

Wittgenstein, World and Wonder

Lap-Chuen Tsang

This paper offers an account of Wittgenstein's treatment of 'the world'. As will be seen, this requires explanation of his view of religious attitudes in general, and of wonder at the world in particular. His religious position may appear to be unsystematic, or even inconsistent. Contrary to this impression, this paper will show that the same view of the world underlies his religious position, which manifests itself in different forms at different stages of his philosophy. For the world, as the logical limit to the expression of the human will,¹ is a unifying idea in his philosophy.² We shall be concerned with his early endeavour to express himself to the limit of the world and then with his later analysis of religious thought and action which construe as real that which lies beyond the world.

The world has always been a limiting concept in Wittgenstein's philosophy. According to him, the world as reality presents itself to us as an unquestioned and necessary experiential fact. All of us believe in the world that has been handed down to us.³ It is the condition that makes possible every questioning and doubting.⁴ It is the background against which we judge in general between true and false.⁵ Its existence is so self-evident that it is even unnoticed, and its nonexistence is inconceivable.⁶ Language means only the world and can mean only it.⁷ In his endeavour to understand the world and man in it, Wittgenstein always holds on to the view that we should be concerned with things and events and situations in the world, and investigate it from within, taking the world as unquestioned and necessary. An exemplary formulation of this understanding is his popular lecture on ethics delivered in 1929, in which he argues that any expression given to our wonder at the existence of the world and related experiences is essentially nonsense, even although he deeply respects such existential wonder and himself irresistibly engages in it.⁸ To begin our discussions, I shall recapitulate, in the next two paragraphs, his view of existential wonder and related experiences in this lecture on ethics.

When I wonder at the existence of the world, I am concerned with the world as a whole. When I feel I am living in agreement with the world,⁹ being safe and good and purposive in the world, no matter what may happen, I am also concerned with the world as a whole.¹⁰ These experiences, which regard the world as a limited whole as if from a position outside it,¹¹ defy proper expression in language. It is nonsense to

speak of existential wonder, for example, by saying that I wonder at the existence of the world.¹² For when I wonder at something being the case, it would be something conceivable not to be the case. I could wonder at the sky being blue as opposed to the case when it is clouded. But now I am wondering at the world as a whole that it exists at all, as opposed to its nonexistence which is inconceivable. This is like wondering at the sky whatever it is. Similarly, it is nonsense to speak of living in agreement with the world, feeling absolutely safe, thinking it imperative to do what I think I ought to do and regarding something as absolutely purposive. For this absolute sense of value goes beyond all circumstances, that is, in effect, beyond the world as a whole.

These experiences—wondering at the existence of the world, feeling absolutely safe, regarding some thought or action or event or situation as absolutely good and purposive, and so on—present themselves to us in actual life, but they defy proper expression in language, which means only and can mean only the things around us being as they are and otherwise. For to wonder at the existence of the world is to inquire about its meaning, which does not reside in the world. For to speak of absolute safety or goodness or purpose is to relate what happens in the world to that which does not reside in the world.¹³ These experiences are concerned with the world in its totality and with what lies outside it. As has been argued in the *Tractatus*,¹⁴ the meaning of the world and related ethical and religious values lie beyond the limits of the world and, therefore, beyond the limits of language. As Wittgenstein also points out, our wonder at the existence of the world is associated with the religious allegory of creation, and the related ethical and religious experiences with that of living in the hands of God.¹⁵

The world of our existence and our existence in the world evoke wonder: we are surprised at the existence of the world and disposed to inquire into it in order to know how to live meaningfully in it.¹⁶ This and related experiences are facts and therefore describable; but, paradoxically, because of their purported supernatural value, any expression given to them violates the rules of language.¹⁷ Wittgenstein describes this violation as our thrust against the walls of our cage, that is, the limits of human existence.¹⁸ In such experiences, we endeavour to transcend the world of our existence and our language goes on 'holi-day'.¹⁹ We go beyond the world for the meaning of the world and for the meaning of life in the world. This going beyond the world views the spatiotemporal objects in *toto sub specie aeternitatis*.²⁰ To understand Wittgenstein's ontological thrust further, I shall develop an analysis of the sentence 'The world exists' on the lines of the *Tractatus*. For the sentence is one obvious way of speaking about the world as a whole, as used in a sentence like 'How extraordinary that the world exists at all' in expression of our experience of existential wonder.

