Wittgenstein’s Ethics in the Koder Diaries

The subject of this paper is not Wittgensteinian ethics but Wittgenstein’s own ethical beliefs, specifically as these are revealed in the so-called Koder diaries.[[1]](#endnote-1) The word ‘diaries’ might make one hesitate to read this material, let alone discuss it in public. But, as James C. Klagge and Alfred Nordmann note, “On first sight, this manuscript is not at all dissimilar from Wittgenstein’s other notebooks.”[[2]](#endnote-2) While the Koder Diaries, also known as Manuscript 183, do contain the kind of thing that one would expect to find in a diary (e.g. accounts of travel and personal relationships), they also contain more obviously philosophical remarks too, sometimes as reflections on these personal remarks. It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that, “As opposed to his other notebooks and the so-called secret diaries of 1914-1916, the Koder diaries are unique precisely in that they do not set off the private from the public at all.”[[3]](#endnote-3) Some of the remarks are written in code, but even these are not clearly more personal or less philosophical than the others. It seems to me, therefore, that the Koder diaries are an especially interesting kind of document, and, as I hope to show, that Wittgenstein’s ethical reflections in them are unusually interesting, even if they resist being summarized in one or more ethical theses or points. That said, I think that it is possible to state two ways in which they are valuable, beyond the vague or superficial kind of value that comes from being interesting. One of these is that Wittgenstein’s diaries illustrate well a point that Iris Murdoch has emphasized, that a person’s inner life can have an ethical dimension not necessarily directly related to overt action or to other people. Another is that the kind of ethical concern that we see in these diaries is one with what we might call global implications. Not in the sense that they might affect the whole planet but in the sense that, for Wittgenstein (or anyone else involved in such struggles or deliberations), they might affect every aspect of his life in the way that a religious conversion might change one’s whole life. This ethical ubiquity is another idea that Murdoch has brought to attention. I will return to her work at the end of the paper.

Before I begin, let me briefly address the issue of Wittgenstein’s use of code in these remarks. Ilse Somavilla has speculated that perhaps the use of code is meant to separate ethical and religious reflections from other kinds of thought, and “is thus a means to emphasize the distinction between meaningful and nonsensical propositions, that is between the sayable and the unsayable, accentuated by a specific kind of script.”[[4]](#endnote-4) It is impossible to know what, if anything, Wittgenstein might have wanted to emphasize or symbolize by the use of code, but it seems unlikely that he would have thought using a different script would in any way make the ineffable sayable. Wittgenstein himself remarks that it is strange that he should find relief in using a secret script to write about certain, unspecified, things.[[5]](#endnote-5) After careful thought and examination of the text, Somavilla concludes that Wittgenstein’s use of code is not consistent and that the reasons for this are still unclear.[[6]](#endnote-6) For this reason it is fortunate that my focus will be on the content of these remarks, not on the manner in which they were recorded or the reasons behind this manner.

The Koder diaries are so named because they were given to Rudolf Koder by Wittgenstein’s sister, Margarete Stonborough. They were written between 1930 and 1932 (in Cambridge) and between 1936 and 1937 (in Norway). They are interesting not only because of their mixing of the personal with the philosophical but also because, having been discovered as recently as 1993 and published in English translation ten years later, they have been little commented on up to now.[[7]](#endnote-7) The whole manuscript is both personal and philosophical, just as one might expect from the man who wrote that, “Working in philosophy—like work in architecture in many respects—is really more a working on oneself. On one’s way of seeing things.”[[8]](#endnote-8) A philosopher who regards his work as a working on himself is likely to make relatively little distinction between personal thoughts about himself and philosophical thoughts about other matters. I will not be discussing *private* matters, such as Wittgenstein’s relationship with Marguerite Respinger, in this paper, but I will certainly be discussing *personal* matters. What could be more personal to someone like Wittgenstein than ethical beliefs? Yet what also could be of more relevance to us than the thoughts of such a serious thinker on the question of how to live? These thoughts will be the subject of the main part of the paper, which I will begin now.

