

# Thinking about Religion through Wittgenstein

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## ABSTRACT

This essay is an attempt at thinking through Wittgenstein's philosophy in order to clarify some aspects of what people call "religion." Central to it is an exploration of the polarity between belief and practice, and an attempt to reframe that polarity in terms of the mutually interconnected processes of being and learning. It seeks to address the old question of persuadability, of what makes for conviction and effective critique, particularly in relation to faith in God and in "another world." It then attempts to apply Wittgenstein's insights to fundamental disagreements in the Islamic tradition over the proper understanding of apparently contradictory representations of God in the Qur'an. Finally, it takes up the question of what Wittgenstein called "the craving for generality," and thus the part abstraction plays in the progressive thrust of our secular, capitalist form of life.

## Keywords

religious reasons, tradition, practice, abstraction, the secular

In what follows I try to think about religious tradition through Wittgenstein's writings. My aim is not to provide an account of his view of religion, and still less to make a contribution to anthropological theory. It is, in the most banal sense, an exercise in thinking. I turn to his philosophy to help me clarify some ideas about what is called "religion" in English. I am not, of course, looking to construct a universal definition of that word. My usage of the word "religion" in this piece as well as in other writings assumes that it is not always necessary to provide a definition in order to make its meaning comprehensible because and to the extent that its grammar already does that.<sup>1</sup> Following Wittgenstein, I take it that the sense of particular words shifts together with the practices of ordinary life.

I begin with some remarks Wittgenstein made on an old anthropological classic, Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*,<sup>2</sup> because they constitute a pivotal moment in the development of his later philosophical enquiries into the dependence of language and being on each other. What I have learnt from reading him is not only the need for thinking about the limitation of language in understanding the world but also the dissolution of language into everyday behavior, where shared life goes on in habitual ways. In speaking of things done habitually I don't mean that they are done mechanically. When a practiced pianist plays, thoughtfully and with feeling, a piece of music she has mastered without having to read the score, one can say that signs have dissolved into her hands. To say that is not to imply that the activity is meaningless but that it is the result of practice that has eventuated in an ability to act in a particular way. Embodiment is a general state; *ability* is a potentiality. And ability is always *the ability to do a specific thing that one has learnt to do*. In this context embodiment is necessary but not sufficient,

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<sup>1</sup> The assumption that definitions are essential for understanding the meaning of utterances is challenged by Wittgenstein: "When I give the description: 'The ground is covered with plants' – do you want to say I don't know what I am talking about until I can give a definition of a plant?" *Philosophical Investigations (PI)* §70.

<sup>2</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough*, ed. Rush Rhees (Retford, Nottinghamshire: Brynmill Press, 1979), written in the 1930s but published long after his death.

for at the center of the human soul is the ability to learn to use language.<sup>3</sup>

This, incidentally, is one of the main reasons why I think Wittgenstein's philosophy is important to anthropology, to anthropological attempts at understanding unfamiliar forms of life by means of participant-observation: learning to do what others do by attending to what is said and what is not said because it is taken for granted – in short trying to *live* like other human beings – does not necessarily require access to their private thoughts but to the ability to grasp a particular form of life and make it (however provisionally) one's own. In that sense participant-observation is not merely the distinctive method of a particular academic discipline but the essence of all learning.

Of course Wittgenstein recognizes that signs, and the meanings of words, are central to learning. My point is simply that he not only helps us see that looking for meanings *underneath* signs (whether in the form of writing, voice, or gesture) is mistaken because meanings are embodied in practice. He also makes us aware that to the extent that a form of life has been mastered through practice – once the practice becomes part of the everyday, of an ordinary form of life – explicit signs may become unnecessary. Hence Wittgenstein offers us a way of thinking about the problem of persuadability as an aspect of learning or relearning. He regards persuasion not only as situated practice but also, very importantly, as a process in time. However, that introduces another problem with which it should not be confused. As David Hume said long ago, custom and habitual conjunction persuade us to believe that certain things must be true.<sup>4</sup> He was of course talking about the *causes* of belief in order to contrast it with its *reasons*. But when Wittgenstein urges us to attend to practices that are mastered what emerges is neither the origin of belief nor what truly validates it. What emerges is simply the formation of the ability to live a distinctive form of life. Wittgenstein doesn't reify "reason."

Religious conviction seems to me paradigmatic in our *secular* understanding of persuasion in general, of our openness or resistance to being moved away from absurdity and toward the truth by the use of reason. Following my brief venture into the question of persuasion in what follows, I try to apply some of Wittgenstein's insights to a historical argument over religious words in which apparent contradictions in the Qur'an are responded to differently within the Islamic discursive tradition. Although I deal schematically with the views of two categories that Orientalists have named "rationalists" and "traditionalists" respectively, I do so primarily not as the views of particular historical persons (although I cite one of them at length) but as contrasting positions for the purpose of argument. I also want to stress that since I am dealing here essentially with *my* tradition, I am at once anthropologist and informant, trying not only to report on something to those who might be interested in it, but also to explore and understand for

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<sup>3</sup> "And in a certain sense, the use of language is something that cannot be taught, i.e. I cannot use language to teach it in the way in which language could be used to teach someone to play the piano – and that of course is just another way of saying: I cannot use language to get outside language." Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Remarks* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1975), 54.

<sup>4</sup> David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, edited and introduced by Peter Millican (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007). Hume is also attacking here the authority of experience in the classical sense that was gradually supplanted from the seventeenth century on by that of *experiment*, and the consequent emergence of the philosophical problem of induction.

myself what aspects of the Islamic tradition might mean. The result is that I sometimes speak at once from inside and outside because the two positions cannot always be kept apart – even if we think it desirable as a matter of principle to do so.

So first: Wittgenstein on James Frazer. Wittgenstein was deeply dissatisfied with Frazer's explanation of religious practice (ritual) in terms of its supposed origin. What he finds particularly objectionable is Frazer's extension of judgments of truth or falsity, of sense or nonsense, from propositions where such judgments are appropriate to situations where they are not. Of course, error and deception exist in every aspect of life, but Wittgenstein's main point is that religious practice isn't necessarily based on a *theory* about the world; it is first and foremost *a way of being*. His critical reading of Frazer marks a moment in the development of his questioning of the way the world is imagined essentially as a collection of *things* and language as essentially the means of representing them. Not only is language *not* a thing aligned or misaligned with the world ("the totality of facts") but it is part of the complex, indeterminate ways that humans inhabit the world by forming and reforming their life.

Incidentally, Wittgenstein's use of the concept "form of life" doesn't seem to me necessarily to denote "an entire culture." It refers to any distinctive way in which human beings speak, behave, think, and interact.<sup>5</sup> To understand behavior as a form of life is to understand how language articulates, characterizes, and shapes its human distinctiveness. The main reason why the translation of concepts from one language into another is often difficult and always incomplete is that language and life are inextricably bound together. Which is why I often refer to the body that inhabits language as "sensible" (stressing the living body's senses) or as "ensouled" (pointing to its potentiality).

It was Bronislaw Malinowski who produced a new, highly fertile concept in anthropological discussions about language: "mythic charter."<sup>6</sup> Myths, he proposed, were not childish accounts of the past but narratives that functioned as justifications of social claims and institutions in the present. This utilitarian approach was subsequently extended by anthropologists to other narratives in tribal societies, such as genealogies. Ernest Gellner later polemicized that Wittgenstein's instrumentalist doctrine of meaning ("don't look for the meaning, look at the use") was not original to him but to Malinowski. There is no evidence that Wittgenstein knew of Malinowski's work, but Gellner's attack shows how easy it is to vulgarize Wittgenstein: the latter doesn't simply argue that meaning is necessarily determined by use (thus generalizing Malinowski's interpretation of the meaning of myth), but that the multiple ways in which language is used – by sender *and* by receiver – requires us to investigate the complex relationships of discourse to life through the idea of "grammar." The distinction that seems to me central to

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<sup>5</sup> Thus Wittgenstein: "to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life." *PI* §19.

<sup>6</sup> "Myth fulfills in primitive culture an indispensable function: it expresses, enhances, and codifies belief; it safeguards and enforces morality; it vouches for the efficiency of ritual and contains practical rules for the guidance of man. Myth is thus a vital ingredient of human civilization; it is not an idle tale, but a hard-worked active force; it is not an intellectual explanation or an artistic imagery, but a pragmatic charter of primitive faith and moral wisdom." Bronislaw Malinowski, "Myth in Primitive Psychology," in *Magic, Science and Religion; and Other Essays* (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1948), 101.

Wittgenstein's work is between on the one hand words, phrases, and discourses that are unfamiliar or difficult to understand, and on the other those that require no explanation, no act of interpretation, no suspicion, because their grammar – how they are inserted into life – has been mastered. The latter requires not merely a proper grasp of what is said but a meaningful response to what is said.

For Wittgenstein the term “grammar” has a much wider and more flexible sense than the conventional one dealing with the principles of sentence construction (tense, gender, mood, syntax, etc.), a sense that opposes grammatical to factual concepts. This example of an extension of the commonly understood sense of “grammar” to a newer one shows, incidentally, that for Wittgenstein the word, like all words, doesn't have a permanently fixed meaning, that different occasions of use may involve highlighting different elements bound together temporarily in the word by what he calls “family resemblances,” and that it is therefore analogical reasoning (as opposed to deductive logic) that facilitates extensions of meaning – the invention of new meanings.

The word “meaning” itself has a complex grammar as it appears in different domains of life – hence the possibility of confusion when one attempts to create a theory of meaning or to provide a universal definition of it. For Wittgenstein there is no absolute principle for determining all meanings. It is grammar that helps one understand the different ways words can or can't make sense in particular forms of life. What is important for Wittgenstein is not simply how “meaning” is to be determined but whether and if so how something becomes intelligible – and usable – in given situations.

Thus in opposition to his earlier view of language in the *Tractatus*,<sup>7</sup> in the *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein presents the figure of a city that has grown unevenly over time, and is not only used but also inhabited, and experienced, differently.<sup>8</sup> Of course words signify, but they also do infinitely more.<sup>9</sup> The analogy of language as a city emphasizes that physical structures *and* words change in accordance with different purposes as the circumstances of life (or of the growing city) change – and that like any living city, *language is never complete*. Language is not a single thing but an indeterminate number of practices that emerge in different times and that serve gradually to shift the boundaries of possible sense.

This awareness of contingency doesn't mean, however, that the concept of *essence* has no place in trying to understand language. On the contrary.<sup>10</sup> “Essence is expressed

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<sup>7</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1922).

<sup>8</sup> “Our language,” he writes in a famous passage, “can be seen as an ancient city: a maze of little streets and squares, of old and new houses, and of houses with additions from various periods; and this surrounded by a multitude of new boroughs with straight regular streets and uniform houses.” *PI* §18.

<sup>9</sup> The philosopher perhaps most famous for developing this point in illuminating ways is J.L. Austin. See *How To Do Things With Words* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, second edition, 1975).

<sup>10</sup> “This finds expression in questions as to the essence of language, of propositions, of thought. – For if we too in these investigations are trying to understand the essence of language – its function, its structure, – yet *this* is not what [traditional questions about the essence of language] have in view. For they see in the essence, not something that already lies open to view and that becomes surveyable by a rearrangement, but something that lies *beneath* the surface. Something that lies within, which we see when we look *into* the thing, and which an analysis digs out. ... We ask: ‘What is language?’, ‘What is a proposition?’ And the answer to these questions is to be given once for all; and independently of any future experience.” *PI* §92.

by grammar,” Wittgenstein writes. “Grammar tells what kind of object anything is.”<sup>11</sup> And the *objects* expressed by grammar aren’t only palpable, bounded things, but also social arrangements, moral judgments, attitudes, feelings, actions, and the concepts by which they are known. Getting to know grammar is learning the *intelligibility* of words – of discourses in worldly situations. It is to engage with the world in and through language even as a child learns to engage with it and live in it. And with the child’s (and adult’s) always incomplete learning of language, and through her emplacement in the tradition that tells her not simply *that* she is doing something wrong or right but *what* it is she is doing, the child acquires not only the skill to use language but also the “self” that she develops and modifies through life.