The sentence 'The world exists' employs the term 'the world', which stands for the sum of positive facts or existent states of affairs in logical
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space.²¹ 'Reality would have been a more inclusive term, which stands for the sum of positive and negative facts. But it can be said that the world also includes negative facts, negative facts being inseparable from positive facts.'²² We experience the existence of the world as an unquestioned and necessary fact. But it is impossible to give proper expression to the experience, for example, by the sentence 'The world exists'. The reasons, which will be given as follows, are connected with the paradoxical nature of the existence of the world for Wittgenstein.

The sentence 'The world exists' as a propositional sign is a part of the world. If it used to depict the world, it must resemble the world in pictorial form.²³ This requires that elements of the picture are so related to one another that it really represents all existent states of affairs in the world.²⁴ It indeed taxes the mind beyond the limit to interpret the sentence as if it were about complexes,²⁵ by saying in effect what the sum of all propositions says. Even if conceivable as such, the sentence 'The world exists' remains a part of the world and necessarily represents its subject from a position inside it, which the *Tractatus* rules out as impossible in principle.²⁶ This applies to any propositional sign, as a part of the world, used to speak about the world as a whole to which it belongs as a part.²⁷

However, for the sake of argument, let us disregard this intrinsic problem and interpret the sentence 'The world exists' on a par with a sentence used to make an empirical proposition. Interpreted thus, the sentence 'The world exists' means that objects in the world are so configured that they constitute the world.²⁸ But, as has been argued in the *Tractatus*, however the objects are configured, they invariably constitute the world—an imagined world necessarily contains the same objects.²⁹ Similarly, the negation 'The world does not exist' fails in principle to depict a possible situation in logical space. On a par with a sentence used to make a negative proposition, the negation means that objects in the world are so configured that they do not constitute the world, saying in effect that objects, the necessarily existing basic constituents of the world, turn out to be not existing. That is to say, the sentence 'The world exists' purports to be used to make an empirical proposition, its truth being not recognizable merely from the sentence. But then it turns out to be necessarily true under analysis, an instance of empirical necessity which the *Tractatus* rules out as impossible in principle.³⁰

Again, for the sake of argument, let us interpret the sentence 'The world exists' as if it were used to make an empirical proposition which is either true or false. According to the *Tractatus*, an empirical proposition must give the whole of logical space though it can determine only one place in logical space.³¹ For a proposition necessarily presupposed the existence of its negation.³² Given this view of an empirical proposition, the sentence 'The world exists' is indeed puzzling. For the sentence, used as an empirical proposition, purports to determine by itself the whole of

logical space, the world being the sum of existent states of affairs in logical space. And yet the sentence, used as an empirical proposition, would be expected to determine only one place in logical space and to give, together with its negation, the whole of logical space. What does 'logical space' here refer to? If one were to think out of bounds, one might conceive of a logical space more inclusive than the one³³ which sustains all existent states of affairs and only them, such that all existent states of affairs *in toto* occupy a logical place in this logical space. And one might conceive of something real other than the real world, which sustains the latter as a part of it.³⁴

The preceding section on reasons for the logical impropriety of the sentence 'The world exists' gives a depiction of the sort of mental cramp which Wittgenstein feels when confronted by the world as an experiential fact. Besides representing a puzzling picture of the totality of facts or existent states of affairs, the sentence, purported to be an empirical proposition, apparently engenders at least two unacceptable consequences. Either its negation is inconceivable, in which case the sentence is logically improper and therefore nonsensical, or its negation is conceivable, in which case the sentence leads one to postulate something real other than the real world. Either alternative leads one to think incoherently and absurdly.

