

**Mutiny of an Error:
Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard on Suicide**

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In their philosophical work Ludwig Wittgenstein and Søren Kierkegaard both reflect on suicide as a response to existential despair. While Anti-Climacus, the pseudonymous author of The Sickness unto Death, rejects the contemplation of suicide as an outright barrier to an “awakening” of the self to its own sinful condition, Wittgenstein’s diary notes betray a different attitude towards such thinking; while he largely concurs with Kierkegaard’s characterization of despair, Wittgenstein strikes a less confident pose concerning the possibility of a leap into faith that would all at once overcome any thought of suicide.

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A discernible trail of references to Kierkegaard runs through Ludwig Wittgenstein’s writings, from early diary entries all the way to a letter to Norman Malcolm about three years before his death. As has long been recognized, the puzzlement expressed by his friend, colleague, and mentor Bertrand Russell upon discovering that Wittgenstein was reading Kierkegaard¹ must be understood more than anything as a reflection of Russell’s own philosophical stance when in fact Wittgenstein’s engagement with Kierkegaard’s reflections on Christianity was sustained and substantial.

Among numerous remarks by Wittgenstein testifying to this close connection one will not find any direct comments on Kierkegaard’s critical stance towards suicide. Yet, even if he never mentions Kierkegaard’s name in this context—and even if *The Sickness unto Death*, the one work pseudonymously authored by Kierkegaard (under the moniker ‘Anti-Climacus’) that contains his

most extensive consideration of the phenomenon of suicide, is not among the half-dozen of his works explicitly mentioned in Wittgenstein's letters—Wittgenstein's own reflections nevertheless seem to echo some of the central objections to suicide voiced in that book.² Despite his own objections, Wittgenstein's stance on suicide must not be mistaken for a univocal rejection or moralistic condemnation of it. In fact, his ultimately unresolved consideration of the question closely mirrors his ambiguous attitude towards Kierkegaard as a writer, shifting as it does between humbled admiration for the 'depth' of the Danish philosopher on the one hand, and critical assessment of the very idea of such 'depth' from the point of view of what we might call the legible surface of human behavior on the other. In what follows I will argue that it is Wittgenstein's own conflictedness about the nature of philosophical writing that both attracts him to Kierkegaard, and likewise repels him to a degree, just as he is repelled by the possible legitimacy of suicide as a 'solution' to existential despair, yet unwilling, or unable, to conclusively reject this option out of hand.

Wittgenstein's most well-known remark on suicide may be his early diary entry from October 1, 1917 in which he memorably identifies it as a crucible of ethics:

Wenn der Selbstmord erlaubt ist, dann ist alles erlaubt.

Wenn etwas nicht erlaubt ist, dann ist der Selbstmord nicht erlaubt.

Dies wirft ein Licht auf das Wesen der Ethik. Denn der Selbstmord ist sozusagen die elementare Sünde.

Und wenn man ihn untersucht, so ist es, wie wenn man den Quecksilberdampf untersucht, um das Wesen des Dampfes zu erfassen.

Oder ist nicht auch der Selbstmord an sich weder gut noch böse!

(Wittgenstein, *Werkausgabe* 1: 187)

If suicide is permitted then anything is permitted.

If there is anything that is not permitted, suicide is not permitted.

This illuminates the essence of ethics. Because suicide, so to speak, is the elementary sin.

And when one examines it, it is as though one were to examine mercury vapor to capture the essence of vapor.

Or is it that even suicide is neither good nor evil as such!³

The central question contemplated in this passage is whether or not suicide should be considered an act with normative implications. The two alternatives offered here are stark in their opposition: either suicide constitutes the most fundamental ethical transgression of all, or else it—and, presumably, along with it all other human action—falls completely outside such normative classification “as such” (*an sich*). This striking disjunction becomes slightly easier to understand when we consider Wittgenstein’s theses offered around the same time in the *Tractatus logico-philosophicus* to the effect that both meaning (*Sinn*) and value (*Wert*) of the world must lie outside of that world (*Tractatus logico-philosophicus* 6.41),⁴ and that death constitutes not a changing of the world but its end (*Tractatus logico-philosophicus* 6.431).⁵ Hence, an ethics pertaining to this world can only be maintained if some normative framework reaching beyond this perspectively restricted world is in place. If the voluntary ‘ending’ of the world by one’s own hand were permitted, one would, in Wittgenstein’s first picture offered here, be destabilizing the world as such. Unless, that is, a world without any ethical framework whatsoever can indeed be imagined, which seems to be the speculative implication of the last sentence.