The self cannot make itself because and to the extent that to construct itself it must already be able to conceive its own purposes. It is pre-existing *being* (ensoulment) and not the individual self that makes the self. The resources needed for making the self are not only those available to the individual *ab initio* but those that present themselves, sometimes ambiguously, in events. Which is also why the self is not necessarily the one that knows itself best.<sup>12</sup> The precondition of the self is the potentiality of an ensouled body, the living ability to act intentionally in the indefinite web of life, to have a world – a language – together with others (we, you, she, he, they) who are themselves *persons* in process of being made and remade.<sup>13</sup> This potentiality enables the self to look back on herself in and through the multiple occasions of her language and tradition as a coherent story. But self-knowledge cannot rely simply on itself: there is always need for another who can trace the patterns of its uncontrolled desires and actions.<sup>14</sup> In our modern world, however, the potentiality for self-deception and willful destructiveness we no longer wish to call “the soul.” There is no object that can be called a soul, we say, because its existence can’t be measured independently of the physiological processes of the body; the soul is merely a pre-scientific superstition, or an archaic term used when counting persons. Yet it is the soul that enables the child to develop a self, to learn – not simply what exists in the world but how one can (or can’t) live with humans and animals in it.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> *PI* §371 and §373. And the following phrase is then appended in brackets: “(Theology as grammar.)”

<sup>12</sup> The Qur’an attributes this condition to the self’s duality: a “soul that urges evil” (*an-naḥs al-ammāra bi-ssū’*, Q12:53) and a “blaming or criticizing soul” (*bi-nnaḥsi-l-lawwāmati*, Q75:2): that is to say, the tendency to mislead oneself, on the one hand, and to overcome that tendency through increasing awareness of right and wrong on the other.

<sup>13</sup> In Arabic the word *naḥs* does duty both for “the self,” for “the same,” as well as for “the soul.”

<sup>14</sup> Hence the Qur’an declares that “it is We who have created the individual human being (*insān*), and We know what his innermost self whispers within him: for We are closer to him than his jugular vein” (50:16). Inner belief is not sufficient to constitute a faithful life, although God knows what someone’s inner belief is.

<sup>15</sup> The child, says Wittgenstein, is not a metaphysician. “Children do not learn that books exist, that armchairs exist, etc. etc., – they learn to fetch books, sit in armchairs, etc. etc. ¶ Later, questions about the existence of things do of course arise. ‘Is there such a thing as a unicorn?’ and so on. But such a question is possible only because as a rule no corresponding question presents itself. For how does one know how to set about satisfying oneself of the existence of unicorns? How did one learn the method for determining whether something exists or not? 477. ‘So one must know that the objects whose names one teaches a child by an ostensive definition exist.’ – Why must one *know* they do? Isn’t it enough that experience doesn’t later show the opposite? ¶ For why should the language-game rest on some kind of knowledge? 478. Does

Wittgenstein was not a believer in a conventional sense of the word. And although he was deeply concerned with the question of certainty he did not deal directly with the ambiguous concept of probability (at once subjective and objective) that is so central to our modern form of life.<sup>16</sup> I am reminded here of a well-known saying (*hadīth*) of the Prophet Muhammad that accepts different degrees of belief/faith: “If any of you sees something reprehensible, then let him stop it with his hand, and if he cannot do that then with his tongue, and if he cannot do that then in his heart – and that is the weakest kind of faith.”<sup>17</sup> The word “faith/belief” (*imān*), on which I will have more to say later, may appear to refer here to degrees of certainty about an external world, but in fact it is used in a sense that is neither epistemological nor aleatory but *dispositional*. Even “the weakest kind of belief” is presented neither as a degree of belief that lacks what could be regarded as adequate evidence; nor as a stable frequency in the human world. It is described as weak because of the subject’s inability to *act* to stop something s/he recognizes as wrong. But in this saying it remains a form of faith because the believer’s *trust* still ties him/her to the world in which he/she must try to live.<sup>18</sup>

So when Wittgenstein says, “I am not a religious man but I can’t help seeing every problem from a religious point of view,” he is not confessing to a *belief* in the modern sense of the word but referring to a *disposition*, a way of being in the world. If we take him seriously, his explorations of grammar, including the grammar of religious language-games and religious forms of life, can be seen as relevant for both his philosophy *and* his own ethical life. Although he is interested in how concepts function in the thinking of analytic philosophers, what largely motivates him is not simple philosophical curiosity. His lifelong concern was to try to express and live according to the requirements of what he called “ethical values,” something he regarded as central to religion but difficult to address in the modern world.

Of course Wittgenstein was respectful of scientific knowledge although he deplored the moral influence that an *ideology* of science had not only on philosophy but also on all modern life. Georg Henrik von Wright put it more provocatively: “The metaphysics which Wittgenstein is fighting is thus not one rooted in theology but one rooted in science. He is fighting the obscuring influence on thinking, *not of the relics of a dead*

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a child believe that milk exists? Or does it *know* that milk exists? Does a cat *know* that a mouse exists?” *On Certainty*, §476-478; italics supplied.

<sup>16</sup> As Ian Hacking reminded readers, “probability” as it emerged in the early modern West has two aspects, one subjective and the other objective: “It has to do both with stable frequencies and with degrees of belief. It is, as I shall put it, both aleatory and epistemological.” Ian Hacking, *The Emergence of Probability* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 10.

<sup>17</sup> *Man rā’a minkum munkaran fa-l-yaghayyirhu biyadihi fa’in lam yastati’ fa bilisānihi fa’in lam yastati’ fabiqalbihi wa dhālik ad’afu-l-’imān*. This *hadīth* is contained in canonical collections such as *Sahīh al-Bukhārī*, but the point I would stress here is that children typically learn of its authority (and that of other *ahādīth*) first by hearing it recited by a familiar and trustworthy adult – as I did when I was a child – and subsequently by trying to understand and instantiate it practically.

<sup>18</sup> This line of thinking is reflected in the well-known doctrine of Abu Hanifa (medieval founder of one of the four Sunni schools of Shari’a) to the effect that a Muslim who has made the declaration of faith (*shahāda*) does not cease to be a believer (*mu’min*) however sinful, and cannot therefore be denounced as an unbeliever (*kāfir*). Judgment pertaining to the sincerity of belief in this matter was reserved to God.

*culture but of the habits of a living culture.*”<sup>19</sup> Of course, the science alluded to by von Wright is an ideological construct whose function is to legitimize political and economic policies as well as to control what it defines as “religion.”<sup>20</sup> For science is not a single discipline based on a distinctive theory and a single method that enables it, and it above all, to access and represent the truth: the modes of reasoning and practice used in the systematic accumulation of knowledge in oceanography, climatology, geology, health studies – not to mention the “social sciences” – are very different from those employed in astrophysics or subatomic physics. Besides, because “scientific problems” and “technological development” are closely interconnected, the direction and techniques of research in each of these domains are significantly shaped by the requirements of governmental institutions and private corporations, both of which evaluate the significance of the research for their own purposes and fund or defund it accordingly. In other words, the sciences are subject to different kinds of assessment, intervention, and direction, both internal and external. There is no *single* scientific community that decides on all these matters, although there are different scientific projects. And in each case only those who have mastered the practices of the relevant scientific project, those who know what model is to be followed, acquire the authority to speak for it. The popular view of “the scientist” as a fundamentally detached, critical seeker after truth is merely vulgar ideology.<sup>21</sup> So it might perhaps have made better sense for von Wright to have said that Wittgenstein is fighting the worship of “science” as the supreme way to understand and deal with the world. It is precisely what Wittgenstein would call the generalization or reification of “scientific theory” that facilitates its ideological function as the guarantor of a secular culture.

So a critical aspect of Wittgenstein’s philosophy is the need to attend to differences and convergences between being and doing that make up our forms of life: using and being used by language (*words can strike one physically*), expressing and attending to bodily movement and sound, choosing silence and stillness over verbalization. But if we accept what his friend and student Maurice O’Connor Drury described as a strong “ethical demand” in all of his thinking then what von Wright calls his fight against obscurantism can be seen as a kind of moral-religious critique.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Cited in Jacques Bouveresse, “Wittgenstein, von Wright and the Myth of Progress,” *Paragraph* 34 (3), (2011): 317, italics added. However, the second sentence in von Wright’s statement seems to me problematic in appearing to suggest that “theology” belongs to the past and therefore has no relevance for the present.

<sup>20</sup> See Paul Feyerabend, *Against Method* (London: New Left Books, 1975), and especially his *Science in a Free Society* (London: New Left Books, 1978). Feyerabend knew Wittgenstein personally (they were both Austrians and philosophers with science and engineering backgrounds), and says in the latter book that Wittgenstein was prepared to take him on as a student in Cambridge but died before that could happen.

<sup>21</sup> There is a long modern history of philosophical attempts to demarcate “science” from “non-science” beginning with the positivism of the Vienna Circle to Popper’s “falsifiability criterion,” and Lakatos’s “program,” as well as Kuhn’s distinction between “normal” and “crisis” science, and Feyerabend’s attack against the idea of a single principle of “rationality” in science. These and many others, including especially Polanyi, Schaffer, Shapin, Latour, and Woolgar have greatly complicated the question.

<sup>22</sup> M. O’C. Drury, “Conversations with Wittgenstein,” in *Recollections of Wittgenstein*, ed. Rush Rhees, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984). Ray Monk puts it this way: Wittgenstein insisted “that the possibility of remaining uncorrupted rested entirely on one’s self – on the qualities one found within. If

### Critique, persuasion, obedience

The epistemological as well as political criticism of religion is essential to the credibility of secularism as an ideology. Critics point to the virtual impossibility of proving God's existence in the Age of Science, and consequently argue for the rejection of religious authority in political and social matters that so easily leads to disorder and violence. In this view, responsible criticism is seen as fundamentally dependent on the nation state's secular order and the right to free speech (including the criticism of religion) guaranteed to its citizens who in turn are expected to have secular sensibilities. But here I want to ask the question as to whether critique is possible in Wittgenstein's philosophy, and if so then whether it is necessarily secular in character.

Those who complain that the important task of political criticism and epistemological critique can't be reconciled with a philosophy that insists it "leaves everything as it was,"<sup>23</sup> also tend to cite Wittgenstein's statement "We can only *describe* and say, human life is like that."<sup>24</sup> But in fact such statements remind us that every purpose must begin with a description, and that what we do, or think we do, when we describe is not always the same thing.<sup>25</sup>

If language is rooted in ways of being and doing, description is not merely necessary *to* critique; it may *be* critique. Take the grammar of the concept "cruelty." It usually implies an individual *intention* to cause suffering. When that word is used to describe suffering inflicted in war (described as collateral damage) or in peace (e.g., the industrial production of meat), it is often thought to be inappropriate because the suffering in such cases is not intended. However, a concept of cruelty to which intention is *not* essential makes a new description of responsibility for suffering possible. To shift one's understanding of responsibility one may have to *re-describe* a form of life in another way than the one generally familiar to us. We do, of course, have a grammar for this word that doesn't assume intentionality – as when a disease, such as Alzheimer's, is said to be "cruel." This usage shifts direct attention from perpetrator to sufferer, and thus invokes – implicitly – the need for judging our forms of life and our needs. This sense of "cruel" no longer depends on the notion of a blameworthy agent (someone to be punished) but on the question of how we can address human and animal pain in our form of life.

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one's soul was pure (and disloyalty to a friend was one thing that would make it impure), then no matter what happened to one 'externally' ... nothing could happen to one's *self*. Thus it was not external matters that should be of the greatest concern, but one's self. The *Sorge* [anxiety, concern] that prevents one facing the world with equanimity is thus a matter of more immediate concern than any misfortune that may befall one through the actions of others." Ray Monk, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius* (New York: Penguin Books, 1991), 52-53.

<sup>23</sup> *PI* §124.

<sup>24</sup> *Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough*, 3, italics in original.

<sup>25</sup> "What we call '*descriptions*' are instruments for particular uses. Think of a machine-drawing, a cross-section, an elevation with measurements, which an engineer has before him. Thinking of a description as a word-picture of the facts has something misleading about it: one tends to think only of such pictures as hang on our walls: which seem simply to portray how a thing looks, what it is like. (These pictures are as it were idle.)" *PI* §291, italics in original.

The purpose of critique in ordinary life is to persuade an interlocutor (if not also to relish his discomfort or doubt) and to get him, in some sense, to behave differently. Criticism is intrinsic to learning how to do something properly. In our modern enthusiasm for critique based on statistical models of objective knowledge (“science”), we sometimes tend to forget that persuasion works through ordinary language – proverbs, jokes, anecdotes, exhortation, promise, appeal, shaming, intimidation, encouragement, etc. – and thus through the force that ordinary language carries, as well as through the appeal to the banalities of ordinary life shared by the one persuading and the one to be persuaded. Ordinary language is inserted into the various motives for persuading and being persuaded: the desire to avoid harm and unpleasantness, to gain advantage, to please someone, or simply to do what is right, whether by secular or by religious standards. Criticism thus issues from a particular description that in turn is framed in a particular tradition of thought and practice. It has various purposes that are not necessarily emancipatory. But first and foremost criticism is an *activity* rooted in and directed at what binds people to their forms of life, not simply an expression of “rational argument.”