This mental cramp seems crucial to understanding Wittgenstein's view of man's endeavour to transcend the limits of human existence. The sentence 'The world exists' used as an empirical proposition speaks about the world as a limited whole, and as such violates the rules of language; and, accordingly, any expression given to existential wonder and related experiences concerned with the world as a limited whole is essentially nonsense. But the sentence 'The world exists' purports to express an unquestioned and necessary experiential fact. Such a sentence, or the idea of the existence of the world, might well be entertained by Wittgenstein despite its logical impropriety and, when entertained, might well lead him to conceive of the negation and of something real outside the real world, in effect transporting the mind to the limit of the world and beyond. Wittgenstein concludes his *Tractatus* by saying that the world as a limited whole is the mystical, about which we can merely express its mysterious effect on us.³⁵ We might wonder whether the mystical has been at work in his *Tractatus* from the very beginning. The world as a limited whole is mysterious, if construed as limited by something real other than the real world or by absolutely nothing. But, of course, we can think of the world as a limited whole without wondering about what lies beyond. For, as regards a viable principle of significance applicable to the assertive uses of language, we can think up to the limits of the conceptual framework of the natural order and human life.³⁶ The idea of the world as a limited whole is not necessarily connected with the idea of something real other than the real world. But Wittgenstein is inclined to speak of man's urge to thrust against the limits

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of language, that is in effect of the world, as if the thrust were pointing to something.³⁷ My suggestion, then, is that we interpret his treatment of existential wonder as agreeing with his ontological thrust, which, as we have seen and shall see, has a definite theistic implication.

In his popular lecture on ethics in 1929, Wittgenstein says that existential wonder is essentially inarticulate in language yet confesses his irresistible engagement in it and his deep respect for it in the same breath. He simply cannot shake off the mysterious effect the existence of the world has on him. He might as well intend the advice conveyed in the form of a paradox to induce existential wonder in his audience! As an object of wonder, the existence of the world evokes in us an emotion of surprise mixed with an inquisitive interest, as to its meaning and significance, as to how we ought to live meaningfully in the world. However we understand the world, whether or not along the lines of *Tractatus*, the sentence that the world exists, an idea that is unquestioned and necessary, necessarily exerts its evocative effect on us while we endeavour to live meaningfully in the world. And this effect will be manifested not only in a *Tractatus* but also in the ways in which we think and act in the world.

Instead of inquiring further into the meaning and significance of the world so as to know how we ought to live meaningfully in the world, the later Wittgenstein turns to understand how people with theistic inclinations think and act in the world. In his 'Lectures on Religious Belief'³⁸ in 1938 Wittgenstein analysed a number of religious concepts which help determine the meaning and significance of existence, for example, retribution, miracle, apparition, and afterlife. I shall now examine his analysis of these concepts, showing that his analysis, which proceeds in line with his world-view, is comprehensible as a depiction of the ways in which we endeavour to live meaningfully in the world with a theistic attitude towards it.

From within a framework that avoids the use of concepts referring to what lies outside human life in the natural order, Wittgenstein elucidates some aspects of religious concepts as employed within the theistic tradition. The existence of the world is taken for granted as unquestioned and necessary—such that the nonexistence of the world is logically inconceivable. This view is important on account of its connection with the idea of God, understood as the One who created the world from absolutely nothing. That is, the world would not have existed if it were not for the creation: if it does not make sense to say that the world does not exist, it does not make sense to say that God exists.