Most intriguingly, that sentence ends with an exclamation point! Why did Wittgenstein opt not to use a question mark? While the *Tractatus* denies the possibility of ethical *propositions* (*Tractatus logico-philosophicus* 6.42), it does not offer a conclusive rejection of ethics as such. Wittgenstein advances the idea of a unity of aesthetics and ethics (*Tractatus logico-philosophicus* 6.421), both of these equally divorced from the kind of sentences about the world as “that which is the case” (*Tractatus logico-philosophicus* 1) to which the *Tractatus* aims to

confine intelligible language use. Wittgenstein thought the ethical significance of the *Tractatus* to consist in exactly that about which it did *not* offer substantive theses but remained tellingly silent. Ethics for Wittgenstein ultimately is delineated by the shape we give to our lives by means of our actions. By extension, the proposed unity of ethics and aesthetics for Wittgenstein may be construed to mean that the identification and disinterested pursuit of the beautiful is a matter of *doing* something in a certain *form*, rather than of advancing particular claims. Philosophical writing as the putting of thought into linguistic form might well be considered one kind of such doing. If stating the unresolved ethical status of suicide hence does not amount to an (unintelligible) ethical proposition, it may rather be the exclamation point to a larger reflection on the relation of aesthetics and ethics.

The appraisal by Kierkegaard's pseudonymous stand-ins of the aesthetic as a guiding principle to one's life takes explicit issue with *doing* in singular pursuit of pleasure. The form of this pursuit creates, as the editor of *The Seducer's Diary* would have it, the aesthetic as a second world beyond the actual world, "a world of gauze, lighter, more ethereal" that is itself perceived "[t]hrough a hanging of fine gauze" of poetic production (Kierkegaard, *Either/Or* 1: 306). This aesthetic world may serve as a refuge, or a realm of release, from the weight of actuality, and it is here that the aesthetic intersects with the consideration of suicide. The aesthete, who has dedicated his life to action in pursuit of pleasure, may eventually run up against the boundaries of the world he has constructed for himself, and his glimpsing of those limits may lead him to despair. As Julia Watkin notes, strategies to which the aesthete might resort in this situation, such as selectively reviving past pleasures in recollection, fighting off boredom by resorting to novelty, or, finally, celebrating death as the release from an overwhelming struggle ultimately do not alter the fundamental situation of the aesthete, "a state of suicidal depression punctuated by occasional bursts of pleasure" (Watkin 66).

All of this is taking place, as the post-Shakespearean metaphor offered in *The Seducer's Diary* would have it, on a second stage behind the "stage proper"

(Kierkegaard, *Either/Or* 1: 306) that is life in the actual world. *The Sickness unto Death* provides a detailed argument as to why an aesthetic remove of this sort might be considered both a fitting context for contemplating suicide, and a problematic one at that. Similar to how Wittgenstein begins the passage quoted above, Kierkegaard's text posits that suicide "for spirit is the most crucial sin,"⁶ and goes on to compare pagan and Christian attitudes towards suicide. It is in specific reference to this phenomenon that a similarity between paganism and the aesthetic stage emerges (Ringleben 173). The aesthete is described as resembling the pagan in the sense that both consider suicide as a viable option in a naïve, insufficiently reflected way. The pagan does not realize that suicide is a "crime against God" (SuD 46) because he does not even conceive of the possibility of committing offense against God—a god, that is, which he does not recognize. This possibility can only be discovered individually (SuD 120), and since the pagan never enters the process of this discovery that is crucial to the Christian faith, by Kierkegaard's logic the pagan does not so much as even *have* a self. Without a self he cannot possibly find himself in the situation Kierkegaard calls *despair*, namely the infinite coming-back-to-itself of the self (SuD 30). One way of describing that infinite process would be to say that the self, afflicted by the sickness unto death, is unable to die, and yet is without hope of life (SuD 18). The eternity of despair that results—or the despair of eternity, which amounts to the same thing—mirrors, as Hermann Burger remarked, the premise of Sartre's play *Huis clos*, namely the inability to kill oneself because one is already dead (Burger 161 [§842]).