Alasdair MacIntyre, a thought-provoking philosopher from whose writings I have learnt much over the years – and who himself was greatly influenced by Wittgenstein – has put the matter this way: “all reasoning takes place within the context of some traditional mode of thought, transcending through criticism and invention the limitations of what had hitherto been reasoned in that tradition; this is as true of modern physics as of medieval logic. Moreover when a tradition is in good order it is always partially constituted by an argument about the goods the pursuit of which gives to that tradition its particular point and purpose.”<sup>26</sup> The only qualification I would make to this statement is that the notion of “good order” may itself be subject to dispute – that while ethical self-cultivation has by definition a teleological structure, a discursive tradition is at once open-ended and expressive of an essential orientation: when the world changes, tradition provides the means by which “good order” (not only our mode of thought but also our ways of acting and living) can be argued over and reformulated. In other words, while the learning and mastery of behavior do of course have point and purpose, “good order” is an ideal. When it is felt that things on the whole are not as they *should* be, there is a general sense that “good order” needs to be restored as an immanent arrangement and orientation that gives sense to constituent practices. So “good order” too is embedded in its time, at once eternal and contingent. As I see it, a discursive tradition is neither an identity-defining framework (as *against* other traditions) nor a nostalgic yearning for the past; it is an insistent present, one that disciplines those who belong to it through a heritage (a language, an activity, a way of being).

Conversation and polemic do take place across traditions, but they do not necessarily lead to the victory of “the more rational tradition.” Instead, they may lead in time to a more productive engagement with the conceptual resources of one’s own discursive tradition in the light of criticisms made by another. Good order is not merely what gives tradition its point and purpose (a thought); it is what a tradition seeks to maintain (an activity). Precisely because and to the extent that a form of life is articulated

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<sup>26</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (London: Duckworth, 1981), 206.

as a tradition (ways of living, and attachments between persons, that are passed on from one generation to another) it is also a mode of inhabiting uncertainty and disagreement over what is “inside” and what is “outside.” Several traditions – especially but not only those now known as “Abrahamic” – may share a space of possibility, relating to one another in agonistic, opportunistic, and mutually supportive ways. Rigid exclusivity (“either victory or death”) is the sign of what MacIntyre would call a moribund tradition whereas a living discursive tradition aims at mutual interrogation and continuous learning. So where a criticism comes from may be less significant than how it engages with current understanding – one’s own and that of others – because that is what, in great part, determines its persuasiveness.

And yet MacIntyre insists that there *is* a rational basis for choosing between contending traditions – traditions that confront each other from “outside.” Citing Aquinas’s debate with the followers of the Muslim Aristotelian philosopher Ibn Rushd, he argues that Thomist Aristotelianism provides “a standpoint which suffers from less incoherence, is more comprehensive and more resourceful in one particular way. For among those resources ... is an ability not only to identify limitations, defects and errors in the light of the standards of the opposing view itself, but also to explain in precise and detailed terms what it is about the opposing view which engenders just these particular limitations, defects and errors and also what it is about the view which must deprive it of the resources required for understanding, overcoming, and correcting them.”<sup>27</sup> This is an attractive argument (isn’t the liberal belief that “the better argument always wins” part of its attraction?), but can’t I reasonably claim that *in time* it may be possible to overcome or explain apparent defects by returning to the resources of my own tradition? In other words, while MacIntyre points to criteria for judging the rational vulnerability of particular traditional beliefs, he doesn’t say *when* arguments based on those criteria become decisive. Grasping the force of a criticism leveled at my entire tradition from “outside,” my being persuaded by that criticism, requires a change not merely in my opinions but more importantly in my relationships to those who help sustain and give meaning to my life – my relatives, friends, and neighbors whom I value and trust, as well as the dead generations who have provided me with ideals, and the children I am educating for the future. So *what time am I allowed* for consulting others in my tradition, especially those I regard as friendly (and therefore supportive) authorities, or for my thinking more deeply about the question and learning more about the practical implications of abandoning my form of life? All the consequences of accepting an argument for change do not emerge immediately, but when does *waiting to see* before one makes a final decision become unreasonably long? When does my reluctance to be persuaded of an argument against my tradition change from being *unreasonable* to being *irrational*? Wittgenstein observes, “Giving grounds, however, justifying the evidence, comes to an end; – but the end is not certain propositions’ striking us immediately as true, i.e. it is not a certain kind of *seeing* on our part; it is our *acting*, which lies at the bottom of the language-game. ¶ If the true is what is grounded, then the ground is not *true*, nor

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<sup>27</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Inquiry: Encyclopedia, Genealogy, and Tradition* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), 146.

yet false.”<sup>28</sup> In other words, unlike *belief*, *action* takes time to happen, so if action is at the center of the language-game how long does it take for persuasion as an action to *fail* to occur?<sup>29</sup> When Rationality is brought in as a method, doesn’t dialogue collapse?

If surrender to what is regarded as a superior position does occur immediately it is then arguably closer to what secularists contemptuously call a “religious conversion” than to a fully reasoned conclusion, because the embrace or the rejection of a tradition depends essentially not on propositions but on practices extended, taught, and grasped over time. It is achieved not by the simple theoretical superiority of the critic’s discourse but by the sense it makes to the listener’s life. Understanding the grammar of concepts is a necessary part of the critical assessment of particular arguments but not necessarily (“rationally”) decisive. Persuadability as my capacity for, or vulnerability to, being converted to another opinion – or to another form of life at a particular moment (in *this* time of my life and the life of my tradition) – may also depend on my willingness to deceive myself in the critic’s favor. Can I not, at any rate, *evade* the fundamental doubt that my external critic seeks to plant in me by refusing a theoretically mandated defense and resorting instead to the practice that has shaped me in my tradition? Can I not refuse to speak *in this moment* in its defense, and instead resume my ordinary life? And if I can, why is that “irrational”?

These worries, incidentally, have serious implications for understanding the difference between the temporal constraints in political persuasion and the time available to persuasion in an intimate, personal context. The time needed to determine what the truth is, to evaluate the “emotional charge”<sup>30</sup> of the words used, may be extended more easily in intimate situations than in modern electoral politics. Which is perhaps why it is easy for political strategists to manipulate the unconscious predispositions of those they call (somewhat contemptuously) “persuadables.”<sup>31</sup> To manipulate people’s unconscious predispositions is not necessarily to assume the existence of “the Unconscious” as a site of symbolic language that can be accessed from “outside” and translated semiotically – a process that Wittgenstein, despite his admiration for Freud, was strongly critical of.<sup>32</sup> But agonistic politics, like analysis, does assume the strategic deployment of critique directed at those who are to be persuaded.

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<sup>28</sup> *On Certainty* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1969), § 204-205.

<sup>29</sup> Ian Hacking reflects the computational view common in our nondeterministic world: “We cannot regard an action as rational unless it computes the probabilities. Beliefs are accompanied by probabilities.” But are all beliefs computable? If truth and falsehood (whatever their degree of probability) are grounded, then – as Wittgenstein pointed out – *the ground* of my belief (my entire discursive tradition as a form of life) is itself neither true nor false and cannot be computed. Ian Hacking, “Was There a Probabilistic Revolution, 1800-1930?” in *The Probabilistic Revolution*, ed. L. Krüger, L.J. Daston, and M. Heidelberger, Vol. 1 (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987), 52.

<sup>30</sup> I take this expression from R.G. Collingwood’s *Principles of Art* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1938), Chapter VIII, in which he introduces the idea that every speech has what he calls “an emotional charge” – including, interestingly, a cold “sterilized” delivery that presents itself as devoid of emotion but is actually a way of persuading the hearer to ignore its distinctive emotional claim.

<sup>31</sup> See the whistleblower Brittany Kaiser’s critique of Cambridge Analytica in her book, *Targeted* (New York: Harper Collins, 2019).

<sup>32</sup> See Jacques Bouveresse, *Wittgenstein Reads Freud* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995) [Paris, 1991].

There is a considerable modern literature that seeks to distinguish *criticism* in the sense of censure from *critique* in a sense derived from Kant. Thus Judith Butler refers to a distinction between the concepts of criticism and critique as follows: “criticism usually takes an object, and critique [reformulating the original Kantian sense] is concerned to identify the conditions of possibility under which a domain of objects appears.”<sup>33</sup> The former may be seen as the rendering of a (moral) judgment and the latter as a practice by which the assumptions that make an object real, or an argument credible, are revealed. What interests me here, however, is not the delineation of two different concepts but the question of how a complex vocabulary, with partly overlapping senses (Wittgenstein’s “family resemblances”) and different kinds of feeling, works to persuade – in life as in literature. Thus while Raymond Williams considers literary criticism (he doesn’t use the term “critique”) to be infected with the ideology of “good taste,” and suggests that a more constructive conception of criticism would be to regard it as a practice rather than a judgment, I am prompted to respond: When a literary criticism’s object of engagement (novel, play, epic) involves the recounting of particular human consequences of (mis)judgments made in the course of a life, it may assist the reader in identifying particular aspects of the story and thus developing his or her capacity for moral thinking. For an alert reader or member of a play’s audience this does not necessarily mean following the critic’s prodding about “good taste,” but it may involve *both* judgment *and* practice (to judge is not equivalent to being judgmental).

Immanuel Kant sought to undermine the illusions of metaphysics by arguing about the limits of reason and the epistemological possibilities these limits entailed (“critique”). But isn’t the Enlightenment principle that “maturity” requires one to “think for oneself,” to refuse all authority, also an instance of censure? It is not without significance that the German word *Kritik*, as used throughout Kant’s *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, has had to be rendered in English translation (*Critique of Pure Reason*) sometimes as *criticism* and sometimes as *critique*. Is that because the translator thought more clearly than Kant? Hardly. “Our age,” so goes a famous passage, “is in especial degree, the age of criticism, and *to criticism* [Kritik] *everything must submit*. Religion through its sanctity, and law-giving through its majesty, may seek to exempt themselves from it. But they then awaken just suspicion, and cannot claim the sincere respect which reason accords only to that which has been able to sustain the test of free and open examination.”<sup>34</sup> To deny the right to hold on to something essentially because it is rooted in the habits and commitments of ordinary life rather than submitting it continuously to the criticism of hypostatized reason (“continuously” because once may not be enough) is to suggest that criticism *as censure* and epistemology *as practice* should not eventually be kept separate. They are together embedded in a form of life.

Kant’s motto for the Enlightenment – *Sapere aude!* (“Dare to know!”) – is also a

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<sup>33</sup> Judith Butler, “The Sensibility of Critique,” in *Is Critique Secular? Blasphemy, Injury, and Free Speech*, Townsend Papers in the Humanities No. 2 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).

<sup>34</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, translated by N.K. Smith (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1965), 9, emphasis added. Smith notes on the same page that he translates the German *Kritik* sometimes as “criticism” and sometimes as “critique.”

basic ideal that justifies modern government surveillance, for purposes of social welfare as well as of political control. Johann Georg Hamann, Kant's contemporary and acquaintance, translated this famous slogan as *Noli admirari!* ("Marvel not!"), which he modified from the Biblical expression *Nil admirari*, ("to marvel at nothing").<sup>35</sup> To be ready to criticize everything, says Hamann, is to attack all that is valuable, all that is deserving of admiration (including, one might add, the slogan *Sapere aude!*). For Hamann it was always the *moral style* of engagement that was paramount. To demand that "to criticism everything must submit" is already to demand that the first step to defeat be taken. Criticism may be entirely justified and critique may yield invaluable results, yet it may not persuade if the result is disparagement. That may not matter, of course, if the primary aim is to humiliate prior to forcing out the truth – which is the aim, after all, of torture that can be justified by some high-minded liberal principle. But *persuasion* works best when the language of power is not used in confronting the one to be persuaded.

When Kant stipulated what he considered the conceptual preconditions making knowledge of what exists possible, he argued that going beyond the limits defined by these preconditions was to enter the domain of the unknowable. Subsequent philosophers criticized him for attempting in this way to place epistemological limits on what could be thought, because the very distinction between knowable things and things not knowable implied that one would know *when* one was actually encountering the latter – and therefore (paradoxically) one would have *some* knowledge of what was said to be unknowable. This paradox about the limits of thought is taken up by Wittgenstein in the Preface to *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*,<sup>36</sup> where he introduces the idea (later elaborated) that the limits of thought are not epistemological but grammatical – although the word "grammatical" as a way of tracing the limits of meaningful linguistic usage has not yet appeared in the *Tractatus*. He would later argue explicitly that it is the grammar of "language-games" embedded in forms of life that define the limits of sense and render some of the things philosophers say about the world to be nonsensical or paradoxical.