In 1931 Wittgenstein wrote:

An ethical proposition states “You shall do this!” or “That is good!” but not “These people say that this is good.” But an ethical proposition is a personal act. Not a statement of fact. Like an exclamation of admiration. Just consider that the justification of an “ethical proposition” merely attempts to refer the proposition back to others that make an impression on you. If in the end you don’t have disgust for this & admiration for that, then there is no justification worthy of that name.[[9]](#endnote-9)

This remark is reminiscent of both the Lecture on Ethics (where ethics is contrasted with “facts, facts, and facts”) and the conversations with Waismann, during which Wittgenstein said that it was important that he had spoken in the first person at the end of that lecture, because one could only speak personally, not objectively in an impersonal sense, about such things as ethics (and perhaps religion and aesthetics too).[[10]](#endnote-10) Ethical judgments depend on subjective reactions to the world, Wittgenstein is saying. It is not a simple matter of giving an immediate and subjective thumbs up or thumbs down to any given suggestion about what is good or what ought to be done, since one can, he says, refer the proposition back to others. He does not specify any limit on how many of these other propositions there might be, so that a chain of ethical reasoning might, on this view, go on for some time, but in the end it will have to terminate in something that makes an impression on you pro or con. The ethical and the personal go together, then, as the factual and the impersonal go together.

The personal attitudes that allow outside things to make favorable or unfavorable impressions can presumably be adjusted. We can learn to admire this or that, perhaps by coming to appreciate how difficult it is to do. Someone who thinks that anyone could paint like Mark Rothko, for instance, might find a new appreciation for his work if they try to duplicate it themselves. But then we must already admire the doing of difficult things. Or we might come to be disgusted by this or that, perhaps by associating it with other things that already disgust us, as when a swastika becomes disgusting through association with Nazi crimes. There has to be some attitude there already to be adjusted though. And this we do not choose. This can be experienced as a gift, but it can also present itself as a burden or even a nightmare.

Wittgenstein struggled with a sense of not being in control of some of the most fundamental or important things in his life. For instance, in 1937 he wrote:

Still on the journey by boat. We were moored at the dock & I watched the steel cable by which the boat was secured, and the thought came to me: walk on the cable; of course you will fall into the water after a few steps — but the water wasn’t deep & I would not have drowned but only gotten wet; & most of all I would have been laughed at of course or considered a little crazy. I immediately shrank back from the thought of doing this & had to tell myself right away that I am not a free man but a slave. Of course it would have been ‘unreasonable’ to follow the impulse; but what does that say?![[11]](#endnote-11)

There are two kinds of unfreedom here, it seems to me. Wittgenstein did not choose what thought, if any, should come to him. Then there is also the tyranny of convention, the influence on our behavior of what others consider reasonable or unreasonable, in a word *normal*. Wittgenstein is grateful that thoughts come to him. He thanks God multiple times for allowing him to do his philosophical work and is unhappy when he cannot do so (because he is too tired, say, and so no worthwhile thoughts occur to him). But he also lives in fear of not having such thoughts come any more, of the well’s drying up. He has no (sense of) control over this. He clearly does not like the influence of conventionality on his thinking and acting, but at the same time he has at least partly bought into its sense of reasonableness (how could he fail to do so?). He seems to want to resist this influence, but then what should he do? Walk on the cable and fall into the water? That doesseem unreasonable. Hence, I take it, the feeling of not being free.

So, we have our attitudes, thoughts that occur to us (including thoughts about what to do), and some control over what we choose to do. We can resist certain urges, although perhaps not all. Living rightly cannot, does not, mean living conventionally. It must be personal. And that means that it must be in accordance with one’s own attitudes, one’s own values, wherever they may come from—they are *not* chosen in the way that a stereotypical existentialist might think of them as chosen. In saying this I do not mean that sincerity is all one needs, only that it is *one* of the things that one needs in order to live rightly. But it might not be easy to know which attitudes are really one’s own rather than merely conventional or traditional. The influence of tradition and convention can be great, but one must still be oneself, so the relation between inheritance and originality can be problematic. This shows up in Wittgenstein’s struggle with regard to Christianity.

He is surely not alone in being drawn to Christian ideals without being drawn all the way into faith. Hence his writing in 1937 that, “Like the insect around the light so I buzz around the New Testament.”[[12]](#endnote-12) He admires those who give their lives for justice without reward, but without religious faith he finds it hard to make sense of this admiration. So religious images of reward and glorification “impose themselves upon” him, even though he is “reluctant to use these images & expressions.”[[13]](#endnote-13) His behavior, as we shall see in more detail below, is like religious behavior, much as his judgment of someone who sacrifices their life for justice is like a religious rather than a worldly judgment, even though he does not (or cannot honestly) go all the way into accepting religion. He denies, especially, that there is anyone there that he is praying to. So his prayer (if we can call it that) looks like a mistake, much as the judgment that it is good to sacrifice oneself for justice looks like a mistake if there is no reward for it.[[14]](#endnote-14)