According to Wittgenstein, religious beliefs have the effect of regulating all in the believer's life,³⁹ in particular his attitude towards the world and the life to be expected in it. Even if religious beliefs are considered logically incoherent or meaningless or false according to the empiricist standards, they may operate as irrefutable statements of faith or dogma on the way the believer endeavours to live meaningfully in the

world. Religious beliefs, unlike ordinary and scientific ones, are not subject to public means of testing. They express the believer's attitude towards life and things happening to him, so that they are connected with a picture of the world and things in it. To speak the other way round, the believer's life articulates or manifests religious beliefs expressive of the adoption of a picture of life, which he may or does not as yet know how to formulate. So, if we are to understand religious beliefs, we may attend to how they operate in relation to the way the believer takes his life—that is, to how he values the things he does and the things happening to him, how he understands the meaning of his life as a whole. A set of religious beliefs endorsed by a man is connected with the picture of life he expresses or pursues, or thinks he expresses or pursues, and this is connected with the kind of life he is living and what life means to him.

Suppose someone believes that God exists and loves him. He would take the world and some of the things happening to him as indicative of Divine providence. Although he may well think that the existence of God and His love for him are not testable by empirical means, he nevertheless would take, as shown in his behaviour, certain ideas as true, and certain acts and happenings as good and purposive, taking all this as such as if he were living in the presence and providence of God.

Consider, for example, an utterance like 'God loves me' occurring in connection with certain ideas taken as true, certain acts as good, and certain happenings as purposive. In its occurrence in relation to ideas and acts and happenings taken in definite ways, the sentence 'God loves me' as a whole is seen to be expressive of the believer's picture of the world and the human life to be expected in it. When Wittgenstein says that in a sense he understands religious beliefs,⁴⁰ like 'God loves me', he seems to refer to their occurrences in connection with the believer's verbal and non-verbal behaviour, to their regulative functions in his life and thought. But then Wittgenstein says that he does not understand religious beliefs in another sense. This is when a religious sentence like 'God loves me' is taken to say something like 'My father loves me', with God becoming an object of inquiry and even manipulation. Wittgenstein suggests that it is understandable how a sentence like 'God loves me' as a notional object operates in relation to the way the believer takes life and things happening to him, but it is improper to take the sentence and inquire into its meaning and significance out of its proper religious contexts.

In Wittgenstein's analysis, our attention is being drawn to the operation of sentences in expression of religious beliefs, as if they were meaningless signs, in relation to other identifiable and describable aspects of the believer's verbal and non-verbal behaviour.⁴¹ The believer in God may take human life as purposive in this world as such, or he may not. If he does, he may take certain things as true, certain acts as good and certain happenings as purposive, on account of the presence and providence of God. The believer's life would exhibit a pattern which

takes certain ideas, acts and things as limits to what is knowable, good and possible. He may take certain ideas and acts as sanctioned or forbidden by God, and certain things happening to him as reward or punishment. He may take certain events as being brought about by Divine providence. He may take death not as an end to life, and speak of afterlife as substantiating in some way this life here and now, e.g. heaven as a place of ultimate reward and hell as a place of ultimate punishment. And if he sees that it is too difficult to get clear ideas about afterlife, he may speak of reward and punishment of one's acts on a kind of transcendent order, as a matter of spiritual elation and dejection one somehow feels.⁴²

In Wittgenstein's analysis, because he does not take the idea that God is real to be conceivable at all, he takes the world and things in it to be explained only with concepts available to all, regardless of different religious inclinations. He takes the world and things in it as real, and as the limiting dimension of our existence. There are objects, notional objects of kinds, indicative of the limits of our existential dimension. When we speak of God, we speak in one way of the limit of the world, though in an incomprehensible way. When we speak of certain acts as absolutely good or bad, we speak of the limiting dimension of what we can and should do, though in an incomprehensible way. When we speak of retribution, we stress this limit on our action as realistic. When we speak of certain things and events as produced by Divine intervention, this is connected, directly or indirectly, with the order of the world in Divine providence. Thus, the world exists not as the only reality, but as a reality limited by the supernatural. When we speak of afterlife, we speak of a kind of limit to life here and now, which is also a threshold leading to another life of a different dimension. We necessarily take certain ideas, acts and things as limiting on what life is to us, and this is reflected in the way we use certain concepts in connection with our reactions towards life and some of the things happening to us. Wittgenstein's analysis of religious concepts presupposes the world as the limiting dimension of human existence, and the results of his analysis, if thus interpreted, are objective and true in a limited sense. His analysis could potentially be agreed upon by people of different religious inclinations, and would also show clearly the situations where people of different religious inclinations may differ in their reactions towards life.