The aesthete as Kierkegaard describes him, though he may be suicidally depressed, never comes to experience this latter sort of dialectically heightened despair because the horizon of an alleged eternity eludes him. If the entire aesthetic world is indeed a stage behind a stage, it is by definition always an iteration of itself, always at a remove from the actual realm. As such it is able to conceive a multitude of ways of considering itself not addressed by the demand that, according to Kierkegaard, causes an existentially deep despair. In the

Supplements to *Either/Or*, the successful avoidance of recognition in an aesthetic context is aptly described with a theatrical metaphor:

Reflection can wind itself around a person in the most curious way. I can imagine someone's wanting to make a theatrical presentation of the fallaciousness of the age; but when he himself sits among the spectators he sees that no one, after all, takes it to heart except to detect the fallacy in his neighbor; he makes one more attempt and stage this very scene in the theater, and people laugh at it, saying isn't it terrible how most people can see the faults of others and not their own, etc. etc. (Kierkegaard, *Either/Or* 2: 479-80)

In other words, a spectator contemplating a stage—or a stage presenting yet another stage—may never be compelled by epistemological strictures or ethical obligations to apply the presentation of what is put before him with radical directness to himself. For him it is indeed true that *l'enfer, c'est les autres*, although he will not derive from this premise the Sartrean conclusion that consequently one needs to take responsibility for one's own actions.

A gap presents itself here between aesthetic representation on the one side and being on the other. In *The Sickness unto Death* this gap is identified as the downfall of the poet, “the sin of poetizing instead of being, of relating to the good and the true through the imagination instead of being that—that is, existentially striving to be that” (SuD 77). The poetic representation of the “fallaciousness of the age,” which one might at first glance take to be epistemologically advisable and ethically commendable, would count as a diversion from “striving to be that” as much as any other. With his own poetic pseudonym Anti-Climacus inveighing in this manner against ‘poet-existence,’ Kierkegaard marks poetic form as a vehicle of imagination—or fantasy—that retains the detrimental capacity for human beings, as Russell Goodman writes, to “hide in rather than placing their own form on their words and thoughts” (Goodman 342).

Given the fondness of Kierkegaard and his pseudonyms for theatrical metaphors in disclosing the faculty of the imagination as fraught with problems, it is all the more noteworthy that Wittgenstein taps the same metaphorical field when characterizing his own experience of reading Kierkegaard, and his struggle with the demands that this experience seems to place upon the individual:

Erkenne Dich selbst und Du wirst sehen, daß Du in jeder Weise immer wieder ein armer Sünder bist. Aber ich will kein armer Sünder sein und suche auf alle Weise zu ent schlüpfen (benütze alles als Tür um diesem Urteil zu ent schlüpfen). . . .

Was ich, quasi, auf dem Theater (Kierkegaard) in meiner Seele aufführe macht ihren Zustand nicht schöner sondern (eher) verabscheuenswürdiger. Und doch glaube ich immer wieder diesen Zustand durch eine schöne Szene auf dem Theater schöner zu machen.

Denn ich sitze im Zuschauerraum derselben statt das Ganze von außen zu betrachten. Denn ich stehe nicht gern auf der nüchternen, alltäglichen, unfreundlichen Straße sondern sitze gern im warmen, angenehmen Zuschauerraum.⁷

Recognize yourself for what you are and you will see that in every which way you are a poor sinner. But I don't want to be a poor sinner, and try to escape in any manner possible (I use everything as a door to escape this judgment). . . .

What I perform in the theater (Kierkegaard) of my soul, so to speak, does not make its condition any more beautiful but (rather) more detestable. And still I believe to be rendering its condition more beautiful by means of a pretty scene in the theater.

For I am sitting in the audience rather than observing the whole thing from the outside. Because I don't like to stand on the cold,

quotidian, unfriendly street but enjoy sitting in the warm, comfortable auditorium.