Although Wittgenstein seems to hold that there is no position external to language for discussing what language represents he is not committed to the view that what can't be represented doesn't exist. His main claim, as I understand it, is that one cannot articulate any *thoughts* outside of language and that the term "nonsense" applies to

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<sup>35</sup> Johann Georg Hamann's comments in his letter to Christian Jacob Kraus, translated in *What Is Enlightenment? Eighteenth-Century Answers and Twentieth-Century Questions*, edited by James Schmidt (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 145. The phrase "Marvel not, my brethren, if the world hate you" appears in 1 John 3:13 (King James Version).

<sup>36</sup> "The book deals with the problems of philosophy and shows, as I believe, that the method of formulating these problems rests on the misunderstanding of our language. Its whole meaning could be summed up somewhat as follows: What can be said at all can be said clearly; and whereof one cannot speak thereof one must be silent. ¶ The book will, therefore, draw a limit to thinking, or rather – not to thinking, but to the expression of thoughts; for, in order to draw a limit to thinking we should have to be able to think both sides of this limit (we should therefore have to be able to think what cannot be thought)." *Tractatus*, 27.

linguistic practices, including the language of mathematics.<sup>37</sup> (Nonsense does not, of course, always call merely for dismissal: it may provoke further thought issuing in a valuable outcome.)

In mathematics, conventional abstract signs indicating procedures to be performed (e.g. “+,” “÷”) and symbols standing for unspecified quantities (e.g. “x,” “y”) are integral to the languages of science and technology, to understanding “the natural world” through manipulation and control – and human beings as part of nature. For Wittgenstein mathematics doesn’t simply represent something about the world that human beings have discovered; it consists of a developing body of techniques that have been created and unified for particular human purposes.<sup>38</sup> That doesn’t mean, of course, that he regarded numbers as merely products of mind. As a trained engineer, he knew that they were crucial to the resolution of practical problems not only in the making of machines but also in the making and remaking of social arrangements. But one well-known paradoxical consequence of the centrality of mathematics to practical knowledge has been that while classical science assumes a determinist world, human beings (and the nation states they live in) are believed to be freely acting. The shift to uncertainty in relatively recent developments in scientific thinking – a concept given a law-like character through probability theory – helps to resolve this paradox,<sup>39</sup> so that the increasing dominion of chance is seen to enlarge the space of human control of the “social” and “natural” worlds.

In *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein tries to show how the limits of *sense* are constituted by the grammar of concepts, by how concepts (including mathematical concepts) are actually used in a form of life. But when the grammar of concepts is translated as discursive tradition – as the open-ended passing on of behavior and styles of argument in which language and life across generations are intertwined – temporality becomes essential to the ways meaning is made and unmade, where “inside” and “outside” are not permanently fixed, because the distinction has to do with what is taken for granted

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<sup>37</sup> Thus: “While logic expresses very general and ubiquitous norms of our language, arithmetic regulates only a certain part of our language: it fixes and develops the grammar of number words and their use in determining quantities of various kinds. But in as much as using a language constitutes a form of life..., elementary mathematics, as part of our everyday language, constitutes an aspect of our form of life.” Severin Schroeder, “Mathematics and Forms of Life,” *Nordic Wittgenstein Review*, Special Issue (2015): 112. To the extent that mathematics is language-in-use, it presents itself as supremely capable of *objectifying* and rendering objects *commensurable* in contrast to language rooted in immediate experience, by allowing particular forms of life to be disassembled into elements that can be re-categorized and rearranged through direct administrative intervention.

<sup>38</sup> “It was not for nothing that Wittgenstein cited Spengler as one of the important influences on his thought. Chapter 2 of *The Decline of the West* is dedicated to a survey of the different mathematics of different cultures. For Spengler viewed Mathematics as a historical phenomenon and historical creation – not as something that has been progressively *discovered* in the course of human history, but as a motley of techniques and concepts that have been progressively *created*, and one might add, progressively unified, throughout human history. This, it seems to me, is an important legacy which Wittgenstein seized. ‘Mathematics’, he wrote, ‘is after all an anthropological phenomenon’ (RFM 399). ... It is a system of norms that determine what is called ‘calculating’, ‘inferring’, ‘working out’ magnitudes and quantities of countables and measurables...” P.M.S. Hacker, “Wittgenstein’s Anthropological and Ethnological Approach,” ms. dated 17 August 2009 / 21 August 2009 / September 9, 2009, 5.

<sup>39</sup> See, for example, Ilya Prigogine, *The End of Certainty: Time, Chaos, and the New Laws of Nature* (New York: Free Press, 1997).

only in and for a particular time.<sup>40</sup> This is why for Wittgenstein “external” criticism is possible. And why the very process of argument can be said to consist of a series of translations: “You said ... and that means,” and “No, what I meant...”

Wittgenstein’s point that arguments draw their plausibility from a “system” of statements and attitudes that one has learnt and not from an indisputable axiom or foundation is often quoted but sometimes misunderstood. “All testing, all confirmation and disconfirmation of a hypothesis,” he writes, “takes place already within a system. And this system is not a more or less arbitrary and doubtful point of departure for all our arguments: no, it belongs to the essence of what we call an argument. The system is not so much the point of departure, as the element in which arguments have their life.”<sup>41</sup> But is “system” (the German word Wittgenstein employs is the same) quite the right word here? In its rigid sense it doesn’t fit comfortably with Wittgenstein’s idea that reasoning draws on different purposes, feelings, conditions in life, and meanings of words that may overlap with one another and shift over time – elements by which the point we are trying to make becomes persuasive to particular audiences at particular times and places. Wouldn’t a term indicating that circumstances are unevenly and contingently bound together (like “web” or “network,” say) be more appropriate to the point Wittgenstein is making than “system”?<sup>42</sup> But there is of course an important sense in which a spontaneous whole is necessary to its parts and vice versa. So long as we don’t think of this arrangement as permanently fixed, the use of “system” here makes sense. (This returns us to the idea of a tradition’s “good order” that I discussed above.)

Ambiguity in ordinary language, an ever-present source of linguistic creativity as well as misunderstanding, also undermines the notion of a permanent “system.” While ambiguity is generally understood as uncertainty about what an original word, phrase, or passage was intended to mean, the original intention may not necessarily be a primary concern in evaluating it. Ambiguity may reflect contradictory motives in the reader or hearer and the use he wants to make of what he reads or hears. In any case the doer is rarely the final authority in determining what she has done: the language through which she acts is not hers alone. So although *everything* can’t yield in response to criticism at

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<sup>40</sup> “If I see the thought symbol ‘from outside’, I become conscious that it *could* be interpreted thus or thus; if it is a step in the course of my thoughts, then it is a stopping-place that is natural to me, and its further interpretability does not occupy (or trouble) me.” *Zettel*, Note 235, 43e.

<sup>41</sup> *On Certainty* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1969), §105. See also the well-known remark: “If the true is what is grounded, then the ground is not *true*, nor yet false. If someone asked us ‘but is that *true*?’ we might say ‘yes’ to him; and if he demanded grounds we might say ‘I can’t give you any grounds, but if you learn more you too will think the same.’ ¶If this didn’t come about, that would mean that he couldn’t for example learn history.” *Op. cit.*, §205-§206. Certainty comes from learning.

<sup>42</sup> Thus in *Philosophical Investigations* he writes: “To say ‘This combination of words makes no sense’ excludes it from the sphere of language and thereby bounds the domain of language. But when one draws a boundary it may be for various kinds of reason. If I surround an area with a fence or a line or otherwise, the purpose may be to prevent someone from getting in or out; but it may also be part of a game and the players be supposed, say, to jump over the boundary; or it may shew [sic] where the property of one man ends and that of another begins; and so on. So if I draw a boundary line that is not yet to say what I am drawing it for.” *PI* §499. He also puts it this way: “I am inclined to distinguish between the essential and the inessential in a game too. The game, one would like to say, has not only rules but also a *point*.” *PI* §564, italics in original.

the same time, *boundaries* of the network within which arguments take place do themselves change according to the purposes in hand. There are “countless different kinds of use of what we call ‘symbols’, ‘words’, ‘sentences’. And this multiplicity is not something fixed, given once for all; but new types of language, new language-games, as we may say, come into existence, and others become obsolete and forgotten.”<sup>43</sup> To be plausible an argument must therefore resonate with different elements in the network, with the same word used differently, and possibly ambiguously, in ordinary life.

To secularists the notion of following a religious rule conveys the sense of an arbitrary commanding power opposed to reason, and of religious obedience in ordinary life as irrational because propelled by emotion. But can’t religious obedience be recognized as an integral part of the *reason* of ordinary life? Wittgenstein argues that the temptation to regard the meaning of a particular practice as being “governed” by a rule leads us to think of the rule as causative in relation to the instances where it is “obeyed,” but that the grammar of a rule is more complicated than this. Thus while the meaning of a word can be grasped in an instant, its use according to a verbally stated rule cannot because that requires recognition of *the same* practice being repeated into an indefinite future. “But we *understand* the meaning of the word when we hear or say it; we grasp it in a flash, and what we grasp in this way is surely something different from the ‘use’ which is extended in time!”<sup>44</sup> To the extent that there is a paradox here, it comes first from the question of how we establish “the same” (analogical reasoning is central here). Second, it comes from the fact that we think of meaning as a private (purely mental) *thing*, and so we think of the meaning of a rule as at once immediately apparent to consciousness and at the same time extended indefinitely into an unknown future. But Wittgenstein then points out: “‘obeying a rule’ is a *practice*. And to *think* one is obeying a rule is not to obey a rule. Hence it is not possible to obey a rule ‘privately’: otherwise thinking one was obeying a rule would be the same thing as obeying it.”<sup>45</sup> The point is *not* that obeying a rule cannot in any sense be associated with the mind. It is that *the rule and its application are one*, that the “authority” of a rule is not separable from “obedience” to it or from the shared life that embodies it. When rule and application are one, the tendency – on the part of both believers and non-believers – to explain “religious” authority in causative terms can be seen to be specious. Once again: the persuasiveness of a particular criticism is rooted in a particular form of life.<sup>46</sup>

The idea that the meaning of a stated rule necessarily depends on how it is interpreted, that interpretation fixes the meaning of the rule, is mistaken, says Wittgenstein, because interpretation requires criteria of its own for how a proper

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<sup>43</sup> *PI* §23.

<sup>44</sup> *PI* §138.

<sup>45</sup> *PI* §202.

<sup>46</sup> “Is what we call ‘obeying a rule’ something that it would be possible for only *one* man to do, and you do only *once* in his lifetime? – This is of course a note on the grammar of the expression ‘to obey a rule’. ¶It is not possible that there should have been only one occasion on which someone obeyed a rule. It is not possible that there should have been only one occasion on which a report was made, an order given or understood; and so on. – To obey a rule, to make a report, to give an order, to play a game of chess, are *customs* (uses, institutions). ¶To understand a sentence means to understand a language. To understand a language means to be master of a technique.” *PI* §199.

interpretation of “interpretation” is to be carried out – and that leads to an infinite regress (i.e., by what criteria is something to be interpreted? How are the criteria themselves to be interpreted?). One consequence of this confusion is that a considerable range of different acts can be made to accord with a given rule through interpretation – and this is a well-known source of disagreement and bitter dispute in a discursive tradition undergoing pressure to change. Wittgenstein challenges the claim that the authority of the rule is its origin – that the origin is the authority. Our confusion is rooted, he says, precisely in separating “a rule” from its practice, reifying it, and then regarding the rule as the foundation of what the practice means: “It can be seen that there is a misunderstanding here from the mere fact that in the course of our argument we give one interpretation after another; as if each one contented us at least for a moment, until we thought of yet another standing behind it. What this shews is that there is a way of grasping the rule which is *not* an *interpretation*, but which is exhibited in what we call ‘obeying the rule’ and ‘going against it’ in actual cases. ¶ Hence there is an inclination to say: every action according to the rule is an interpretation. But we ought to restrict the term ‘interpretation’ to the substitution of one expression of the rule for another.”<sup>47</sup> Strictly speaking, one shouldn’t speak of following a rule as a sequence of events (a statement of the rule followed by obedience to it) but of the activity itself that expresses the practitioner’s grasp of the rule.

