping things as "all theology is nonsense" or "thinking does not pay." He gives no consolation to the thoughtless or to the impatient. He is not against thinking, but he also thought the problems and how we got ourselves into such morasses, where disagreements proliferate and confusions multiply. Instead of yielding to an easy skepticism, it seems to me that Wittgenstein's work urges more concern with details and closer scrutiny of the source of the theologian's puzzlement.[26]

It is a sad commentary on theology that we are led to the point of having to understand its mode of talking about God, instead of seeking theology's help in our own understanding of our beliefs. There have been too many systems offered – too many 'isms' and new theologies – "where the promises are so vast a feeling of incredulity creeps in." We seem pressed in our time to try and understand theology and theologies.

There is some irony in theology's 'vast promises' and their mode of delivery. Theology should be completely simple, but it is not. Kierkegaard intended some irony in his mode of delivery, but never pretension. Often, as he suggested, his work may seem "...too strict to be edifying, and too edifying to be strictly scientific."[27] The dialectic and poetry in his literature often cover his direct intention to edify – but part of the point is the 'strictness' itself. He brings us through a

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[26]P. L. Holmer, "Wittgenstein and Theology," *Reflection* (the Yale Divinity School *Journal*) Vol. 65, no. 4 (May, 1968), p. 2. Italics mine.

[27]Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, trans. W. Lowrie (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1954), p. 142. Published with *Fear and Trembling*.

process, a mode of inquiry, to an *indirect* confrontation with ourselves which is, in the end, edifying. Wittgenstein's strategy, too, is *indirect.* Once again, it forces us to re-examine the fundamental questions – those which involve us in an intensively personal way. The combination of 'strictness' ("the hard way") and the genuinely personal is vital to understanding theology. Theology more than addressing problems, addresses persons. The problems and the error which gives rise to them are there primarily through the mismanagement of the linguistic evidence in theological arguments and the misappropriation of Christian concepts in understanding the faith.

Wittgenstein's strategy can aid theology by forcing upon the theologian a reappraisal of the language he uses to talk about God. Parenthetically, Wittgenstein urged us to think about theology "as grammar" (*Inv*, I, 373) – as the ordinary expressions in a man's life about his beliefs, as the way man conceptually refers himself to God: "O God my God my help in ages past, my hope for years to come. . ." Just as Wittgenstein said that philosophical investigations should be investigations into the grammar of our natural languages (*Inv*, I, 90), so too, theological investigations should be investigations into the grammar of how men conceptually refer themselves to God – into the language and the life-style used in the living out of faith.

IV. Concluding Note:

> Kierkegaard wrote in his preface to *The Sickness Unto Death:*
>
> > All Christian knowledge, however strict its form, ought to be anxiously concerned; but this concern is precisely the note of the edifying. Concern implies relationship to life, to the reality of personal existence, and thus in a Christian sense it is seriousness; the high aloofness of indifferent learning, is, from the Christian point of view, far from being seriousness, it is, from the Christian point of view, jest and vanity. But seriousness again is the edifying.[28]

Theology, however well formulated, is empty unless it implies "relationship to life, to the reality of personal existence." Therein lies its seriousness. And its seriousness implies that we have depth in our understanding of its language, even more, what Wittgenstein would call its "grammar."

The depth that theology has presses upon us as a seriousness about our lives and a care in the application of its concepts. The actions of men and women tied up with theological concepts – actions like praying, understanding the beatitudes, loving God and one's self, suffering,

[28] *Ibid.*, p. 142f.

or singing a hymn – give theology its depth. These actions, properly understood, are the "how" of understanding theology. The philosophical strategies provided us by Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein give us a way of looking into the workings of these faithful actions; they force us to focus on how Christians use concepts in the expression of their deepest passions.

Finally, it becomes increasingly clear that at the point where Kierkegaard insisted on "existing as" and the "how" of being a Christian, and where Wittgenstein stressed that understanding grammar meant that we master a technique, that is, that concepts cannot be disjoined from the forms of life in which they figure, that there is a meeting of minds. Both put the stress on what Kierkegaard termed "elevated emphasis" – emphasis with one's life. The language we use has its meaning only insofar as it catches up something of the quality of a human's existence. Theology's language, too, must catch up the passionate qualities of a man's existence. The fundamental strategy for understanding theology, therefore, should involve the description of how men of faith actively employ theology's concepts. It should look into the workings of theology's concepts and the actions of men who use such concepts. This strategic ploy is perhaps the most important step in moving us from the all too familiar plain of theological error toward the rediscovery of its truth.