Wittgenstein here describes the individual struggle with the existential self-recognition called for by Kierkegaard as happening within a metaphorical 'theater of the soul.' Within the space of that theater it is not only possible but also very much his own manifest habit, writes Wittgenstein, to look for ways of avoiding the stark confrontation with himself that would reveal him to be guilty of sin. The staging of 'pretty scenes' successfully convinces the 'viewer'—the aesthete engaging in a self-contemplation (one that by Kierkegaard's logic functions as self-avoidance) wrapped in aesthetic gauze—to remain within the comforts of that aesthetic sphere, rather than to choose the barren reality of the street outside.

In this remark Wittgenstein very much seems to agree with Kierkegaard's critical assessment of the aesthetic stage. However, he is likewise aware that the *writer* Kierkegaard manages to elicit the sort of response that is described by particular literary means. In a later notebook, Wittgenstein remarks the following about this narrative technique:

Kierkegaards Schriften haben etwas Neckendes und das ist natürlich beabsichtigt, wenn ich auch nicht sicher weiß; ob genau diese Wirkung beabsichtigt ist, die sie auf mich haben. Es ist auch kein Zweifel daß der, der mich neckt mich zwingt, mich mit seiner Sache auseinanderzusetzen und ist diese Sache wichtig so ist das gut. – Und dennoch gibt es etwas was dieses Necken in mir verurteilt. Und ist dies nur mein Ressentiment? Ich weiß auch sehr wohl daß Kierkegaard das Ästhetische mit seiner Meisterschaft darin ad absurdum führt und daß er das natürlich auch will. Aber es ist als wäre in seinem Ästhetischen bereits der Tropfen Wermuts drin, so daß es eben an und für sich schon nicht so schmeckt wie das Werk eines Dichters. Er ahmt dem Dichter gleichsam mit

unglaublicher Meisterschaft nach, ohne aber ein Dichter zu sein und daß er keiner ist merkt man doch in der Nachahmung.

Die Idee daß jemand einen Trick verwendet um mich zu etwas zu veranlassen ist unangenehm. Es ist sicher, daß dazu (diesen Trick zu gebrauchen) großer Mut gehört und daß ich diesen Mut nicht—nicht im entferntesten—hätte; aber es fragt sich, ob, wenn ich ihn hätte, es recht wäre ihn zu gebrauchen. Ich glaube, dazu gehörte dann außer dem Mut auch ein Mangel an Liebe zum Nächsten. (No. 183 [“Tagebuch aus dem Koder Nachlass”], 122-3)

Kierkegaard’s writings have something teasing about them, which is of course intentional, even though I am not sure whether it is the very effect that they have on me that is intended. There is also no doubt that the one teasing me is thereby forcing me to confront the matter he is concerned with, and if that matter is important that is a good thing. – And still something within me rejects this teasing. Is that only my own resentment? I know very well that Kierkegaard shows the aesthetic to be absurd with his very own aesthetic mastery, and that he means to do so. But it is as though in his aestheticism there is already a drop of bitterness, such that in and of itself it already lacks the character of the work of a poet. It is as though he were mimicking the poet with incredible mastery without, however, being a poet, and the fact that he isn’t one is evident from his mimicry.

The notion that someone is employing a ruse to get me to do something is bothersome. There is no doubt that a great deal of courage (to employ such a ruse) is necessary, and that I would not have that courage, not in the slightest; but the question is whether, if I did have it, it would be right to make use of it. I believe that in

order to do so one would need not just that courage but also a lack of compassion.

The irony of Kierkegaard's pseudonyms, if not exactly poetic, is, in Wittgenstein's description, at least an incredibly masterful *mimicry* of the poetic, and as such something of a ruse. Kierkegaard's aesthetic machinations approximate the poetic and—intentionally, it would seem—miss it by the narrowest of margins.

