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A Note on a Remark in *Philosophical Investigations*

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0. Introduction

In the fourth section of *Philosophical Investigations* “Part II”, Wittgenstein discusses the concept of a person and the body-mind problem. During his discussion he undertakes a detour. He makes a remark concerning a problem in the philosophy of religion that preoccupied him throughout his life, not least in the *Tractatus Logico-philosophicus*. It is the question of the immortality of the soul or the possibility of eternal life. In the *Investigations* he writes:

Religion teaches that the soul can exist when the body has disintegrated. Now do I understand this teaching?
– Of course I understand it – I can imagine plenty of things in connexion with it (PI, IIiv).

Seen in its immediate context, this remark is capable of various interpretations – three, to be precise. (i) The *semantic* interpretation, in which this passage links in to the ensuing discussion of the picture concept via the question of the extent to which the semantic content and linguistic use of a painted picture might correspond to the content and function of the proposition. (ii) The *epistemological* interpretation, in which the text prepares the ground for the question of what enables a picture, such as the picture of the soul’s immortality and eternal life, to “force itself upon us”. And finally (iii) a *surface grammatical* interpretation, in which the text is read merely as Wittgenstein’s admission that he finds it unproblematic to point out some of the imaginary ideas that a religious use of language associates with “this teaching”. In what follows I shall attempt to sketch the possibility of a fourth interpretation: (iv) an *ethical-existential* reading, in which the remark is read as a *personal* affirmation that “this teaching” appears comprehensible, meaningful and useful for Wittgenstein *himself*. The statement prompts many associations and ideas in him. And the crucial question that we have to ask here is: What, in more precise terms, does Wittgenstein *himself* imagine in connection with the teaching that the soul endures once the body has ceased to exist, especially since, at the same time, he specifically rejects the possibility of life post mortem?

My attempt to sketch an answer to this question will relate the above quotation to a sequence of remarks that occur in Wittgenstein’s diary notes of February 1937, now published in *Denkbewegungen. Tagebücher 1930-1932/1936-1937*. At the same time this approach will reveal one of the many threads that run between Wittgenstein’s earlier and later thought.

In other words, we have to take a detour.

1. “We do not live to experience death”

In his early work Wittgenstein asserts the finality of death. Death is the end of all experience and of life. He writes: “Death is not an event in life: we do not live to experience death” (TLP 6.4311). “So too at death the world does not alter, but comes to an end” (TLP 6.431). However, this does not amount to a rejection of the meaningful use of the idea of eternal life, since that idea is linked to a description of a certain mode of existence: a certain attitude towards life characterised by a suspension of time and a particular perspective. Wittgenstein suggests: “If we take eternity to mean not infinite temporal duration but timelessness, then eternal life belongs to those who live in the present” (TLP 6.4311). This is a concept of eternity that depends on the nature of immanence, and which is related to the moral philosophical remarks in the *Tractatus* in which the world of the happy person is characterised as different from that of the unhappy person. More precisely, the concept of eternity is introduced in relation to the (ethically good) world of the happy person, which possesses certain characteristics, among them the following. (A) The happy person’s world is characterised by an absence of fear of death (NB 74). (B) The happy person’s world is particular insofar as it entails the fulfilment of the purpose of existence (NB 74). And (C) it is, as already mentioned, a world lived in the present. “Only a man who lives not in time but in the present is happy” (NB 74). And finally (D) the world of the happy person is notable insofar as it involves the application of an ethical standard that is different from the standards (with regard to utility, pleasure, well-being ...) that apply in the world of temporality. It is an ethical standard that *shows* itself in the timeless present. In other words: “Ethics is transcendental” (TLP 6.421). – Let me summarise these points. In his early thought, Wittgenstein distinguishes two modes of existence: the worlds of the happy and the unhappy person. The former is a world lived in the present; here – he writes – the world is viewed *sub specie aeternitatis*. It is a world liberated from temporality and the standards of ends and means that belong thereto. By contrast, the world of the unhappy person is one in which everything is viewed under the aspect of the limitations of temporality. Here there is a dominant fear of death and the purpose of existence has been set aside. Yet both will die; the worlds of both the happy and the unhappy person will cease to exist.

We must now take a closer look at the diary remarks of February 1937, in which the framework I have just sketched from the early philosophy is reiterated.

2. "Happiness in an eternal sense ..."

One fundamental distinction found in the diary remarks appears to echo the distinction in the *Tractatus* between the worlds of the happy and the unhappy person. Here Wittgenstein distinguishes between two modes of existence, one that is wretched and low and the other that is meritorious and worth aspiring to. The former is described as a condition characterised by cowardice, vanity, mendacity, lack of willingness to suffer or to renounce comforts. The world of the happy person, by contrast, is full of courage, sobriety, truthfulness, willingness to suffer and renounce. Two things are stressed at the outset: (i) that in the midst of the wretched life a call can be heard; a challenge to aspire to the other more worthy life (DB 78). And (ii) to live in the lower mode of existence, in other words, to ignore the challenge, is equivalent to wasting one's life. It amounts to living an deluded existence, a life of vanity, in which one is remote, as Wittgenstein puts it, "from the good, from the source of life" (DB 82). A life without truth and depth. "And when I die, then there would be an end to this self-delusion" (DB 82).