Wittgenstein’s account of rule-following may help one to understand the grammar of the modern concept of “ethics” that he linked with “religion.” Kant saw morality as legislating rules for oneself, and thus the moral person as split into two, at once the free legislator and the one bound by legislation.<sup>48</sup> In each case “morality” in our modern form of life is thought of as following rules, and a practice is evaluated “morally” as sound or defective according to a rule. But his approach suggests that one should argue not that “moral rules” have now been detached from their religious source, and in this way become secularized, but that the emergence of a freely choosing agent in our modern form of life calls for the reconstruction of a modern form of ethics expressed in the grammar of “rights” and “obligations,” where both belong to the free and yet responsible agent: ethics is now a matter of judging freely to act according to rules that are rooted in

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<sup>47</sup> *PI* §201. Martin Stone on the question of interpretation in the law: “Wittgenstein is not denying that we are free to use the *word* ‘interpretation’ in any way we like, and we may still want to go on calling every application of a rule an interpretation of it. Wittgenstein, however, proposes that, for the sake of clarity, we restrict the word ‘interpretation’ to the substitution of one linguistic expression for another: if we follow the proposal we can allow that it is sometimes helpful, but not always necessary to interpret a rule in order to follow it. What is at stake here is not merely a terminological point.” Martin Stone, “Focusing the Law: What Legal Interpretation is Not,” in *Wittgenstein and Law*, ed. Dennis Patterson, (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2004), 283.

<sup>48</sup> The Durkheimian approach to the concept of morality has been especially important in anthropological thinking – but it leads to an unhelpful relativism. See the interesting paper by Joel Robbins, “Between Reproduction and Freedom: Morality, Value, and Radical Change,” *Ethnos* 72:3 (September 2007), that attempts to synthesize the Durkheimian (stressing social normativity) with the Kantian (focused on freedom) approaches to morality.

conscience.<sup>49</sup> John Caputo puts the matter well: “If an obligation is ‘mine’ it is not because it belongs to me but because I belong to it. Obligation is not one more thing I comprehend and want to do, but something that intervenes and disrupts the sphere of what the I wants ... I do not know what if any hidden forces I obey when I give heed to this otherness, by what forces I am bound over. Is it the voice or face of God? Or the deep momentum of a network of laws embedded in the ‘tradition,’ of what is handed down to me by the ages? Or by some still darker law of the unconscious, some blind repressed event that keeps repeating itself on me? Or even some evolutionary survival mechanism aimed at keeping the species going? I cannot say.”<sup>50</sup> In other words, the force of obligation here is rooted not in rules but in a form of life that *obliges* what one can or cannot do.

### **Interpreting the Qur’an? Or Listening to It?**

What happens if the members of a particular religious tradition come to see serious contradictions or absurdities in divine discourse? One concern of believers is that a collapse of faith will follow: if one is not to abandon the tradition altogether one must find ways of translating what appears to be absurd or contradictory into something that isn’t. In the Islamic tradition – as in some other traditions – philosophers have attempted to resolve scriptural paradox by hermeneutic devices in order to forestall or overcome corrosive doubt.<sup>51</sup>

Western scholars of Islamic thought often categorize medieval Muslim philosophers and theologians who give precedence to reasoned speculation of the meaning of scriptural language (such as Mu‘tazilites) as “rationalists,” and those who insist on the immutable value of every word (such as Hanbalites) as “traditionalists.” The latter tend to forbid speculative interpretation of the Qur’an and are therefore said to be literalists. But I want to pose a question that precedes this classification: What constitutes a faithful attitude to the Qur’an? Alternatively: How is divine revelation recognized – or doubted?

The Qur’an contains apparent contradictions in its words about God: On the one hand there are epithets, physical and psychological (God has a face and hands, and he expresses anger, compassion, etc.) that are usually attributed to human beings. This seems to imply that God is a magnified human being with unlimited powers and unfathomable emotions. On the other hand there is the famous chapter of the Qur’an known as *al-ikhhlās* that rejects God's representability: “(1) Say: He is God the indivisible, (2) God the timeless, (3) He is neither cause nor is he caused, (4) and there is nothing at

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<sup>49</sup> But as Elizabeth Anscombe pointed out (in “Modern Moral Philosophy,” *Philosophy* 33, no. 124, [January 1958]), “conscience” can lead one to do the vilest things.

<sup>50</sup> John D. Caputo, *Against Ethics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 8.

<sup>51</sup> My comments in what follows were prompted by an unpublished paper comparing use theory in the work of the influential medieval theologian Ibn Taymiyya with Wittgenstein – although my basic questions are different: Muhammad M. Yunis Ali, “*Nazariyyātu-l-isti‘māl ‘ind ibn taymiyya wa fitginshtāyn: dirāsa muqārana.*” My thanks to Islam Dayeh for providing me with a copy of this interesting paper first presented at a conference in Berlin on “Wittgenstein in Arabic” that he organized, and that is now in process of being published.

all like him.”<sup>52</sup> Representation has a dual sense: *making a visible sign stand for* something or someone, and *speaking authoritatively for* another. According to traditionalists, God cannot be represented in either sense. And if he cannot be definitively represented there cannot be contradictory representations of him in Qur’anic discourse. (In Islamic theology there is a term for the elimination of all anthropomorphic elements from the conception of God: *tanzīh allāh*.)<sup>53</sup>

Rationalists find themselves compelled to resolve apparent contradictions in the Qur’an by treating the language in which they appear as metaphorical. For philosophers such as al-Rāzi, the basic opposition here is between reason (*‘aql*) and revelation (*naql*) – or more precisely, between the foundation provided by abstract reason on the one hand and unquestioning obedience on the other. The use of *naql* to refer to the act of “unquestioning obedience” as opposed to *‘aql* – “critical intelligence” – is typically part of philosophical discourse; the more common usage of the term *naql*, however, refers to transference, imitation, tradition. The followers of tradition respond that since God himself declares his revelation to be “clear of any obscurity” (*al-kitāb al-mubīn*), his words should be understood in the way he has uttered them and not in the way some scholars think he must have meant them. The famous Hanbalite jurist and theologian Ibn Taymiyya criticizes proponents of the theory of Qur’anic metaphor (*majāz*). The word *majāz*, he notes, appears quite late in the history of Qur’anic commentary – first used by Abu ‘Ubayda – and that even then it did not have a figurative sense (according to which one meaning is substituted for another) but simply meant *the perfect way in which*

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<sup>52</sup> Qur’an 112. This is not merely a statement of God’s indescribability because, let’s say, God is hidden. It is a declaration that God is not “thing-like,” that he is not divisible by time or subject to causality, that he is not *visible* although he may be *sensed* and *addressed*. God is not a *thing* and nor is he an *abstraction*. Since all *things* can be represented and abstractions made from them (so secular reasoning goes) a god that can’t be represented does not (for all intents and purposes) exist. But the non-representability of God does not equal his absence. To begin with, he can be described by what he is not (negatively). More important, the use of Qur’anic epithets is simply *his* way of making himself accessible in – relatable to – the human world through human language. (Visibility is not indispensable to the treatment of relationships as real.) The Islamic prohibition is based on the concern that to represent something is an abstraction that therefore implies the possibility of abstracting and representing it another way. The Judaic tradition, which shares many concepts and attitudes with Islam, seems to be ambiguous on the point of God’s representability: “Although the claim that God has no image is considered by [the medieval Islamo-Judaic scholar] Maimonides as a principle of faith, it is not so clear that it is accepted in the Bible or in the rabbinic traditions. In the Bible it seems that God does indeed have an image, except that it is forbidden to represent this image in any way. Thus, for example, when Moses asks to see God’s face, God answers, ‘You cannot see my face, for man may not see Me and live’ (Exodus 33:20). Elsewhere it is said of Moses that ‘he beholds the likeness of the Lord’ (Numbers 12:8), and of the elders of Israel that ‘they beheld God, and they ate and drank’ (Exodus 24:11). Isaiah saw the Lord ‘seated on a high and lofty throne’ (Isaiah 6:1), and Ezekiel describes him as having ‘the semblance of a human form’ (Ezekiel 1:26). It thus seems that the prohibition against representation is associated not with the metaphysical question of whether God has an image but with the methods of representing God in ritual worship.” Moshe Halbertal and Avishai Margalit, *Idolatry* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 45-46.

<sup>53</sup> See *Taj al-‘Arūs*.

*Qur'anic verse expresses what it does.*<sup>54</sup> In other words, Ibn Taymiyya implies that the use of *majāz* in the sense of metaphor has no traditional authority in Qur'anic exegesis since it does not appear in the earliest years of Islamic practice and doctrine that begin with the Prophet and his companions. So both “rationalists” and “traditionalists” differ in their attitude to metaphor. But what does the idea of metaphor actually do?

Despite much modern theorizing on the subject, the notion of metaphor is not always clear. Wittgenstein has an interesting take on the matter: “Only if you have learnt to calculate – on paper or out loud – can you be made to grasp, by means of this concept, what calculating in the head is. ¶The secondary sense is not a ‘metaphorical’ sense. If I say ‘For me the vowel *e* is yellow’ I do not mean: ‘yellow’ in a metaphorical sense, – for I could not express what I want to say in any other way than by means of the idea ‘yellow’.”<sup>55</sup> Thus Wittgenstein makes his point in two ways: first, that *what has been learnt can become the basis for making sense of subsequent experience*, and second, that if something cannot be expressed in any way other than the way it is used, then it must be accepted as such, and not regarded as a colorful substitute for the primary sense. So Wittgenstein’s distinction between “primary” and “secondary” senses of a word does not map onto “literal” and “metaphorical” but indicates *a practical process of learning*. When a sequence of usages making a particular concept into the necessary *means* of grasping another, the former concept may be said to be primary and the latter secondary.<sup>56</sup> That is not quite the same as the alternatives usually described as literal and metaphorical. Since the Qur'anic verse is expressed in “the best and only way possible,” as all faithful Muslims believe, there can be no distinction between *alternative* meanings, and so no reason for the exegete to invent metaphorical meanings in place of literal ones.<sup>57</sup>

This applies, incidentally, not only to the Qur'anic epithets already mentioned but also to the qualities of divine perfection known as the ninety-nine “beautiful names of God” (*asmā' allāh al-husna*, a phrase that appears several times in the Qur'an),<sup>58</sup> names memorized as a familiar part of traditional Islamic formation. The fact that these are epithets of God produced by God implies that they have a transcendent force not as propositions that call for coherent evidence, but as utterances enacting the change and

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<sup>54</sup> Ibn Taymiyya, *Al-ʿImān* (Beirut: Maktab al-Islami edition, 1996), 74. I have chosen to draw on this book not as an authority but because it dwells most explicitly and systematically on the centrality of practice for the believer.

<sup>55</sup> *PI*, p. 216.

<sup>56</sup> This, one might note here, is a mode of analogical reasoning, a mode of inference central to the Shari'a tradition based on the Qur'an. An analogy not only leads to a conclusion on the basis of similarity; it also enables an understanding of why what is similar matters.

<sup>57</sup> “It is difficult for us to shake off this comparison: a man makes his appearance – and event makes its appearance. As if an event even now stood in readiness before the door of reality and were then to make its appearance in reality – like coming into a room. ¶ Reality is not a property still missing in what is expected and which accedes to it when one's expectation comes about. – Nor is reality like the daylight that things need to acquire colour, when they are already there, as it were colourless, in the dark.” Wittgenstein, *Zettel*, §59-§60. The hermeneutic uncovering reality in a historical account by means of metaphor is paralleled by the device of setting words in an appropriate context (“appropriateness” depending on the historian's motivation); this of course makes History the touchstone of reality.

<sup>58</sup> First appearance in 7:180.

development of human character.

Incidentally, although *al-‘adl* (“justice, honesty, equality”) is listed among the “beautiful names of God,” it does not appear in the Qur’an as a divine epithet. Perhaps this is because the grammar of “justice” indicates that the concept can be used with reference only to the behavior of human beings toward one another, not to the relation between creator and creation. *Al-‘adl* applies to humans precisely because only *humans can be unjust*. From the fact that *God cannot be unjust*, it follows that *the concept of justice* can’t be used grammatically of his actions in the way it is used to describe human actions. Compassion (*rahma*) by contrast is simply the ability to empathize with a suffering being – whether animal or human – and hence does appear many times in the Qur’an as a divine epithet (*al-rahmān*).