The question of how the literary and the theoretical are related in a piece of writing would be of immediate interest to Wittgenstein, who was adamant about the dual character of his *Tractatus* as both philosophical *and* literary,⁸ while at the same time being more than skeptical about whether his own writing reached the mark of poetry worthy of the name.⁹ One aspect for which both Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard seem to indict the poetic is the lack of clarity that results from its refusal to speak directly. Wittgenstein may admit that he is liable to avoid direct existential self-confrontation wherever possible, but he also notes that Kierkegaard's indirect teasing by aesthetic means of his reader to do the (conceivably) right thing smacks of a lack of authenticity. If, according to Kierkegaard, direct communication about the most crucial things simply is not possible, then it certainly stands to reason that one should resort to indirect means. But Wittgenstein himself is direct enough in his notebook entry to remark that something about this strategy leaves him uncomfortable. It is not hard to appreciate that the ultimate appeal to existential directness, delivered in ironical indirectness, might elicit such a response.

In *The Sickness unto Death*, it is Anti-Climacus' contention that "it is imperative to have clarity about oneself—that is, insofar as simultaneous clarity and despair are conceivable" (SuD 47). The self must clarify itself to itself in order to exit from the insufficiently self-reflective aesthetic state in which the hiding of oneself from oneself remains possible. This is the state in which Wittgenstein finds himself as a self-conscious comedy spectator: "Ich bleibe immer wieder in der Komödie sitzen, statt hinaus auf die Straße zu gehen" [Time

and again I remain sitting watching the comedy rather than going out on the street] (No. 183, 202).

But is a clean exit out onto the street, a full transitioning out of the aesthetic state actually possible? As Joachim Ringleben argues in his commentary on *The Sickness unto Death*, it must be considered an open question whether for Kierkegaard there really can be such a thing as full and utter clarity in the conscious relationship of the self to itself (175). It is conceivable that such clarity would have to be considered the end of despair as such, which certainly would not fit the dialectic of intensified despair through a clarification of consciousness that Kierkegaard is trying to work out in his book.

Wittgenstein's concern with linguistic clarity, meanwhile, is palpable throughout his work. It also marks his recurrent skeptical self-evaluations of that work, and this self-directed critique, as I have argued elsewhere, has much to do with the written form of this work.¹⁰ As Wittgenstein moved from the hypothetical standpoint atop the Tractarian ladder from whence one might see "the world aright" to a radically modified methodological conception of what clarification in philosophy might mean—i.e. to patiently investigate linguistic practices and the surround in which these are embedded ('language games' and 'forms of life')—he kept the ideal of clarity in view. Both the published remarks in the *Philosophical Investigations* and his unpublished writing, however, provide reason to doubt that Wittgenstein himself considered that ideal to have been met. Wittgenstein's own writing seems to militate against the very idea of a radically clear sorting of the myriad confusions that are, as he so effectively demonstrates, at the base of many philosophical quandaries.

It is the qualified pursuit of the ideal of clarity on Wittgenstein's part that may have kept him from distancing himself more unambiguously from the notion of suicide than he does, and—it may be argued—than Kierkegaard did. From his notebook remarks in the 1930s it is sufficiently evident that Wittgenstein considered suicide and was repeatedly given to despairing thoughts.¹¹ While his descriptions of despair do echo those by Kierkegaard and sometimes even

invoke his name directly, the connection drawn to suicide as a response is less *clearly* articulated than it is by Anti-Climacus. In one telling remark, Wittgenstein connects the two concepts as follows: “Die Verzweiflung hat kein Ende & der Selbstmord endet sie nicht, es sei denn, daß man ihr ein Ende macht indem man sich aufrafft” [There is no end to despair & suicide does not end it unless one gathers up oneself] (No. 183, 119 [November 7, 1931]). Suicide is marked here as unable to end infinite despair. In terms of Anti-Climacus’ analysis, this is a pleonastic description of the ‘sickness unto death,’ since “every human existence that has become or simply wants to be infinite is despair” (SuD 30). That is to say, the very notion that despair is infinite itself sustains despair in a circular logic. This logic operates in the aesthetic realm, since “imagination is the medium for the process of infinitizing” (ibid.). Insofar as imagination, according to Anti-Climacus, leads the self away from itself, self-inflicted death of the self—suicide—has no purchase on this distancing which is at the heart of despair. What *would* make a difference would be to “gather up oneself” (*sich aufraffen*), or, in Anti-Climacus’ terms, to leap into faith, since “[t]he opposite to being in despair is to have faith” (SuD 49).