In later descriptions of the two modes of existence Wittgenstein introduces variations on the four characteristics of the happy person's world, such as they occur in his early philosophy. His emphasis now is: (Ai) The attitudes and reactions that a person shows towards the idea of death reflect whether that person's life is happy or unhappy. For the clear realisation of one's own impending death prompts a retrospective judgement on how one lives one's life. When confronted with death the unhappy person sees his life as one that has been wasted and which fills him with regret, whereas the person who has attempted to live the higher, meritorious life will view his biography as a consistent and meaningful whole. In contrast to the regret of the "soulless life" Wittgenstein writes: "And the spiritual moment must be, 'Now it is finished!'" (DB 81). The fact that Wittgenstein alludes here to the last words of Christ in the Gospel of John indicates two things: (Bi) that the world of the happy person consists in a life that fulfils, or has fulfilled the purpose of existence. And fulfilling the purpose of existence – which entails *not* being cut off "from the good, from the source of life" – involves striving towards the absolute: "And the sole absolute is to battle one's way through life towards death like a soldier in combat, on the offensive. Everything else is prevarication, cowardice, idleness and hence wretchedness" (DB 85). He remarks that this higher, meritorious existence is identical with that which people are encouraged to strive for in the New Testament: a life of enterprise and of close involvement with one's fellow beings and the world. "Christianity says: here (in this world) thou shall not – so to speak – *sit* but rather *move*" (DB 92c). And once again he adduces the idea of the timeless present, this time in conjunction with the higher, meritorious mode of existence: (Ci) "Happiness in the eternal sense can only be achieved in this way" (DB 79). "This individual *must come home*' is what I want to say about such a person" (DB 79). The reward of the good life is therefore a particular *quality* inherent in the right mode of existence. In other words, it is not something that accrues post mortem. It is a quality that Wittgenstein pinpoints using a formulation that both paraphrases *Tractatus* 6.4311 and redefines the category of "the present" by equating it with the notion of the "moment". Wittgenstein writes: "One usually imagines eternity (as a reward or a punishment) as an endless temporal duration. But one could picture it just as well as a moment. For in a single moment one can experience *all horror* and *all bliss*" (DB 79). And finally, he also asserts: (Di) that the happy

person's (eternal) world stands in relation to a peculiarly ethical standard. The life that is constituted as a journey, the life of struggle, indeed the life that strives for the absolute, makes all the values of the standards of ends and means appear trivial, it makes "all earthly happiness seem petty" (DB 85). The life of struggle is one that "turns the gaze upwards" (DB 85), towards some other standard that is higher than the earthly. And this gaze sees things in the light of this higher standard, whereas the earthly instrumental standard sees only the things themselves.

Such is the tractarian-like characterisation of the happy person's world that we find in Wittgenstein's *Denkbewegungen*.

3. "Thus it would seem I need all the expressions ..."

It is characteristic of the descriptions in Wittgenstein's diaries of the two modes of existence and their associated requirements that they repeatedly employ religious and theological terminology. For instance, in connection with the world of the unhappy person he speaks of "perdition", and, as we have seen, he illustrates the happy person's retrospective judgement with the words "Now it is finished!" Many further examples could be adduced. Let me mention just one, where he introduces biblical terminology and metaphors into his treatment of the ethical individual: "Should he not receive the 'Crown of life'? Is it not precisely this that I am demanding for him? Am I not demanding for him glorification?! Yes! But how should I picture his glorification? Intuitively speaking I might say: not only must he behold the light, he must also come in contact with it, become a single entity with it – and the like" (DB 80). In elaborating on this thought Wittgenstein makes what is to my mind a crucial grammatical point about his own remarks. He notes: "Thus it would seem I need all the expressions that religion has in fact employed" (DB 80). In this way Wittgenstein acknowledges that his own use of religious terminology, expressions and turns of phrase is legitimised by the fact that such language is rooted in and derives its life and spirit from the varied field of experience and the circumstances associated with the two modes of existence and the various tensions between them. Via this route he links the expressions already mentioned – "perdition", "finished", "Crown of life", "glorification", "behold the light" – to the ethical condition of life that he sketches.

To put it another way, for Wittgenstein there is a close affinity between the grammar of ethical terminology and the concepts, expressions and ideas of religious language.

4. "... the real death, that which one can fear ..."

