THE INFLUENCE OF STANLEY CAVELL ON
FERGUS KERR’S WITTGENSTEINIAN THEOLOGY

Thesis
Submitted to
The College of Arts and Sciences of the
UNIVERSITY OF DAYTON

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
The Degree
Master of Arts in Theological Studies

by
Justus Hamilton Hunter

UNIVERSITY OF DAYTON
Dayton, Ohio
August 2011
THE INFLUENCE OF STANLEY CAVELL ON FERGUS KERR’S WITTGENSTEINIAN THEOLOGY

Name: Hunter, Justus Hamilton

APPROVED BY:

___________________________________
Brad J. Kallenberg, Ph. D., Faculty Advisor

___________________________________
John A. Inglis, Ph. D., Faculty Reader

___________________________________
Kelly Johnson, Ph. D., Faculty Reader

___________________________________
Sandra A. Yocum, Ph. D., Chairperson, Dept. of Religious Studies
ABSTRACT

THE INFLUENCE OF STANLEY CAVELL ON
FERGUS KERR’S WITTGENSTEINIAN THEOLOGY

Name: Hunter, Justus Hamilton
University of Dayton

Advisor: Dr. Brad J. Kallenberg

This thesis argues that Fergus Kerr reads Ludwig Wittgenstein through the lens of
Stanley Cavell, and this influence has an impact on Kerr’s theology. Chapter two outlines
Cavell’s account of “the truth of skepticism.” For Cavell, our language does not rest upon
necessary criteria (in this regard, skepticism is true), but is made possible by our
attunement to one another, via our shared “forms of life.” Recognition of the truth of
skepticism arouses an anxiety about the certainty of our knowledge and language. The
problem we encounter is the tendency, when faced with skepticism’s truth, to engage in
philosophical deflections which guide us back into imagining our language and
knowledge rest upon more than “forms of life.”

Wittgenstein’s methods, on Cavell’s read, aim at the removal of these deflections,
deflections which give rise to philosophical illusion. Thus, Wittgenstein’s philosophy is
therapeutic – it aims to remove philosophical illusions so that we can see the truth already
there. Chapters three and four describe that therapy. Chapter three is an excursus on Cora
Diamond’s account of Wittgenstein’s early philosophy in the Tractatus Logico-
Philosophicus. Against P.M.S. Hacker, Diamond argues that Wittgenstein’s aim in the
Tractatus is therapeutic. On Diamond’s read, Wittgenstein guides his reader into imagining his propositions are meaningful, only to realize eventually that the same propositions were nonsense and we were deeply attracted to imagine them otherwise. In this way, Wittgenstein performs a therapy on his reader. Cavell reads the Investigations in a correlative way in his essay “The Availability of Wittgenstein’s Later Philosophy,” which is the subject of chapter four.

Chapter five considers four “moments” in Fergus Kerr’s oeuvre wherein he engages, explicitly, with Wittgenstein’s philosophy. It is shown that the Cavellian themes perdure throughout, although we can see development in Kerr’s engagement with them. Chapter six then attempts to demonstrate how this engagement with Cavell’s Wittgenstein extends into Kerr’s other writing. The key here is Kerr’s engagement with Rahner. In moving through three “phases” of Kerr’s work: early (1980s), middle (1990s), and later (2000s), the chapter shows the transition between the early and middle phases from what was an inchoate, and at times underdeveloped criticism of Rahner’s theology to an appreciation. Kerr’s engagement with Russell Reno’s The Ordinary Transformed was pivotal in this shift. However, the Cavellian themes are shown to persist in spite of Kerr’s change of sympathy with regard to Rahner. Finally, the thesis closes with a suggestion that the themes hover in the background of Kerr’s most recent publications, most notably in his engagement with twentieth-century Catholic theology. This provides a partial explanation for the narration Kerr gives in Twentieth-Century Catholic Theologians.
for Ellen
Thanks to my committee, whose willingness to support and provoke me to think more deeply than I might otherwise was nothing short of a gift. Thanks to my readers, Dr. John Inglis and Dr. Kelly Johnson, for bearing with what felt at times to be idiosyncratic even to me. A very special thanks to Dr. Brad Kallenberg, who not only introduced me to the work of Stanley Cavell and Cora Diamond, but whose persistent challenge and generous guidance always felt encouraging, even when it made my task more laborious. Along the way I was blessed with many important conversations about this project. My father-in-law, Pete, asked probing questions as to the structure of the argument that I am certain saved me a great amount of time. Conversations with Ethan Smith were always helpful and thought-provoking, particularly with regard to Cora Diamond. Alan Mostrom, Herbie Miller, and Scott McDaniel all helped me think through the project at various phases. More importantly, their friendship along the way no doubt kept me sane. Thanks to my son, Justus II, who sacrificed many ours of play and, in his words, “missed me lots and lots.” And most importantly, thanks to my wife, Ellen, who worked the hardest to see this project through to completion.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract .............................................................................................................................. iii
Acknowledgements............................................................................................................ v