But how to do so? We may regard it as a function of the literary form in which Wittgenstein’s remarks appear, namely the diary that is not meant for publication and much of which is even written in code, but the self-directed reproach for not doing what would apparently be required to counteract despair is unmistakable in these remarks.¹² Wittgenstein is not given to Kierkegaard’s ironic refractions, writing much rather with what often appears to be an attempt at utmost openness. Following the passage quoted above on his unease regarding Kierkegaard’s literary trickery Wittgenstein goes on to reflect on the suicide of his older brother during the closing days of World War I on the Italian frontlines: “Ich verstehe den Geisteszustand meines Bruders Kurt vollkommen. Er war nur noch um einen Grad verschlafener als der meine” [I completely understand my brother Kurt’s state of mind. It was only just one degree more sleepy than my own] (No. 183, 124). The ‘sleepiness’ of the suicide and of the one contemplating his state of mind must be understood as an extension of the inability ‘to gather up oneself.’

Wittgenstein's professed understanding for this disposition in his brother indicates that any criticism of suicide is, in his case, also a self-criticism. It runs parallel to Wittgenstein's repeated critical remarks about himself as trying to make himself look better *in his writing* than he appears to himself. This includes confessional writing that acknowledges one's own weaknesses, such as the following passage:

Vielleicht habe ich nur insoweit ein Selbst als ich mich tatsächlich verworfen fühle.

Und wenn ich sage daß ich mich verworfen fühle so ist das kein Ausdruck (oder nur: beinahe nie ein Ausdruck?) dieses Gefühls.

Ich habe mir oft den Kopf darüber zerbrochen daß ich nicht besser bin als Kraus und verwandte Geister und es mir mit Schmerzen vorgehalten. Welche Unsumme von Eitelkeit liegt aber in diesem Gedanken. (No. 183, 104)

Perhaps I have a self only insofar as I in fact feel deprived.

And if I say that I feel deprived, that is not an expression (or only: almost never an expression?) of that feeling.

I have often racked my brain over the fact that I am not better than Kraus and similar figures and have painfully reproached myself for it. But what an immeasurable amount of vanity is contained in that thought.

The linguistic expression of a feeling is not equivalent, Wittgenstein claims here, to the feeling itself. Voicing the feeling of despair, or the feeling of inferiority as a writer—or at least the failure to lead a morally more defensible life compared—to satirist Karl Kraus and others is not the same as experiencing those feelings. The *utterance* of feelings of this sort is itself branded a form of vanity for which Wittgenstein reproaches himself. If any conclusion may be drawn from this circularity, it is that a pure 'gathering up' of oneself *in the form of writing*, a clear

written acknowledgment of one's own self as mired in sin (or *Verworfenheit*, which might be rendered literally as "thrown-aside-ness") may not be possible.

Simple silence, on the other hand, will not do either, neither for Wittgenstein nor for Kierkegaard. If Wittgenstein had believed that to "pass over in silence" anything not readily accessible to meaningful language were indeed the *solution*, he would have never had to write another word following his completion of the *Tractatus*. As the vast amount of unpublished writing following the (delayed) publication of that book and Wittgenstein's return to philosophy in 1929 demonstrates, he did nothing if not continue to struggle with, and against, the very notion that written language be completely transparent. Anti-Climacus, meanwhile, identifies silence as either an avoidance mechanism against despair that only furthers the loss of self (SuD 34-5), or, in a more acute case, marks the person of "inclosing reserve" who, in failing to confide in anyone, is putting himself at risk for suicide (SuD 66). If it were at all possible to wake from existential 'sleepiness,' as the subtitle of Kierkegaard's book appears to indicate it is, then one would surely not be waking to silence.