But there is more at stake than a quarrel about how to redefine terms that appear contradictory. Traditionalists do not reject *reasoning*; what they reject is the notion that the Qur’an must be an object of an abstract faculty called “reason” in order to make sense. Ibn Taymiyya puts it this way: “All communities of scholars who specialize in theoretical knowledge and the writing of treatises (*ahl al-‘ulūm wa-l-maqālāt*), all people who engage in trade and crafts (*ahl al-‘māl wa-s-sinā‘āt*), know what they need to know and determine the kinds of knowledge and practice that concern them without talking about definitions.”<sup>59</sup> That is to say, learning to practice a particular form of life is prior to the offering of definitions or redefinitions; one can understand and enact what is required in one’s form of life perfectly well without resorting to definitions. The reasoning used by traditionalists consists of a *practical response to revelation as heard*. To the extent that their form of life is rooted in a divinely guided tradition, they recognize that if the Qur’an is fundamentally addressed by general criteria used in interpreting any text whatsoever, then its meaning can be argued over, and consequently its authority as revelation evaporates.<sup>60</sup> In other words: for rationalists the existence of human epithets attributed to God is a sign of contradictions between signs, a theological scandal that calls for a theoretical explanation and defense of God’s word. For traditionalists the epithets are not representations but an essential means of relating to divinity. Not only do the human passions of security (*amāna*), loyalty, integrity, and faithfulness give the human relations of friendship and love their everyday strength, they also provide the means of grasping and building on relations with the divine, through the formation of virtuous character.

Unlike rationalists, traditionalists are not scandalized by what appear to be contradictions. They seek to build on trust as a predisposition toward the divine voice they hear in recitation.<sup>61</sup> After all, the Islamic creed (*shahāda*, “witness”) does not say, “I

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<sup>59</sup> Ibn Taymiyya, *Juḥd al-qarīḥa fī tajrīd al-nasīḥa* (Beirut: Maktabat al-‘asriyya, 2009), 29. Thus for Ibn Taymiyya (and for Wittgenstein) the practice of philosophy as such is not condemned; its misuse is.

<sup>60</sup> And yet the demand that the Qur’an be read as “purely religious” signals a post-Reformation Christian point of view because and to the extent that it assumes religion has a universal (“spiritual”) essence that can be abstracted from its contingent (“temporal”) domain – from “politics,” “law,” “morality,” “family,” and so forth.

<sup>61</sup> Mohamed Amer Meziane has written an excellent essay on the nontranslatability of the Qur’an regarded as the utterance of the divine voice titled, “The Untranslatable Voices of the Body: Deafness, Aesthetics and the Qur’an” (unpublished ms).

believe in One God” but “I *testify* that there is no other god but the unique God and I testify that Muhammad is his messenger.” It is not, in other words, simply an affirmation of conviction (although it is that too) but a declaration made to a community, of absolute faith and trust in God, and consequently of a commitment to follow a particular form of life.

Of course, trust or faith (*'imān*) in God is shared by rationalists and traditionalists alike – in fact, it is important not to reify the two as permanently fixed and mutually exclusive – but the concept does have a different valence for each side.<sup>62</sup> For rationalists what are experienced essentially as contradictions in the meaning of divine discourse may prompt an immediate desire to resolve them by interpretation; for traditionalists the multiple epithets are grasped as passional means for articulating and shaping one’s life in unconditional surrender to God (*Islām*). So rationalists see contradictions essentially as an intellectual problem whereas traditionalists meet apparent incongruities as the disparate means towards a divinely ordained form of life – by hearing God’s word and reciting it.<sup>63</sup> In the traditionalist approach to divine discourse, however, God is regarded *both* as non-representable (because he transcends the ability of humans to grasp him) *and* as the subject of attributes that bind his creation to him (because, as the Qur’an says: “We are closer to him than his jugular vein”).<sup>64</sup>

The well-known skeptical argument about the qualities that allegedly define God is this: If God is absolute goodness and all-powerful, why does he allow evil to exist in the world? It is sometimes claimed in defense that what humans recognize as evil God permits as a *means* to his end and not as an *end* in itself, and what he aims at is something humans cannot know and cannot therefore label evil. But I won’t speculate along these lines just as faithful Muslims rarely do in their ordinary lives. Instead I give an account of a meeting in a hospital nearly sixty years ago that I still remember vividly.

After my first period of fieldwork among the nomadic Kababish in the Sudan, sometime in the mid sixties, I visited a Kabbashi friend who was dying of diabetes in a Khartoum hospital after a long and painful illness. “What is this, Oh Faki Abdullahi?” I said, affecting a cheerful, somewhat jocular tone. He lay quietly on his bed and

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<sup>62</sup> In modern Arabic, the cognate *ta'mīn* means “insurance,” “social security,” and the like, but the concept of *'imān* has, of course, nothing whatever to do with the modern function of calculating and acting on probabilities. It is used innumerable times in the Qur’an in its core verbal form *amuna* and its various derivatives (of which *'imān* is one) with the sense of absolute security and trust in God.

<sup>63</sup> In his pathbreaking account of the reception of Friday sermons (*khutab*, sing. *khutba*) in Cairo, Charles Hirschkind describes beautifully the way ordinary believing Muslims respond to the recitation of Qur’anic verses as God’s word and not the reciter’s (*The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2006). This might be seen as parallel to a banal distinction in secular theater between the actor and the person he/she seeks to play (whose words are authored by the playwright). But unlike listening to Qur’anic recitation, in the theater one attends to the words as those of the character on the stage and not of the author. I should not, incidentally, be taken as implying that there is no dramatic representation in Muslim tradition – the most famous dramatic representation of a religious historical event in the Shi’a sect of Islam is the annual ritual replay of the death of Hussein (the Prophet Muhammad’s grandson) in the Battle of Karbala (*'ashura*). My point is not only that the distinction between *the author* of the Qur’an and *the one who articulates* it is essential to the Islamic tradition, but that the *repeated* act of recitation is an essential part of the formation of faith.

<sup>64</sup> Qur’an 50:16.

eventually replied: “This is the will of God (*hādhā irādat allāh*).” He was anxious about leaving his little daughter of eight unprotected, but otherwise there was no trace in his voice or gesture of anything other than acceptance. I had heard him use these words several times in a banal way when he was well. For my friend, the expression didn’t signify an object of possible knowledge or speculation. It was simply a reverential expression of trust (what Wittgenstein would call an “avowal”), a mundane part of his form of life, and of death as integral to it. My point is merely that for traditionalists such apparent contradictions (God is All-Merciful, and yet I am dying from a painful and fatal disease) are not to be resolved by resort to philosophical resources – by one set of words being translated into another – but by words expressing a particular form of life. They are presentations not representations: God’s unique utterances issue at once from his indescribability *and* his intimacy. Like “injustice,” “evil” cannot apply to God as an agent – this is, as Wittgenstein would say, a grammatical statement. If, traditionalists say, we don’t always understand God’s self-descriptions it is because we can never see him face-to-face, and we can’t definitively translate his words into words humans produce. For the Qur’an says, “If all the sea were ink for my Sustainer’s words, the sea would indeed be exhausted ere my Sustainer’s words are exhausted. And [thus it would be] if we were to add to it sea upon sea.”<sup>65</sup> So what the faithful can do is not to try and translate his words into other words (to interpret apparent contradictions away) but to awaken the ensouled body into practicing a form of life in submission to him.

The traditionalists, in short, do not see the Qur’an as simply presenting them with conflicting statements about God, but as God speaking to human beings in different human times and different human ways – ways that are impossible to grasp fully in human language but that humans can, nevertheless, respond to. The Qur’an is neither a physical text (*mushaf*) nor a mere vocalization (*tajwīd*); it is God speaking and his audience hearing. References to his attributes, like the declaration of God’s unrepresentability, are divine demands for cultivating God-consciousness (*taqwa*),<sup>66</sup> a form of life to which the virtue of dread-awe-reverence (*rahab*) of God is central.<sup>67</sup> (Dread-awe-reverence can be directed not only at a particular *person* but – as Pascal once

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<sup>65</sup> Qur’an 18:109. Muhammad Asad’s translation prefers “Sustainer” to the conventional “Lord” for *rabb* because (he explains) the latter word also has the sense of raising a child.

<sup>66</sup> The usual translation into English of *taqwa* as “fear of God,” and of the derivative *muttaqi* as “God-fearing,” was regarded as too narrow by some translators and so rendered by them as “one who guards himself against evil” or “one who is careful of his duty.” Muhammad Asad’s *Message of the Qur’an* introduces the term “God-conscious” (Q2:1) on the grounds that while “fear of God” is simply too negative, the alternative translations don’t alert one to “more than one particular aspect of the concept of God-consciousness” (p. 3, footnote 2). Translation from one language to another is often a matter of selecting some values and omitting others; to this translator “God-consciousness” is the most capacious, and therefore the most satisfactory term in this context because it implies a continuous, constructive relationship between the worshiper and her God. But I prefer the construct “dread-awe-reverence” because I do *not* think that fear – or better, “dread” – is simply a negative emotion.

<sup>67</sup> See Qur’an 16:51. From the root verb *rahiba* is derived not only the sense of veneration but also of monasticism (*rahbana*) as essentially inspired by continuous reverence toward God, but also the sense of political terrorism (*irhābiyya*). That the inducement of terror (or dread) should be an attribute of the divine appears at least as scandalous to liberal sensibilities, as his having hands and a face does – especially given the repeated Qur’anic epithets *ar-rahmān*, *ar-rahīm* (the merciful, the compassionate).

reminded us – at the infinite vastness of space, the insignificance of human beings in it.)<sup>68</sup>

What is ultimately being addressed in the Qur'an is what I want to refer to as the ensouled body. The disciplinary modality of the language, the *repeated* exercise of a virtue, heightens and shapes not simply the worshipper's *body* but her *ability* to sense and act as a faithful Muslim before God in the world. According to the Qur'anic view, the more one exercises a virtue the easier – the less deliberately intentional – it becomes. Conversely, the more one gives in to vicious behavior, the harder it is to act virtuously. Hence the expression repeated in the Qur'an to the effect that God "seals the hearts" of stubborn sinners and of "those who refuse to hear." The punishment for repeated perpetration of corruption is to be the sort of person one is: unable to distinguish virtue from vice. The assumption that underlies this perspective is that human beings cannot escape the molding effect of repetitive wickedness. The Qur'an defines the result of repeated wickedness essentially as the inability to know right from wrong: when those who perpetrate corruption on earth are told to cease, they say they are peacemakers, but they are in fact perpetrators of corruption who are no longer aware of the difference between corruption and its opposite.<sup>69</sup> To master the use of a particular grammar, to inhabit a particular form of life, is to be a particular kind of person, including one to whom virtue is *intrinsic*: mastery is its own reward.<sup>70</sup> A virtuous person is one to whom a particular kind of behaviour "comes naturally."

Ibn Taymiyya cites a well-known prophetic saying (*hadīth*), "modest behavior and sense of shame (*al-hayā'*)<sup>71</sup> is an offshoot (*shu'ba*) of faith."<sup>72</sup> That is to say, faith is

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<sup>68</sup> Thus Blaise Pascal: "When I consider the short span of my life, absorbed into the preceding and subsequent eternity, ... the small space which I fill and even can see swallowed up in the infinite immensity of spaces of which I know nothing, and which knows nothing of me, I am terrified, and surprised to find myself here rather than there, for there is no reason why it should be here rather than there, why now rather than then." *Pensées*, translated by Honor Levi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), no.102, 26. Pascal was an important figure in the early emergence of probability theory. He is famous for his argument for belief in the existence of God – that is, for a secular mode of reasoning based neither on dread-awe-reverence nor on trust but on probability. "His famous correspondence with Fermat," notes Hacking, "discusses the division problem, a question about dividing stakes in a game of chance that has been interrupted. The problem is entirely aleatory in nature. His decision-theoretic argument for belief in the existence of God is not. It is no matter of chance whether or not God exists, but it still is a question of reasonable belief and action to which the new probable reasoning can be applied." *The Emergence of Probability* (Cambridge University Press, 1975), 12.

<sup>69</sup> I am here rendering Qur'anic verses 2:11-12: *wa idhā qīla lahum lā tufsidū fī-l-ard qālū innamā nahnu muslihūn, alā innahum hum al-mufsidūn wa lākin lā yash'urūn.*

<sup>70</sup> This view is found also in ancient conceptions of the soul. "We are told in Theaetetus," Iris Murdoch writes, "that the penalty of wickedness is simply to be the sort of person one is." *The Fire and the Sun: Why Plato Banished the Artists* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 39.

<sup>71</sup> The word *hayā'* includes the sense of shame – as in the common reproof, *ya qalīl al-hayā'*! (literally "Oh you of little shame!") – but it sounds, when ordinarily spoken, like *hayāh* ("life"). Ibn al-Qayyim, the medieval jurist and student of Ibn Taymiyya, suggested that the former was derived from the latter "because he who is without *hayā'* (humility/shame/modesty) is dead in this world and wretched in the next." Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, *Ad-dā'i wa-d-dawā'*, edited by Muhammad Ajmal Islāhī (Jeddah: Majma' al-Fiqh al-Islāmī), 168-70. Ibn al-Qayyim is, of course, sketching conceptual connections (within what Wittgenstein might say is a family-concept) and not an etymology of *hayāh*, "life." My thanks to Islam Dayeh for directing my attention to Ibn al-Qayyim.