On Valentine’s Day of 1937 he records that he had this thought:

If I disregard entirely punishments in the hereafter: Do I find it right that a person suffers an entire life for the cause of justice, then dies perhaps a terrible death,—& now has no reward at all for this life? After all, I admire such a person & place him high above me & why don’t I say, he was an ass that he used his life like that. Why is he not stupid?[[15]](#endnote-15)

Wittgenstein has no real answer to this kind of question, but he strongly denies that such a person is stupid.[[16]](#endnote-16) This moral judgment, like his prayer-like behavior, comes from the heart without being rationally explicable (at least by him at this moment in his life).[[17]](#endnote-17)

The internal, ethical struggle of how to live (for instance, of whether to become a Christian or not) is in a sense a struggle over what expressions to use. For these are not similes, not forms of words that could be replaced by others without loss.[[18]](#endnote-18) It is also a question of what to believe, of course, but beliefs cannot be identified (and then accepted or rejected) without their expression. And if Wittgenstein is right that the beliefs in question are ones that can only be expressed one way, then reference to the words that constitute this expression is reference to the belief in question. The belief has no intelligible existence distinct from those words.

A case similar to the one with the cable on the boat concerns a sweater of which Wittgenstein was fond. In February 1937 it occurred to him that he ought to give away both an old sweater that he already intended to give away and a new one that he had just recently bought and liked a lot. He felt a kind of outrage in response to this thought, which he experienced as an imperative (*Befehl*):

what makes me ‘outraged’ is that something like this, & therefore everything can be demanded from me, & specifically demanded,—not just recommended as good or worthwhile. The idea that I might be lost if I don’t do it.—Now one could simply say: “So don’t give it away! what then?”—But what if this goes on to make me unhappy? But what does this outrage mean after all? Isn’t it a rage against facts?[[19]](#endnote-19)

The fact in question, which could not be very important ethically speaking on Wittgenstein’s view, is the fact that a certain feeling or thought has occurred to him. The thought that he should give both sweaters away could be thought of this way, as ‘antics in the heart,’ as Wittgenstein puts it. But what self-deception might there be in writing off unwelcome demands of conscience as such antics? One’s whole life might become a flight into self-deception if a genuine demand, one that *ought* to be taken seriously, were disregarded in this way because of its unpleasantness. This assumes, perhaps unjustifiably, that there are such demands. But if we give up on that idea, Wittgenstein apparently believes, then we give up on ethics, on taking life seriously, on thinking that anything we do really matters at all. This is something that he will not, perhaps cannot, do. And so, Wittgenstein seems to think, he cannot dismiss the unwanted voice of conscience in such cases: “One could say: “The dear Lord decides what antics are.” But I don’t want to use this expression now.”[[20]](#endnote-20)

I referred just now to the voice of conscience, as if one’s conscience were an independent being, and Wittgenstein mentions the Lord, but he does not believe that there is some other being that makes the demands that outrage him. This seems to be why he suggests that his outrage is directed at facts. There is no person for it to be directed at. But then outrage appears to be absurd, which might explain Wittgenstein’s use of quotation marks around the word ‘outraged’ (*empört*), and his questions about what this outrage means after all. It is something like outrage, but directed at no one in particular, at the no one who demands various sacrifices of him. There is something striking and odd about this. Why pay attention to demands that are not made by anyone? One possible answer might be that there is no reason to do so, but that this is the nature of ethics. It presents itself to us as a set of demands which must be obeyed categorically, without reference to self-interest. Rejecting any one such demand on the ground that obeying it would be irrational risks opening up a floodgate of amorality.

Wittgenstein does not go into this, but he does express the view that ethics is ultimately groundless. In 1930 Friedrich Waismann records Wittgenstein as follows:

Schlick says that in theological ethics there used to be two conceptions of the essence of the good: according to the shallower interpretation the good is good because it is what God wants; according to the profounder interpretation God wants the good because it is good. I think that the first interpretation is the profounder one: what God commands, that is good. For it cuts off the way to any explanation ‘why’ it is good.[[21]](#endnote-21)

Similarly, on 6 May 1930 Wittgenstein writes in MS 183 that “‘It is good because God commands it’ is the right expression for the groundlessness” of ethics.[[22]](#endnote-22) It might seem that there is still a kind of foundationalism here, that Wittgenstein is still assuming the existence of God. But it is clear enough in the Koder diaries that Wittgenstein, whatever kind of faith we might attribute to him, did not assume the existence of God. It is clear also from the passages just quoted that Wittgenstein rejected any explanation as to why the good is good (or, presumably, why the bad is bad). It is better to say that what God commands is good not because this is true, and not because God is the ultimate or best ground on which ethics might rest, but because to define the good as what God commands cuts off *any* explanation of why it is good. And if what we want is emphatic groundlessness, the amputation of any possible grounds, then we do not need to posit the existence of God at all. Wittgenstein can have his moral groundlessness and yet admit that there is no one there when he prays.