It is perhaps not accidental that the question of the extent to which one is able to "gather up" oneself or bring oneself to take the leap finds itself directly adjacent to reflections about authorship. Kierkegaard offers a telling analogy of the weak, despairing person who adamantly rejects the consolation of eternity that faith would offer him:

Figuratively speaking, it is as if an error had slipped into an author's writing and the error became conscious of itself as an error—perhaps it actually was not a mistake but in a much higher sense an integral part of the whole production—and now this error wants to mutiny against the author, out of hatred towards him, forbidding him to correct it and in maniacal defiance saying to him: No, I refuse to be erased; I will stand as a witness against you, a witness that you are a second-rate author. (SuD 74)

Taking one's own work as a witness against oneself to heart in the manner Anti-Climacus suggests here, and subjecting oneself to the mutiny of one's own written bounty, is not just a figure of Kierkegaardian speech. It in fact rather well characterizes Wittgenstein's reflections on the perceived shortcomings of his own work, that of a "second-rate poet." The flaws inherent in that work are a constant subject of reflection in Wittgenstein's notebooks where they are diagnosed with a double gesture that reveals itself to be aesthetic in character: "Kaum eine der mich tadelnden unter meinen Bemerkungen ist ganz ohne das Gefühl geschrieben, daß es doch immerhin schön ist daß ich meine Fehler sehe" [There is hardly a single one among my remarks in which I reproach myself that is written altogether without the feeling that it is, after all, beautiful that I see my own errors] (No. 183, 136). Pointing to one's own errors itself constitutes an aesthetic value that may well be interpreted as a moral shortcoming (by Wittgenstein's own lights it certainly would). An error is hence not just something to be corrected, but it may, in the event of a self-directed diagnosis of an error, become the occasion for a self-relation that finds, as Wittgenstein describes it, a kind of beauty in self-awareness.

Such beauty, or pleasure, stands in the way of the ideal that Wittgenstein so relentlessly invokes of clear-sightedness about one's own limitations; the aesthetic gain, it seems, is itself the occasion for another self-deluding obstruction. However, this sort of pleasure, Wittgenstein writes, is part and parcel of what sustains a joy of life for him:

Die Freude an meinen Gedanken (philosophischen Gedanken) ist die Freude an meinem eigenen seltsamen Leben. Ist das Lebensfreude?

Es ist sehr schwer nichts von sich zu halten und jeden Beweis daß man doch ein Recht habe etwas von sich zu halten (Beweis nach Analogien) von vornherein, auch ehe man den Fehler durchschaut hat daß er irgendwo nicht stimmt (ja auch wenn man nie auf den Fehler kommen sollte) als Trug zu erklären. (No. 183, 108)

The joy taken in my thoughts (philosophical thoughts) is the joy taken in my own strange life. Is that the joy of life?

It is very difficult to think nothing of oneself and to consider every proof that one is right to think something of oneself (proof by way of analogies) from the outset—even prior to finding out the error in the proof that makes it invalid (or even if one should never find the error at all—to be an illusion.

A radical attempt to banish all error and illusion with respect to one's own (presumably falsely inflated) self-esteem would certainly be difficult to see through to a conclusion. Even though Wittgenstein does not make this connection here, one such conclusion would be *suicide*. The pleasure taken in one's own thoughts, in one's own "strange life," and in pointing out one's own errors would hence constitute the counterweight to that most difficult step. If suicide is possibly "in itself neither good nor bad," as Wittgenstein's early diary entry from 1917 had hypothesized, then it is perhaps fitting that its opposite, the "joy of life" (if there is such a thing), is situated between the moral taint of vanity and the a-moral tenacity of life in the face of the realization that it is riddled with weakness and error. For all the self-directed moral scruples Wittgenstein articulates in his notebooks, it is, in the end, a certain acceptance—despite everything—of the imperfection of life that banishes suicide as an option for him. Quite in line with Wittgenstein's overall approach in his later writings, this is not so much an argument against suicide *per se* but, more modestly perhaps, a description of what stands against it in the particular life that is Wittgenstein's own. Just like the linguistic practices that Wittgenstein dubbed 'language games' demand patient investigation and resist the philosophical impulse of broad generalization, there may indeed be no answer possible to the question of whether suicide "as such" is right or wrong.