<sup>72</sup> Ibn Taymiyya, *Al-'imān*, 13.

neither simply external behavior nor merely a state of mind; behavior and mind are together incorporated *in* faith. Faith is not simply a consequence of passive conditioning; it is what shapes and sustains virtuous human life. “Perhaps,” Wittgenstein writes in one of his notes, “one could ‘convince someone that God exists’ by means of a certain kind of upbringing, by shaping his life in such and such a way. ¶ Life can educate one to a belief in God. And *experiences* too are what bring this about; but I don’t mean visions and other forms of sense experience which show us the ‘existence of this being’, but, e.g., sufferings of various sorts. These neither show us God in the way a sense impression shows us an object, nor do they give rise to *conjectures* about him. Experiences, thoughts, – life can force this concept on us.”<sup>73</sup> A corollary of that is that loss of faith in God may be the result not of rational argument but of glacial shifts in the form of life that render an older language increasingly meaningless.

Ibn Taymiyya attacked those who maintained that the essential meaning of faith was internal assent or verification (*tasdīq*), not the performance of rightful actions (*a‘māl*), and that therefore all references to the need for practical action must be taken as merely figurative.<sup>74</sup> If belief, says Ibn Taymiyya, were to be taken only by what was in the heart of another and never by what was expressed in his behavior, how could one ever identify an enemy if all one knew about him was his hostile action?<sup>75</sup> Ibn Taymiyya’s argument is precisely that belief as an inner state is never sufficient in the matter of faith (*‘imān*), that it is not always necessary to know what was in another’s heart in order to know how to act toward them. Inner conviction and outer behavior are often separable but for faith neither is sufficient in itself. (To think one is following a rule is not, as Wittgenstein put it, the same thing as following the rule.) One consequence of this is that Ibn Taymiyya explicitly rejects the doctrine of determinism and predestination, particularly as exemplified by the medieval sects known as Qarmatians and Jahmites,<sup>76</sup> insisting against them that *how one lived* in this world was essential to one’s faith and therefore to how one would be judged after death. In other words, learning and practicing the Islamic tradition – including how to think, to feel, to talk, and to behave – are necessary for acquiring and strengthening *‘imān*.

The point of view of so-called traditionalists, therefore, is that abstract reflection on and theoretically inspired translation of Qur’anic expressions regarded as a problem can be misleading if translation – the substitution of one set of words for another – is taken as the essential way of receiving the meaning of the original (the stronger term Ibn Taymiyya uses for hermeneutics is *mubtadi‘*, “heretical innovation”). Discursive tradition presupposes the mastery of the grammars that constitute ordinary life. While tradition may involve the making of new meanings, traditionalists do not puzzle over meanings in the Qur’an but try to respond to its demand for a specific form of life as they learn it in the tradition.

The Shari‘a is a tradition centrally concerned with virtuous practice in social relations, not with philosophical speculation or theology. Unlike the Qur’an the Shari‘a is

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<sup>73</sup> Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 85-86.

<sup>74</sup> See Ibn Taymiyya, op. cit. 73.

<sup>75</sup> See Ibn Taymiyya, op. cit. 169-70.

<sup>76</sup> See Ibn Taymiyya, op. cit. 109, 120.

a product of human endeavor, and therefore liable to error and in need of renewal. Its basic orientation to Qur'anic language is rooted in a community that shares and passes on language-linked practices. The Shari'a is not, as secular accounts typically have it, a synthesis of morality (based on following divinely authorized rules) and law (the Qur'an actually has very few rules and prescriptions, especially when compared with the Old Testament) brought together in a primitive theology; it is a tradition that seeks to promote and regulate virtues oriented toward God, that aims primarily at understanding (*fiqh*) rather than at logical reasoning (*istintāj mantiqiyyan*). It is neither, strictly speaking, what in modernity is called "morality" nor positive law.<sup>77</sup> The fundamental authorities of the Shari'a to whom the learned in that tradition look begin with the Qur'an, then move to the sayings and practices of the Prophet (*hadīth*) as conveyed by the consensus of the faithful (*ijmā'*), and when these do not provide a satisfactory answer, there is analogical reasoning (*qiyās*). They also include the customary practices of a rightly guided community (*'urf* or *'āda*), that is to say acceptable customs as objects of an ongoing conversation about the past in the context of a shifting present. The Shari'a is not fully this-worldly simply because it is "law," nor would I use the term "secular" to describe the well-known *shar'ī* category of "neutral behavior" (*mubāh*, or *jā'iz*), simply because it relates to behavior that falls outside the four categories of "forbidden," "disapproved," "mandatory," "recommended" – that is, the four categories of behavior governed by explicit divine sanctions that some would therefore regard as "religious law."<sup>78</sup> In short, the Shari'a is a tradition that seeks to guide a worldly community in accordance with God's word, and it must always be kept in what MacIntyre calls "good order."

To repeat, for "traditionalists" the Qur'an is not a text that addresses God's existence as a problem requiring a solution: it is a *demand* for a practical engagement with an essentially indescribable force, an engagement that includes the complex passion of reverence-fear-awe, by which one's form of life is oriented and deepened.<sup>79</sup> Because death awaits every one of us at the end of life (death is integral to life) it helps the living

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<sup>77</sup> Christian and Buddhist monasticism provide famous examples of virtue ethics, but they are not the only kinds of religious "obedience to the rule"; for the faithful Muslim, ordinary life is also a space for following the rules through the Shari'a – in an Islamic state or in one that is avowedly secular, it can also function as "law." For an interesting account of a system of socially functioning Shari'a courts in secular India (although not formally recognized by either the colonial state or its nationalist successor), see Ebrahim Moosa, "*Shari'at* Governance in Colonial and Postcolonial India," in *Islam in South Asia in Practice*, ed. Barbara B. Metcalf, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

<sup>78</sup> I have discussed these categories at some length in a paper about a reforming Egyptian jurist at the very beginning of the twentieth century. My argument there was that reform of the Shari'a that depends on subjecting it to the overriding authority of the modern state (i.e., assimilating it to positive law) amounts in effect to secularization. See Talal Asad, "Law, Ethics and Religion in the Story of Egyptian Modernization," in *Religion and Its Other: Secular and Sacred Concepts and Practices*, ed. H. Bock, J. Feuchter, M. Knecht (Frankfurt & New York: Campus Verlag, 2008).

<sup>79</sup> Some Orientalists distinguish between two approaches to the Qur'anic text: on the one hand, trying to understand what its language means (exegesis), and on the other, responding to it as an aesthetic experience (rhetoric), in other words as interpretive versus experiential. Although I wouldn't argue that enjoying the Qur'an as a secular, aesthetic text is impossible, what this leaves out crucially is the cultivation (formation) of life to which the text is essential precisely because it eventually becomes absorbed into the body's sensibilities in an attitude of complete submission to God.

to define what that life is and to mark the fact that the living subject cannot know what lies “beyond.”

Ibn Taymiyya cites a prophetic saying (*hadīth*) to the effect that “*dīn* [a complex word for which ‘religion’ will sometimes do, but which here means ‘that which one is owed,’ ‘obedience,’ ‘that with which one serves God’]<sup>80</sup> consists of three levels: the highest of them is *al-ihsān* [the cultivation of practical virtues], the middle is *al-’imān* [faith or trust as their foundation], and following it is *al-islām* [complete submission to God].”<sup>81</sup> Faith on the part of the subject includes a willingness to focus on uttering, repeating, and internalizing Qur’anic language in a way that helps her to move further into an alignment with God. Expressions of reverence-awe-terror bind subject to object but without fusing the two. It was precisely the speculative Sufi doctrine that God and his creation are one (*wahdat al-wujūd*) that Ibn Taymiyya forcefully rejected: to posit the fusion of subject and object not only denies the independent character of the force/power that grasps human life from “outside,” it also removes conceptually the transcendent ideal toward which the faithful can and should aspire but can never completely succeed in embodying. Conversely, the assumption held by secular critics of religion that worshipper and worshipped must correspond to completely separate *identities* makes possible the claim that since God does not exist, the believer’s “desire for God” is no more than a desire for a non-existent *person*, and his/her reverence-awe-terror is merely the expression of an emotion directed at nothing.

One might adapt an analogy from another tradition: although there is no *picture* of God in the Qur’an (and hence, no iconography in Islam), its *language* is iconic in the sense of having no fixed locality, no single perspective to which it is bound, and yet having an indescribable force. One cannot *see* God but one can *sense* him. The language does not *represent* something that it resembles (as in the Peircean sense of *icon*) but *presents* practical possibilities.<sup>82</sup> For the faithful individual, God reveals himself directly in his speech. God is not a subject independent of his speech but the divine *intention* of his words is embedded in the *reception* of the faithful.<sup>83</sup> When practices initiated by his discourse come to constitute a faithful form of life they require no interpretation; what they do require is time. There is therefore no call, Ibn Taymiyya says, for theologians and philosophers to interpret what God *really means* by his speech (by translating his words into other signs), or to tell us what he is *really like*, since the words of God alone have the

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<sup>80</sup> For a much fuller account of the many possible English renderings of *dīn*, see Lane’s *Arabic-English Lexicon*.

<sup>81</sup> Ibn Taymiyya, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

<sup>82</sup> Rowan Williams writes: “The traditional icon of the Eastern Christian world is never meant to be a reproduction of the realities you see around you; it is not even meant to show what these realities will ever look like. ... The point of the icon is to give us a window into an alien frame of reference that is at the same time the structure that will make definitive sense of the world we inhabit. It is sometimes described as a channel for the ‘energies’ of that other frame of reference to be transmitted to the viewer [and listener].” *Lost Icons: Reflections on Cultural Bereavement* (London: Morehouse Publishing, 2000), 2.

<sup>83</sup> “‘You can’t hear God speak to someone else, you can hear him only if you are being addressed.’ – That is a grammatical remark.” Wittgenstein, *Zettel* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1967), 124e, note 717. When I report that someone else “claims” to hear God I am not reporting a simple fact but a fact imbued with a distancing value – an expression of agnosticism if not skepticism.

authority to tell us such things.

### **Concluding thoughts**

Wittgenstein, although born and baptized a Catholic, was not “religious,” and yet he has a more provocative understanding of what being a believer might entail than have many apologists and critics. Thus he writes, “Christianity is not based on a historical truth; rather, it offers us a (historical) narrative and says: now believe! But not believe this narrative with the belief appropriate to a historical narrative, rather: believe, through thick and thin, which you can do only as the result of a life. *Here you have a narrative, don't take the same attitude to it as you take to other historical narratives!* Make a *quite different* place in your life for it. – There is nothing *paradoxical* about that! ... Queer as it sounds: The historical accounts in the Gospels might, historically speaking, be demonstrably false and yet belief would lose nothing by this: *not*, however, because it concerns ‘universal truths of reason’! Rather because historical proof (the historical proof-game) is irrelevant to belief. This message (the Gospels) is seized on by men believingly (i.e. lovingly). *That* is the certainty characterizing this particular acceptance-as-true, not something *else*. A believer's relation to these narratives is *neither* the relation to historical truth (probability) *nor yet* that to a theory consisting of ‘truths of reason’. There is such a thing. - (We have quite different attitudes even to different species of what we call fiction!).”<sup>84</sup> The crucial point that Wittgenstein makes here is neither that the apparent contradictions and absurdities in scriptural accounts should be ignored, nor that they should be resolved by resort to hermeneutics, but that they require a particular mode of response, a particular place in the life of the listener/reader. To say that *The Brothers Karamazov* is absurd because Jesus did not return to be tried by the inquisitor, and so it is not worth believing, is to misuse the novel fundamentally. This skeptical approach not only makes *history* the only record of possible *happenings*; it makes historiography the final arbiter of reasonable belief. It misses the profound feeling that reading the novel actually produces, and the conviction of the truth of the novel. It is to assume (as the *Tractatus* largely assumed) that truth can be reached only by the sterilization of language,<sup>85</sup> by a neutral rendering of the “real” meaning of what is done and recorded.