Another way to shrug off the demands of ethics, to refuse to take them seriously as a burden, might be to give in to them casually. If only a nice sweater were at issue then he could just give it away, and perhaps (conscience willing) even buy another one. But what if all that meant most to him, his life’s work, say, were demanded as a sacrifice? The ultimate groundlessness of all value judgments means that he cannot reason his way to place his work above an apparent demand of conscience. (Nor could he reason his way to the reverse judgment.) To accept the voice of conscience as the voice of God, a voice to which one submits unconditionally, would be to find a kind of peace and a certainty about what to do (namely whatever this voice commands). But Wittgenstein does not have this faith. He is not certain, and he lacks inner peace. His heart does not submit. He cannot simply accept these orders, although he seems to think that he can accept this inability to accept: “*When you are sick, accommodate yourself to the sickness; don’t be angry that you are sick*.”[[23]](#endnote-23) Calling it a sickness, he says, explains nothing, and it is in this context that he tells himself to describe rather than seeking to explain. This idea is a hallmark of his later philosophical work generally.

Later in the same month Wittgenstein wrote a statement of his beliefs, a kind of credo, in which, among other things (starting with “I should not fear people and their opinions when I want to do what I consider right”), he says that “the condition which demands everything from me is not taken care of by the words “sickness” or “madness,” that is: that in this condition I am just as responsible as out of it, that it belongs to my life like any other and that it thus deserves full attention.”[[24]](#endnote-24) He is still not Christian, but he is not isolating the demanding voice of conscience from the rest of himself by calling it a sickness. It belongs to his life. Perhaps this is because, as he comes to see, there is no one there but himself. And so the voice must be his voice, or one of his voices.

This idea that there is no one else present is important to Wittgenstein. On 19th February 1937 he wrote in his diary in code:

Let me confess this: After a difficult day for me I kneeled during dinner today & prayed & suddenly said, kneeling & looking up above: “There is no one here.” That made me feel at ease as if I had been enlightened in an important matter. But what it really means, I do not know yet. I feel relieved. But that does not mean, for example, that I had previously been in error.[[25]](#endnote-25)

He then refers back to this idea of there being no one there where one might look for God (up above while praying on one’s knees) on February 22nd, 24th, March 20th, and 22nd.[[26]](#endnote-26) The fact that he could not be in error means that he does not take himself to have made a metaphysical discovery. It is his attitude that has changed. He feels that he has overcome a kind of problem. But mystery remains. On March 20th he writes: “There is no one here: & yet I speak & thank & petition. But is this speaking & thanking & petitioning an error?! I would rather say: “This is what’s strange!””[[27]](#endnote-27)

There is some ambiguity here. When Wittgenstein writes that he would like to say that “This is what’s strange” the word ‘This’ could refer to the speaking, thanking, and petitioning to which he has just referred, or he could be assuming the answer No to the seemingly rhetorical question: “But is this speaking & thanking & petitioning an error?!” In other words, what strikes him as strange could be his behavior or it could be the fact that this behavior is not an error, despite its seeming irrationality. The behavior is strange. But it is also the case that Wittgenstein does not seem to regard it as an error (the underlining of ‘error’ and the use of both a question mark and an exclamation mark certainly makes the question look rhetorical), and that he seems to find this fact remarkable or puzzling. What he seems to be saying is that his prayer-like behavior, which makes no sense from the perspective of a familiar way of thinking about prayer and its purpose, does make sense to him from a subjective perspective, and it is this fact that is most strange.