Anti-Climacus likens the steadfast resistance to correction of the figurative error to the inertia of the self looking truthfully at itself. Held back in this way by

“the whole production” of his life riddled by error, the un-faithful remains at risk for suicide. Wittgenstein’s unease at Kierkegaard’s aesthetic teasing and prodding his reader to doing the right thing under such circumstances, namely affirming faith in all its absurdity, is rooted not in the notion that faith would be undesirable. Rather, Wittgenstein’s observation is that it is, in fact, the unfitness of his own self for the radically negative self-assessment that Anti-Climacus demands (his moniker carrying the very demand within itself) that may keep it from choosing suicide. The sum of Wittgenstein’s remarks on Kierkegaard suggests that he had the highest admiration of the form of life that the scene of Kierkegaard’s writing models for his reader. Despite the fact that his characterization of his own despair so closely mirrors Kierkegaard’s, Wittgenstein’s “own strange life” was not Kierkegaard’s. His attempts, “Klarheit und Wahrheit zu schaffen” [to bring forth clarity and truth] (No. 108, 46) by means of accounting for his own life in writing were not a path to an identical stance towards suicide to that voiced by Kierkegaard’s pseudonym, who would have the self attain utmost clarity about itself to the point where the admonishments of an uncorrected error will no longer be heard.¹³

¹ See Russell’s letter to Lady Ottoline Morrell from December 20, 1919 (cited in Brian McGuinness and G.H. von Wright 140).

² Genia Schönbaumsfeld notes the “striking” (16) parallels between Wittgenstein’s and Anti-Climacus’ stances on suicide.

³ All translations into English of passages by Wittgenstein in this essay are my own.

⁴ References to the *Tractatus logico-philosophicus* are given in the text by the decimal numbering of the propositions; the edition cited is found in *Werkausgabe* 1: 7-85.

⁵ Michael Fox (154-5) points out that Wittgenstein here appears to draw on Schopenhauer, who likewise maintains that since conscious life is essentially a series of present moments, death cannot be experienced as one such moment.

⁶ Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death* [hereafter abbreviated in the text as SuD] 46.

⁷ Wittgenstein, *Wittgensteins Nachlass*, No. 108 (“Band IV Philosophische Bemerkungen”), 102-3. All further citations from this electronic edition in the text with item no., item title (where given), and page number.

⁸ See the undated letter by Wittgenstein to Ludwig von Ficker (G.H. v. Wright 1969 32–3).

⁹ The following passage expresses that skepticism without reserve: “Ich bin ein zweitrangiger Dichter. Wenn ich auch als Einäugiger König unter den Blinden bin. Und ein zweitrangiger

Dichter täte besser daran, das Dichten aufzugeben. Auch wenn er damit unter seinen Mitmenschen hervorragt" [I am a second-rate poet. Even if I am a one-eyed king among the blind. And a second-rate poet would do better to give up poetry. Even if it is poetry by means of which he excels among his fellow human beings] (No. 117 [Band XIII "Philosophische Bemerkungen"], 193.

- ¹⁰ See Klebes, Chap. 1. One memorable passage from the notebooks reads as follows: "Man glaubt oft — und ich selber verfall[e] oft in diesen Fehler — daß alles aufgeschrieben werden kann was man denkt. In Wirklichkeit kann man nur das aufschreiben — d.h. ohne etwas Blödes und Unpassendes zu tun — was in der Schreibform in uns entsteht. Alles andere wirkt komisch und gleichsam wie Dreck. D.h. etwas was weggewischt gehörte" [One often thinks—and I myself *often* make this mistake—that everything that one thinks can be written down. In reality one can only write down—i.e., without doing something that was stupid or uncalled for—what emerges in us in the form of writing. Everything else appears odd & practically like dirt. I.e. something that should be wiped away] (No. 183, 27).
- ¹¹ For one particularly stark example see No. 102 ("Notizbuch"), 65v (February 26, 1915).
- ¹² The diagnosis given by Schönbaumsfeld points to the same conclusion: "Wittgenstein, given his ethical-religious conception, has contracted Climacus' disease—the sickness unto death—but without, in the end, being able to reach for the 'radical cure' that Christianity would provide" (Schönbaumsfeld 147).
- ¹³ I would like to thank Dr. Josiah Simon for his assistance in compiling the bibliography.

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