Towards the end of his diary notes of February 1937, Wittgenstein contrasts the two modes of existence in a new way. This time he speaks of a life full of love and a life dominated by egoism. Once again he lists the characteristics of the worlds of the happy and the unhappy person. The former include courage, honesty, resolve, and clarity with regard to one's own motives, whereas the latter include cowardice, deceit, and fear of the opinions of others. In addition to these qualities he introduces a crucial new theme by asking whether he believes he himself could meet the challenge to live the higher, meritorious life if he had the requisite courage. He replies: "But this [courage] I do not have and I must hope that this will not make me unhappy unto death, in other words in eternity" (DB 88c). –

In other words, the world of the unhappy person, which is cut off from "the source of life", must also be seen as the world of an unhappy living person who is in a certain sense dead. And this mode of existence – that of being "unhappy unto death, in other words in eternity", that of being "todunglücklich" (mortally unhappy) – is, Wittgenstein maintains, one of the forms in which human life can manifest itself, and it is, he adds, "perhaps not even one of the rarest" (VB 153). It is precisely in this sense that one can be "surrounded in life by death", just as "the health of our intellect" can be surrounded by "madness" (VB 91).

Via this new theme Wittgenstein links the concept of death to the world of the unhappy person and he pursues the point in what follows by juxtaposing the New Testament metaphors of light (with their attendant mode of existence, the world of the happy person) with the orientation towards life that is devoid of all value and meaning. Here the spiritless and empty mode – a life in which "the splendour of all things is extinguished, everything is dead" – is contrasted with the world of the happy person, which is illuminated by, or experienced against, the background of "the gleam of a light" (DB 89c). – Put another way, the orientation towards life that involves rebellion against or flight from the challenge results in an existence that is turned away from the source of life and the light, a life in which everything is dead. Alluding to *Tractatus* 6.4311, Wittgenstein writes: "One has then died while alive. Or rather, this is the *real death*, that which one can fear, for the mere 'end of life' is not a thing one experiences (as I have quite rightly written)" (DB 89c). – Wittgenstein illustrates his grammatical remark about the root, life and spirit of religious terminology by saying that the person who is tempted by or who lives "the *real death*" can be described as "go[ing] to hell" (DB 89-90c).

5. "... on the resurrection of the dead ..."

By this point we have the material to attempt an answer to my introductory question. Let me summarise. – If we compare the juxtaposition of the latter remarks with the foregoing descriptions of the worlds of the happy and the unhappy person, we can draw the following conclusion: *if* the spiritless and empty mode of existence is "the *real death*, that which one can fear", and *if* the world of the *mortally* unhappy person is a form of "hell", and *if* a life in which the challenges are ignored is a life of "perdition", *then* we must regard the mode of existence that maintains a relation to "life's source" as that which is full of spirit and love, *then* we must regard the world of the happy person as that in which "happiness in an eternal sense" is attained, indeed, *then* the life in which the light is seen will correspond to a life glorified. And in extension of this point, it is precisely the *transformation* that the human condition undergoes when it "turns the gaze upwards" towards the other, higher standard that has to be regarded as a renewal of life to the condition of something heavenly, as the resurrection of the living dead to a condition of eternal life. – Or as we read in Wittgenstein's *Notebooks*: "For life in the present there is no death" (NB 75). Or in the New Testament: "Old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new" (II Cor 5, 17).

This more than merely suggests the contours of the answer to which the fourth reading – the ethical-existential – brings us, namely, that Wittgenstein's remark in the fourth section of the *Philosophical Investigations* "Part II", to the effect that he can imagine plenty of things in relation to the religious teaching "that the soul can exist when the body has disintegrated", presupposes the distinction he makes elsewhere between the worlds of the happy and the unhappy person; it alludes to the experience of the conflict between these two modes of existence and the descriptions thereof (the absence of light versus illumination, real death versus the source of life, perdition versus glorification, hell versus heaven). But the remark in the *Investigations* should also be viewed in connection with Wittgenstein's grammatical observation that his characterisation of the two modes of existence makes use of religious and theological terminology. In this way he links his religious terminology to the ethical modes and the field of ethical tensions that lies between these two life orientations. In this way he also suggests that the reason why the idea of the resurrection of the dead seems to him meaningful is precisely because it is rooted in and derives its life and spirit from that aspect of existence that involves the question of how the individual ought to lead his life. – Does one prefer life or death! Does one wish to overcome death and live a renewed life! An eternal life in the timeless present! A life that attains the purpose of existence! A life that involves coming home! Or does one want to die "the *real death*", which amounts to a living death and a wasted life! Wittgenstein writes:

A sentence can seem absurd and its superficial absurdity can be consumed by its profundity, which lies behind it, so to speak. One can apply this to the idea of the resurrection of the dead and to other related notions. – What gives the idea its depth is the use to which it is put: the *life* led by the person who believes in this. For this sentence can for example be the expression of the highest responsibility (DB 70).

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