Learning to recognize and negotiate the world in and through the multiple possibilities and demands of ordinary language is part of what a discursive tradition enables. The divine language of which the faithful speak – as part of their everyday life – is inhabited and not simply interpreted. Take religious ritual: like most behavior in everyday life, religious practice has no expressive meaning that calls for interpretation,

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<sup>84</sup> *Culture and Value*, 32, all italics and parentheses in original. The German word “der Glaube,” translated here into English as “belief,” has virtually the same range of meanings as the latter: “faith, confidence, trust, dependence, as well as belief.” As the Oxford English Dictionary notes, both the German “Glaube” and the English “belief” have a shared etymology that connects them to “love.”

<sup>85</sup> Collingwood writes, “the habit of ‘sterilizing’ sense by ignoring their emotional charge aside is not equally prevalent among all sorts and conditions of men. It seems to be especially characteristic of adult and ‘educated’ people in what is called modern European civilization...” *Principles of Art* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1938), 162.

other than to anthropologists, psychoanalysts, and paranoiacs – that is to say, to all who are unfamiliar with a particular form of life and therefore see it as a system of hidden signs (a *system* that the viewer takes as evidence of what is highly significant).<sup>86</sup> But the completed act of religious ritual is essentially, like other ordinary behavior, a way of being in the world.<sup>87</sup> Thus when Wittgenstein asks, rhetorically, “Does everything we do not find conspicuous make an impression of inconspicuousness? Does what is ordinary always make the *impression* of ordinariness?”<sup>88</sup> he is saying in effect that religious practice (including ritual) is not *fundamentally* different from behavior in ordinary life – because it *is* a part of ordinary life.

In itself, nothing impresses us as *significant* unless we deem it so. To the extent that behavior is “trivial and insignificant,”<sup>89</sup> it will contrast with behavior that is not, but there is no *a priori* way of distinguishing between secular behavior and behavior we call religious. Thus in her study of the modern emergence of free prayer in early Protestantism, Lori Branch describes how, in the desire to purify religion of superstition, the idea of “spontaneity” came to be a core criterion of genuine worship: sincerity of intent and self-monitoring not only made worship “authentic” but also rendered certain styles of mundane thought and behavior into “religion.” In this case, religious devotion that had once been collective, formal, and expressive was transformed into a private psychological event.<sup>90</sup> This transformation represented not the clarification of what worship really means, but – as Wittgenstein might have said – the establishment of another grammar and another practice that helped to shift the sense both of “the secular” and of “the religious.”

From a Wittgensteinian point of view, the concept of “religion” can’t be reduced to a universal essence of beliefs and practices because (a) that pair is common to all human life, and (b) as part of different forms of life the grammar of this concept functions differently, expressing and guiding different ways of inhabiting the world. Our craving for abstract definition that he deplores is evidenced in the way people insist on using “religion” as a universal, abstract term – a tendency reinforced, incidentally, both by the policies of secular modern governments and by the relatively recent establishment of university departments of religious studies. The question is not, in other words, whether or not one can ever have a better, or more inclusive, definition of religion (or of the secular, for that matter); the crucial question is how, by whom, and for what purpose a definition is required, and what the implications of that concept are for particular forms of life.

In languages drawing on Latin, the word “religion” and its cognates mean what they do by virtue of the particular ways they are used in different contexts – and it is because these words thus shift in meaning, connect up with other words, and take on new

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<sup>86</sup> See David Trotter, *Paranoid Modernism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

<sup>87</sup> The formal prayer consisting of prescribed movements and words (known as *salāt*) is distinguished from the concluding supplication (known as *du‘ā*).

<sup>88</sup> *PI* §600 (emphasis in original).

<sup>89</sup> *Remarks on Frazer’s Golden Bough*, 3.

<sup>90</sup> Lori Branch, *Rituals of Spontaneity: Sentiment and Secularism from Free Prayer to Wordsworth* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2006).

meanings, that the use of “religion” may give rise to misunderstanding and empty speculation about a putatively universal phenomenon. When one translates that word into another language, one enters a different network of overlapping words articulating different purposes, sensibilities, passions, affects. Of course both “religion” and “the secular” have been adopted and adapted by non-European languages in ways that reflect the historical power of Europe in the modern world – and thus have often been oversimplified.<sup>91</sup>

The term “secular” was fully compatible with religion in medieval European Christianity, as in the distinction between regular (monastic, rule-governed) and secular (uncloistered, worldly) clergy. The verb “to secularize” first emerged in English in 1611 – that is, after the early beginnings of Protestantism – and it generally referred to attacks on the property and authority of the established Catholic Church by the “secular arm” (i.e., by non-ecclesiastical princes), the civil power that had governed in medieval times in tandem with the spiritual power of the church. Since then “the secular” and “secularization” have not only carried the sense of the exclusion of (though not necessarily hostility to) “religion” from the domain of politics, they have also been crucial elements in the formation of the modern state – and through the state, of the experience of modernization.

Thus the claim has been made, by drawing on the older sense of the secular as “worldly,” that Christianity (like some other religions) has always been concerned with worldly affairs.<sup>92</sup> But the modern sense of secularization is not simply a matter of “making things worldly.” It is a matter of *the forcible unmaking* of a particular kind of world and its simultaneous transformation into another, often called “disenchanted”: a form of life and a way of reasoning allegedly derived from “science,” a reasoning that supposedly rejects the idea of an invisible other world and therefore of an afterlife.<sup>93</sup> There were certainly important responses to the religio-political crises of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries that fed into early Protestantism, but the concept of the secular and its cognates that have now become central to modernity were not solely the outcome of political solutions devised to meet critical political needs. There was also at the same time the growth of “modern science,” the crystallization of a capitalist economy, and the beginnings of settler-colonial empires as a way of civilizing the world, all of which had profound consequences for an emerging secular European society.

There is, therefore, one theme that Wittgenstein doesn’t investigate, although his philosophy does open the possibility: the way language-games help to undermine a form of life. Such undermining often results in conversion, sometimes deliberate and

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<sup>91</sup> For a learned and persuasive argument that Judaism as a “religion” was a Christian invention, see Daniel Boyarin, *Judaism: The Genealogy of a Modern Notion* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2019).

<sup>92</sup> See, for example, José Casanova, “Secularization Revisited: A Reply to Talal Asad,” in *Powers of the Secular Modern*, eds. D. Scott and C. Hirschkind (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 19-20.

<sup>93</sup> In his study of the cryonics movement that he calls “immortalist,” Abou Farman has taken the anthropology of science in a new and mind-widening direction (*On Not Dying: Secular Immortality in the Age of Technoscience* [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020]). For atheists, death is seen as the end of the human subject, but for religious believers death is the end only of earthly life since there is always an afterlife in another world. The ambition of immortalists, however, is to abolish death as an intrinsic fact of life itself by means of technoscience.

sometimes not, but it is in any case rarely the result of critique. One way that conversion occurs in the modern world is indirectly: just as immersion in a particular language imposes a particular world on the user, so modern techniques tend to promote a distinctive mind-set, one in which what exists must be quantifiable, representable, exchangeable – and so manipulable. Gradually that precondition for identifying existence becomes a primary criterion of truth and reason.

I have used the term “ensouled body” several times and referred to its unfashionable character, but it deserves a further comment. A respected geneticist writes skeptically on the idea of the soul as an expression of human uniqueness: “since one cannot prove whether or not the soul actually exists, in like manner, if there is a soul, one cannot know if it is a separate entity from the physical body or is a unity with the body. And if it is separate from the body, one cannot know if [genetic engineering of] the body can harm the soul or if the soul is unaffected by anything that happens to the body.”<sup>94</sup> This kind of argument allows one to commend genetic engineering for humans without this affecting their humanity: “We cannot alter our humanness [that some call the soul] by genetic engineering except in ways that can be measured and, therefore, potentially controlled. I believe that if there are uniquely human characteristics that are beyond our physical hardware, we simply cannot alter them. Whatever we can do in the way of alterations will be measurable, at least in theory.”<sup>95</sup> What seems to follow from this familiar line of thinking is that what cannot be represented by calculative language – generalized in terms of probability ratios – is not accessible, can’t be proved to exist, and so for all intents and purposes doesn’t exist.

The craving for generality that Wittgenstein problematized remains particularly strong in modern life. Thus the concept of “labor” is often used as an abstract homogeneous category, although the work of a medieval peasant and of a domestic servant (or the birth pains of a woman in labor) are very different not only from one another but also from the abstract labor that produces commodities – labor that is itself the primary commodity because of its productive power. The value of a commodity is expressed by the medium that enables it to be exchanged for its equivalent: money.<sup>96</sup>

Early European societies (and other non-capitalist forms of life) were not as committed to formal equality and exchangeability as we now are. The heterogeneity of labor was irreducible and expressed in the diverse forms of personal service – to master, to prince, to God. It stands in sharp contrast, as Marx pointed out long ago, to the paradigm of exchange that has now become the signifier and signified not only of labor but also of everything else in modern life that can be exchanged as equals. But the idiom of service was not merely an abstract relation of asymmetry; it was held together by a

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<sup>94</sup> W. French Anderson, “Genetic Engineering and Our Humanness,” *Human Gene Therapy* 5 (1994): 758.

<sup>95</sup> Op. cit., 759.

<sup>96</sup> “If *money*,” Marx wrote in a famous comment on a famous passage from Shakespeare’s *Timon of Athens*, “is the bond binding me to *human* life, binding society to me, binding me and nature and man, is not money the bond of all *bonds*? Can it not dissolve and bind all ties? Is it not, therefore, the universal *agent of divorce*?” Money, he concluded, is at once the universal agent of social connection as well as of separation between human beings in bourgeois society. Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophical Manuscript of 1844* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1959), 139, italics in original.

language and a variety of sentiments and abilities. This is not to imply that actual relations were idyllic; it is that cruelty, resentment, and dishonesty were not sensed and expressed as they are today. Particular grammatical formulations are not only transgressed for the sake of greater truth and freedom; they are also *lost*, and as a consequence they render certain embodied virtues more difficult if not impossible to entertain.

To the extent that relations are now rendered abstract, homogenized, and exchangeable they facilitate the calculability of what would otherwise be incommensurables. Complex computational practices (based on large data-mining and machine learning algorithms) have replaced simple enumeration and are now at the center of modern state and corporate power. And this has led not to enlightenment but to the increasing inadequacy of our inherited language for negotiating the world we now inhabit.

The greatest failure of modernity – one that Wittgenstein sensed<sup>97</sup> – has been the continuous desire to move the world toward an increasingly controlled future: such a failure issues from the belief that every problem we meet must have a solution. Less attended to is compassion, as at once feeling and action, for the pain and suffering of living beings – even though the suffering is clearly an unavoidable consequence of our progress-driven world. This may be why *reverence* – the deep awareness of human limitation and dependence – is no longer recognized as a virtue. And why our rejection of human limits can be described *at once* as “secular” (because of the confidence in being able to reason and control all that exists) *and* as “religious” (because of the faith in being able, eventually, to overcome all future obstacles). It may be objected that modern philosophers have continually shown apparently decisive answers aren’t really conclusive – and this is no doubt what makes philosophizing so seductive.<sup>98</sup> But isn’t that precisely why “philosophy” has such an ambiguous reputation when made to confront the prestige of “scientific progress”?

At any rate, the crisis we are in is not generated simply by climate change but by the basic thrust of modern civilization – our institutions, our desires, our politics, and our entire form of life – helps to explain why the language we have inherited is so inadequate for our worldly experience. Neither secular reason nor religious faith can make our world forever safe.<sup>99</sup> The outcome of our crisis, however, is unlikely to be something as

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<sup>97</sup> For example, in the Foreword to a posthumous collection: “This book is written for such men as are in sympathy with its spirit. This spirit is different from the one which informs the vast stream of European and American civilization in which all of us stand. *That* spirit expresses itself in an onward movement, in building ever larger and more complicated structures; the other in striving after clarity and perspicuity in no matter what structure....” *Philosophical Remarks* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1975), 7.

<sup>98</sup> See the subtle and witty defense of philosophy against the claim that its inconclusiveness is evidence of its pointlessness in Becca Rothfeld, “The Art of Not Concluding: Can Philosophy Be Worth Doing?” *The Hedgehog Review* 21.3 (Fall 2019).

<sup>99</sup> In his remarkable reflection on “destruction” as the limit notion of everything, Gil Anidjar moves away from its conventional attachment to the experience of war and violence. By reproducing, in Arabic, the Qur’anic verse *kullu man ‘alayhā fān*, “All that is [on the earth and the heavens] is bound to pass away” (55:25), as the epigraph of his essay, Anidjar stresses the impossibility of experience giving access to the fact of total finitude. See his forthcoming article, “The Destruction of Thought,” in *Thinking: A Philosophical History*, edited by P. Vassilopoulou and D. Webster (New York: Routledge [in process]).

dramatic as the end of humanity; instead we will probably have a world of incredible viciousness.

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