To say that apparently religious behavior makes sense to him, though, is not to say that he is entirely comfortable with it. From the God who is not there, the no one to whom Wittgenstein prays, or at least from a similar source, come occasional commands to give away a sweater or to fast on Good Friday (see p. 233). And these attacks of conscience, these unwanted demands, are frightening:

Is being alone with oneself—or with God, not like being alone with a wild animal? It can attack you any moment.—But isn’t that precisely why you shouldn’t run away?! Isn’t that, so to speak, what’s glorious [*herrliche*]?! Doesn’t it mean: grow fond of this wild animal!—And yet one must ask: Lead us not into temptation![[28]](#endnote-28)

This is rather obscure, especially taken on its own. But there are echoes here of ideas found in a passage from 25th March, in which Wittgenstein writes that:

There is no mortification in doing what comes from the heart (even if it is friendly or in some sense pious). You don’t die in this, after all. Whereas you die precisely in obedience to a command, from mere obedience. This is agony but can be, is supposed to be, a pious agony. That’s at least how I understand it.[[29]](#endnote-29)

It is not a pious agony for Wittgenstein, though. The passage continues: “But I myself!—I confess that I do not want to die off, even though I understand that it is the higher.” He goes on (in code) to admit to a fear of “certain religious thoughts.” The religious requirement to die in some sense, to the world or to oneself, understandably seems to frighten and repel him.

There is something rather Nietzschean about Wittgenstein’s experience. In *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche writes that: “It seems to me that the religious instinct is indeed in the process of growing powerfully—but the theistic satisfaction it refuses with deep suspicion.”[[30]](#endnote-30) Wittgenstein clearly has this religious instinct (or *some* religious instinct) yet denies himself whatever satisfaction theism might bring. (Although he appears to feel that it would bring no satisfaction whatsoever—indeed, he experiences atheism as a relief.) And Wittgenstein, again in a somewhat Nietzschean vein, wants to act in accordance with his own will, with his own heartfelt beliefs, not to obey the whimsical demands of some external power. He does not wish the death of the self. He is, as it were, crushed between the religious impulse and the dead body of God. At any rate, religion attracts but theism repels him.

We see here rather clearly how ethics and religion are inseparable for Wittgenstein: neither is really about metaphysics, both are fundamentally concerned with the question of how to live. And this question has much to do with questions about which forms of verbal and behavioral expression to use, and so has an aesthetic aspect to it. The challenge, not the whole challenge of life but part of it, is to express oneself sincerely, a challenge that cannot fully be understood without some sense of who one is and that cannot be met without a constant battle against self-deception, cowardice, and the pressure of conformity. For this reason ethics is a personal battle and one really cannot ethicize for someone else. There might be universal principles that we ought all to follow, but no two people face exactly the same problems. Each person’s case is different. Even so, each is likely to involve problems of expression, that is, of language, and hence philosophy (understood as the fight against nonsense and the battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language).

At this point, if not before now, one might expect me to evaluate Wittgenstein’s ethics. If he does not offer a theory to compete with utilitarianism or Kantian deontology, for instance, he surely offers some kind of vision of what it is to think about ethics which we might choose to adopt or reject. I find that there is nothing much to say about this however. Wittgenstein wants to avoid insincerity. With the possible exception of Harry Frankfurt, who memorably opines that sincerity is bullshit, everyone values sincerity.[[31]](#endnote-31) Wittgenstein is working at being himself and, since the diaries I have quoted from were written when he was living alone, there is no real question of how this might affect others. If anything, what Wittgenstein’s remarks show is that it is possible to have a rich inner life, including moral struggles, without those struggles necessarily being about others. This inner life involves language, and so implies others in the background from whom one would have acquired this language, but the contents of a merely implied background are part of the picture only in a rather special sense. There is a social aspect to Wittgenstein’s ethics, certainly. He cares about possibly looking ridiculous to others (see the case where he considers walking on the steel cable, for instance) and about the opinions of others (see the first item listed in his credo above), but he seems to reject the idea that he ought to care about these things. Even when he is quite alone he still struggles with the same kinds of concern with honesty or being true to himself. Nor does Wittgenstein’s own overt *behavior* even necessarily come into the picture. It is true that he kneels as in prayer, but a very similar struggle could have taken place without this event.