As we have seen, Wittgenstein considers the world and human life in it to be limiting and mysterious. Questions about why the world and human life in it are as such always remain with him. Outside his philosophical moments, when he confronts realities in actual life in a self-reflective mood, he is inclined to think and act with a theistic tendency.⁴³ As philosopher he rules out any expression of existential wonder, regarding it as nonsense, but as man he cannot help engaging in it. This discrepancy in him as philosopher and as man is only an apparent one, for what is regarded as nonsense is assertions about what lies

beyond; this renders the limit more mysterious. In his treatment of the world, Wittgenstein is sceptical about its cognitive aspect, but deeply concerned with the propriety of his attitude towards it, and irresistibly inclined towards treating it as limited by the supernatural. Theistic concepts give powerful expression to a definite attitude towards the world and human life in it. The world and humanity, whether construed as self-justifiable, or justifiable by allusion to an order other than the natural and human, are sublime⁴⁴ to the human mind. In his inevitable continuous adjustment to the world of his existence, Wittgenstein, instead of losing wonder at the world as such, takes it as an object of wondrous awe even more.⁴⁵

- 1 See e.g. Wittgenstein, *Notebooks 1914–1916* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1961), p. 80: ‘If the will did not exist, neither would there be that centre of the world, which we call the I, and which is the bearer of ethics.’
- 2 This paper agrees with and reinforces the thesis that there is a basic unity in Wittgenstein’s philosophy. See e.g. Peter Winch (ed.), *Studies in the Philosophy of Wittgenstein* (London: Routledge & Kegan, 1969), an anthology of papers on different aspects of Wittgenstein’s philosophy, emphasizing its inner unity.
- 3 See e.g. Wittgenstein, *On Certainty* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1969), para. 280, 281, 288, 289. Citations from Wittgenstein are not enclosed within quotation marks in this paper. However, references are given to the appropriate texts.
- 4 See e.g. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Remarks* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1975), para. 168, cp. 34, 47, 152, 253.
- 5 See e.g. *On Certainty*, para. 94.
- 6 See e.g. ‘Wittgenstein’s Lecture on Ethics’, *Philosophical Review* (1965), LXXIV, pp. 8–9.
- 7 See e.g. *Philosophical Remarks*, para. 47.
- 8 ‘Wittgenstein’s Lecture on Ethics’, pp. 3–12, esp. 11–12.
- 9 Cp. e.g. Wittgenstein, *Notebooks 1914–1916*, pp. 75–79, esp. 75.
- 10 Cp. *ibid.*, pp. 75–79.
- 11 Cp. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961), 6.4–7, esp. 6.45.
- 12 Cp. *On Certainty*, para. 35–36, that it is nonsense to say that there are physical objects; because the purported proposition belongs to our ‘frame of reference’ (83), which is ‘the substratum of all (our) inquiring and asserting’ (162) or ‘the scaffolding of our thoughts’ (211).
- 13 See e.g. *Tractatus*, 6.41.
- 14 See esp. 6.42, 6.421.
- 15 ‘Wittgenstein’s Lecture on Ethics’, pp. 9–10.
- 16 For Wittgenstein, logic deals with the conditions which make talking about the world possible, and ethics or religion deals with the conditions which make it possible to live meaningfully in the world. See e.g. ‘Wittgenstein’s Lecture on Ethics’, pp. 3–5; and *Notebooks 1914–1916*, p. 77.
- 17 ‘Wittgenstein’s Lecture on Ethics’, p. 10.
- 18 *Ibid.*, pp. 11–12.
- 19 Cp. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1953), para. 38: ‘For philosophical problems arise when language goes on holiday.’
- 20 *Tractatus*, 6.45.
- 21 *Tractatus*, 1.1, 1.13, see also 2.013.
- 22 *Tractatus*, 5.5151.
- 23 *Tractatus*, 2.1–2.225.