If we want to draw conclusions that connect with other work in moral philosophy, I think we might be best to see Wittgenstein as an example of the kind of point that Iris Murdoch makes in her discussion of a mother M and her daughter-in-law D.[[32]](#endnote-32) The point of Murdoch’s example is to show that how one thinks and sees things can be a significant moral issue, contrary to the way she regards her contemporaries in philosophy as treating ethics. Their view, she says, reflects an image that is “behaviourist in its connection of the meaning and being of action with the publicly observable” and “utilitarian in its assumption that morality is and can only be concerned with public acts.”[[33]](#endnote-33) It also has existentialist, Freudian, and Kantian elements too, according to Murdoch, but this is not the place to analyze it further. Against this conception of ethics, Murdoch asks us to consider M’s work on her way of viewing D. M thinks over her rather negative assessment of D and changes her mind about her, coming to see that whereas D had seemed vulgar she is actually refreshingly forthright, and so on. It is not only that M looks on the bright side of D’s character. She comes also to realize that this is a more accurate assessment of her, and that different words (albeit ones similar in terms of what behavior they pick out)are therefore appropriate. Wittgenstein too is trying to see exactly which words make the most sense of his life, without distortion. Murdoch wants to show that a kind of behaviorism that Wittgenstein’s work may have encouraged, a behaviorism that dichotomizes the inner and the outer and then allows no significant place for the inner, gives us a false picture of moral life. It would be fitting if Wittgenstein himself could provide another example to dispel such behaviorism.

His case also shows the universality of ethics. Everything is involved, not just a particular set of decisions or actions. If one becomes a Christian, say, then one’s whole life changes because what it is about changes. A Christian is saved (or deluded) in a way that others are not, and this colors everything in her life. Whether to be a Christian and, if not, then what else to be instead (which need not be a member of any religion) is precisely the kind of question that Wittgenstein asks himself constantly, and any answer to it will have similarly global effects on his life. This is an aspect of ethics that, as Murdoch sees it, utilitarians and Kantians typically overlook. Murdoch’s *The Sovereignty of Good* was first published in 1970 and much has changed since then.[[34]](#endnote-34) But there are still ethicists who focus primarily, if not exclusively, on overt behavior (consequentialists would hardly want to do otherwise). They are not necessarily wrong to do so, but their kind of theory might perhaps usefully be supplemented by some considerations along the lines suggested by Murdoch and Wittgenstein.[[35]](#endnote-35) Indeed, if ethics is truly global then it might be that we need to do more than expand the scope of our ethical theories. If everything belongs to ethics then no specific area of inquiry will be left to be called ‘ethics.’ This has been suggested, but is not something that I can go into more here.[[36]](#endnote-36) If ethics is global in this way then its apparent, or alleged, groundlessness could be less of a problem than one might have thought. If this and this are grounded but that is not, then there seems to be a problem with that. But if each particular thing is grounded and only the whole is not then perhaps there is no need for any additional foundation.

Finally, perhaps I should attempt a verdict or last word on the nature of Wittgenstein’s belief. My view in a nutshell is that he is right on the edge between theism and atheism. More on the edge than I would have thought possible, like Robin Hood getting even closer to the bull’s-eye than anyone else by splitting an arrow that was already there. He sometimes chides himself for having only weak faith, but his faith *is* weak. He wrestles with God, with himself, with his faith, and with his relative lack of faith. He is clearly attracted to Christianity, but he rejects it. For instance, in February 1937 he writes that he rejects “the Christian solution of the problem of life (salvation, resurrection, judgement, heaven, hell).”[[37]](#endnote-37) He still has a relationship with God, peppering his writings with such expressions as “God willing” and “Thank God” in a way that is clearly not just a manner of speaking. No atheist would write “God! let me come into a relationship with you in which I “can be cheerful in my work”!”[[38]](#endnote-38) At the same time, though, this remark shows that he is not in the kind of relationship he wants.

One might be tempted to compare him to Simone Weil, who famously writes:

I am quite sure that there is a God in the sense that I am quite sure my love is not illusory. I am quite sure that there is not a God in the sense that I am quite sure nothing real can be anything like what I am able to conceive when I pronounce this word. But that which I cannot conceive is not an illusion.[[39]](#endnote-39)

This is not Wittgenstein’s position, or so it seems to me. There is no sense in which he is quite sure that there is a God. On the contrary, there is no one there. This remark could be interpreted as the rejection only of a crude sort of theism, but Wittgenstein does not follow it up with any more sophisticated theology. Although he undeniably has a kind of faith, the idea that he believes there is a God is very deniable indeed. There is also no sense in which he has a love of God that could not be an illusion. His relationship with God is more like a struggle than an instance of love (“To get rid of the torments of the mind, that is to get rid of religion,” he writes on February 21st 1937), although of course one can be tormented by or struggle with a loved one.[[40]](#endnote-40) And whatever love he might have for God could be an illusion, or at least infected with some measure of illusion. Wittgenstein is aware of the danger of superstition. If we wanted a kind of encapsulation of the nature of his faith (a desire whose dubiousness I hope is obvious) we might choose the following. On February 22nd 1937 he writes:

Now I often tell myself in doubtful times: “There is no one here.” And look around. Would that this not become something base in me!