- 24 *Tractatus*, 2.151.
- 25 *Tractatus*, 2.0201.
- 26 *Tractatus*, 2.173.
- 27 The *Tractatus* is abundant with sentences of this category, its opening sentence being the most notable. One must transcend them in order to see the world aright (6.45).
- 28 Cp. *Philosophical Investigations*, para. 60, on the analysis of propositions like 'My broom is in the corner.'
- 29 *Tractatus*, 2.022, 2.023.
- 30 *Tractatus*, 6.375.
- 31 *Tractatus*, 3.42. It may be said further that an empirical proposition is necessarily interpreted in a system i.e. the world. Cp. *Philosophical Remarks*, para. 152, 157.
- 32 *Tractatus*, 5.5151, 4.061—4.1, esp. 4.0641. Cp. *Notebooks 1914—16*, pp. 25—26, 94, on the suggestion that a proposition completes its sense in its negation.
- 33 Note that existent states of affairs combine in logical space to constitute the world and an existent state of affairs necessarily occupies a place in logical space. *Tractatus*, 1.13, 2.11, 2.202, 3.4, 3.42, 4.463. See also 6.341 on logical space by analogy of a co-ordinate system of points.
- 34 Cp. *Tractatus*, 6.45: 'To view the world *sub specie aeterni* is to view it as a whole—a limited whole.'
- 35 *Tractatus*, 6.45—7.
- 36 See e.g. P.F. Strawson, *The Bounds of Sense* (London: Methuen, 1966), p. 44.
- 37 As suggested in his conversations with Friedrich Waismann and Moritz Schlick, as reported in the appendix to 'Wittgenstein's Lecture on Ethics', p. 13.
- 38 Cyril Barrett (ed.), *Wittgenstein: Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1966), pp. 53—72, which contains students' notes of his lectures on religious belief in 1938.
- 39 *Ibid.*, esp. pp. 53—54.
- 40 *Ibid.*, esp. p. 55.
- 41 Cp. Charles Taylor, 'Interpretation and the Sciences of Man', *The Review of Metaphysics* (1971), XXV, pp. 3—51, on the operation of notional objects in a subject's notional world as he interacts with his environment, as attested by his responses to certain forms of words, and/or in his non-verbal behaviour. Daniel Dennett calls this approach to determining the notional world of *another* from the outside *hetero-phenomenology*, as distinct from *auto-phenomenology* in the tradition of Brentano and Husserl, which proposes 'to get to one's own notional world by some special somewhat introspectionist bit of mental gymnastics.' Daniel Dennett, 'Beyond Belief', in *Thought and Object*, Andrew Woodfield (ed.) (Oxford: Clarendon, 1982), pp. 1—90; see pp. 36—60 on notional objects, esp. pp. 39—40.
- 42 Cyril Barrett, *ibid.*, pp. 69—70.
- 43 See e.g. Rush Rhees (ed.), *Recollections of Wittgenstein* (Oxford: O.U.P., 1984).
- 44 The *Oxford Dictionary* defines the sublime as an object of wondrous awe of the most exalted kind. In 'Wittgenstein's Lecture on Ethics' (pp. 6—7), sentences expressing existential wonder and related experiences are regarded as sublime.
- 45 I am indebted to C.A. Davies, Erik Kvan, Basil Mitchell, C.G. New, Stephen Palmquist and, especially, F.C.T. Moore, for useful comments on earlier drafts.