I think I should tell myself: “Don’t be servile in your religion!” Or try not to be! For that is in the direction of superstition.

A human being lives his ordinary life with the illumination of a light of which he is not aware until it is extinguished. Once it is extinguished, life is suddenly deprived of all value, meaning, or whatever one wants to say. One suddenly becomes aware that mere existence—as one would like to say—is in itself still completely empty, bleak. It is as if the sheen was wiped away from all things, ~~everything is dead~~.[[41]](#endnote-41)

Should we call this unnoticed, meaning-giving illumination God? Perhaps, but I think it would be misleading to label Wittgenstein as either a theist or an atheist. He wears religious language like a necessary but ill-fitting and uncomfortable garment. Yet he won’t take it off, and sometimes seems to feel an obligation toward it, however much he is inclined to rebel against it. What is interesting is not the generalizations or labels but the details of his case.

To help us resist the temptation to try to encapsulate Wittgenstein's faith here is another, last quotation:

A religious question is either a question of life or it is (empty) chatter. This language game--one could say--gets played only with questions of life. Much like the word "ouch" does not have any meaning--except as a scream of pain.

I want to say: If eternal bliss means nothing for my life, my *way of life*, then I don't have to rack my brain about it; if I am to rightfully think about it, then what I think must stand in a precise relation to my life, otherwise what I think is rubbish or my life is in danger.--An authority which is not effective, which I don't have to heed, is no authority. If I rightfully speak of an authority I must also be dependent upon it.[[42]](#endnote-42)

Wittgenstein seems uncertain whether his faith (if that is the right word for it) is rubbish or not. Maybe this is a common concern for believers, but if so that does not prove that he is a real believer. Is his way of life dependent on God? If even he is not sure about this, then surely we cannot be so either. The best guide to the state of his faith or relationship with God might be his regular, less doubt-filled writing. There he does seem dependent on God, he does seem at home in that language game. That is, it would be extremely difficult to translate his writings into language devoid of reference to God. He is certainly not an orthodox believer, though. About what he *was* I will attempt no further comment here.

Notes

1. I am grateful to Reshef Agam-Segal, Kelly Jolley, Matthew Pianalto, participants at the Fourth Regional Wittgenstein Workshop at Washington and Lee University, March 10th 2012 (especially William Brenner, David Cerbone, Chris Hoyt, Simon Levy, Charles Lowney, Andrew Moser, and Ted Parent), and members of the audience at the conference “In Wittgenstein’s Footsteps” at the University of Iceland, September 15th, 2012 (especially Anna Boncompagni, [Anne-Marie Søndergaard Christensen](http://www.springerlink.com/content/?Author=Anne-Marie+S%c3%b8ndergaard+Christensen), Lars Hertzberg, and Patrick Quinn), for helpful comments on a previous draft of this paper, and to an anonymous reviewer from that conference for helpful comments on an abstract of it. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Ludwig Wittgenstein *Public and Private Occasions*, edited by James C. Klagge and Alfred Nordmann, Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., Lanham, Maryland, 2003, p. 3. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. *Ibid*., p. 3. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Ilse Somavilla, “Wittgenstein’s Coded Remarks in the Context of His Philosophizing,” pp. 30-50 in Nuno Venturinha (ed.) *Wittgenstein After His* Nachlass, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2010, p. 36. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. See MS 106, p. 4, 1929, quoted in Somavilla, p. 49. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. See Somavilla, p. 49. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. A notable exception to the rule that these diaries have not been commented on is [Anne-Marie Søndergaard Christensen](http://www.springerlink.com/content/?Author=Anne-Marie+S%c3%b8ndergaard+Christensen), “[‘A Glorious Sun and a Bad Person’. Wittgenstein, Ethical Reflection and the Other](http://www.springerlink.com/content/212r06j8q1345680/),” *Philosophia* [Volume 39, Number 2](http://www.springerlink.com/content/0048-3893/39/2/) (2011), 207-223. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Ludwig Wittgenstein *Culture and Value*, edited by G. H. von Wright in collaboration with Heikki Nyman, translated by Peter Winch, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1980, p. 16e. This remark was written in 1931, the year after Wittgenstein began MS 183, in which he wrote during the years 1930-1932 and 1936-1937. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Wittgenstein 2003, p. 85. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Ludwig Wittgenstein, “A Lecture on Ethics,” pp. 36-44 in *Philosophical Occasions 1912-1951*, edited by James Klagge and Alfred Nordmann, Hackett Publishing Company, Indianapolis, Indiana, 1993, p. 40. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Wittgenstein 2003, 162-163. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. *Ibid.*, 177. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. *Ibid.*, 181. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Cf. Paul, "If Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith" (1 Cor. 15:14, NIV), as well as Kant’s postulates of practical reason. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Wittgenstein 2003, p. 177. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. The question of the rationality of noble self-sacrifice is addressed in Philippa Foot, “Rationality and Goodness” in Anthony O’Hear, ed., *Modern Moral Philosophy*,Cambridge University Press, 2004, pp. 1-13. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Cf. Wittgenstein 2003, p. 233 (entry dated 25th March 1937), where he contrasts doing what comes from the heart (“*es mir von Herzen kommt*”) with doing what is commanded. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Wittgenstein emphasizes this point on p. 181 (*ibid.*): “Above all these are not similes, of course. For what can be said by way of a simile, that can also be said without a simile.” Compare the “Lecture on Ethics” and later remarks on secondary uses of words. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. *Ibid.*, 187. The underlining is Wittgenstein’s own. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. *Ibid.* [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Friedrich Waismann *Ludwig Wittgenstein and the Vienna Circle*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1979, p. 115. This remark is dated 17 December 1930. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Wittgenstein 2003, p. 83. I have altered Nordmann’s translation of *Grundlosigkeit*, which he renders as “lack of reason.” He suggests (in note g on the same page) that one might also render this as “lack of cause” or “absence of justification.” [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. *Ibid.*, p. 191. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. *Ibid.*, p. 201. The passage was originally written in code, which Nordmann indicates by placing it in italics. I have not used italics here, for fear that it might seem that Wittgenstein wanted to give the words special emphasis. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. *Ibid.*, p. 193. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. See *ibid*., p. 207, p. 215, p. 229, and p. 231. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. *Ibid.*, p. 229. The underlining is Wittgenstein’s own,. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. *Ibid.*, p. 247, from 17th April, 1937. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. *Ibid.*, pp. 233-235 (even numbered pages contain the original German text). The underlining is Wittgenstein’s own. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Friedrich Nietzsche *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Kaufmann, Random House, New York, 1992, p. 256. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. Harry G. Frankfurt *On Bullshit*,Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2005, p. 67. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. See Iris Murdoch *The Sovereignty of Good*, Ark Paperback,London, 1985, pp. 17-23. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. *Ibid.*, p. 9. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. Kantians such as Barbara Herman and Christine Korsgaard, for instance, have certainly addressed ‘inner’ matters such as character. See, for instance, Christine M. Korsgaard *Self-Constitution: Agency, Identity, and Integrity*, Oxford University Press,Oxford, 2009 and “Making Room for Character” in Barbara Herman *Moral Literacy*, Harvard University Press,Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2007, pp. 1-28. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. The consequentialist James Rachels writes in his popular ethics textbook *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*, McGraw-Hill Higher Education, New York, 2003, p. 190, that “it seems best to regard the theory of virtue as part of an overall theory of ethics than as a complete theory in itself,” even though, as he sees it, human welfare, or the welfare of all sentient creatures, is “the surpassingly important value.” [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. Cora Diamond calls “the theme that thinking is always an activity of ours as *moral* beings” an “extremely central theme” of Murdoch’s philosophical work in her essay “’We Are Perpetually Moralists’: Iris Murdoch, Fact, and Value,” in Maria Antonaccio and William Schweiker, eds., *Iris Murdoch and the Search for Human Goodness*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1996, pp. 79-109,p. 82. A similar idea is central also to Alice Crary’s *Beyond Moral Judgment*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2007. James Conant writes in “What ‘Ethics’ in the *Tractatus* is *Not*,” in D. Z. Phillips and Mario von der Ruhr, eds., *Religion and Wittgenstein’s Legacy*, Ashgate, Aldershot, UK, 2005, pp. 39-88, that “some such idea as the following seems to remain in place throughout the several stages of Wittgenstein’s philosophical development: as logic (or later: grammar) pervades all our thinking, so, too, ethics pervades all our living, and each impinges on the other…,” p. 40. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. Wittgenstein 2003, p. 169. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. *Ibid*., p. 181, from 15th February 1937. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, translated by Emma Crawford and Mario von der Ruhr, Routledge Classics, 2002, p. 114. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. Wittgenstein 2003, p. 199. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. *Ibid*., p. 207. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. *Ibid.*, pp. 211-213. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)