I. KERR, WITTGENSTEIN AND CAVEII................................................................. 1
   A Methodological Overview ......................................................................................... 9

II. STANLEY CAVEII AND THE TRUTH OF SKEPTICISM............................... 13
   “Criteria and Skepticism” ......................................................................................... 14
   The Truth of Skepticism ............................................................................................. 18

III. EXCURSUS: CORA DIAMOND’S THERAPEUTIC TRACTATUS ........... 22
   Conant and Geach on Frege and the Tractatus .......................................................... 24
   Diamond and Hacker on the Tractatus ....................................................................... 30
   “Ethics, Imagination, and the Method of Wittgenstein’s Tractatus” ....................... 37

IV. STANLEY CAVEII’S THERAPEUTIC INVESTIGATIONS ....................... 42
   “The Availability of Wittgenstein’s Later Philosophy” ............................................. 43
   Diamond and Cavell ................................................................................................... 48

V. STANLEY CAVEII’S WITTGENSTEIN AND FERGUS KERR ............... 53
   The Cavellian Themes in New Blackfriars (1982-1983) .......................................... 54
   Theology After Wittgenstein (1986) ........................................................................ 59
   The Postscript to Theology After Wittgenstein (1997) .......................................... 63
   “Work on Oneself”: Wittgenstein’s Philosophy of Psychology (2008) ................. 66

VI. STANLEY CAVEII’S WITTGENSTEIN EXTENDED INTO FERGUS KERR’S
    THEOLOGICAL ENGAGEMENT WITH KARL RAHNER
    AND TWENTIETH-CENTURY CATHOLIC THEOLOGY ..................... 71
    The Early Phase: Kerr’s Critique of Rahner ............................................................ 74
    The Middle Phase: Reno’s Critique and Kerr’s Response ...................................... 80
    The Later Phase: Twentieth-Century Catholic Theologians .................................. 89
    A Partial Explanation .............................................................................................. 94

BIBLIOGRAPHY .............................................................................................................. 98
All that philosophy can do is to destroy idols. And that means not creating a new one—for instance as in “absence of an idol.”

Ludwig Wittgenstein
Fergus Kerr, O.P., is editor of *New Blackfriars*, Honorary Fellow of New College, University of Edinburgh, and Honorary Professor of Saint Mary’s College, University of St. Andrews. His publications are ranging. In philosophy, his work engages philosophers from both the continental and analytic traditions (Heidegger, Wittgenstein, Derrida, and Putnam, to name a few). In theology, he publishes both on Thomas Aquinas and Modern Theology (Protestant and Catholic). In terms of subjects, his publications range from philosophy and theology to psychology and sociology. His interests, and proficiencies, are extensive.

Both Protestant and Catholic scholars struggle to locate Kerr theologically. For instance, Lutheran theologian Hans Frei, in “Five Types of Theology,” arranges modern theology on a spectrum described in terms of the relationship between philosophy and theology.¹ On one end of the spectrum (type one), “theology as a philosophical discipline in the academy takes complete priority over Christian self-description within the religious community called the Church”; a type exemplified by Gordon Kaufman. At the other end, “there is not even a subordinated place for philosophy within theology”; exemplified

---

by D.Z. Phillips. Later in the same volume, in a related essay entitled “The End of Academic Theology?,” Frei lumps Kerr (citing *Theology After Wittgenstein*) together with Phillips under type five. However, Kerr becomes problematic once located. Having placed him under type five, which the reader will recall has no place for philosophy (to use Frei’s somewhat imprecise language), Frei now must deal with Kerr’s appropriation of the philosophical anthropology of René Girard in developing a “scapegoat Christology” in the final chapter of *Theology After Wittgenstein*. Does this not force Kerr into another of Frei’s types? Frei concludes that Kerr reflects the impossibility of type five theology: “in a strange way, that is, at a very concrete experiential level, we are back where John Locke first took us more theoretically: the rooting of specific theological discourse in general or universal criteria of meaning.”

Which is it, then – type one, type five, or somewhere in between? Frei recognizes that Kerr is a difficult fit for his spectrum: “It does seem that here we reach at least one boundary of academic theology, as it were, from within the spectrum.”

---

2 Kerr defends Phillips (and himself) against Frei, pointing out that the position he describes as type five more neatly fits what Kai Neilson describes as “Wittgensteinian Fideism.” Kerr contends that Phillips has resisted such descriptions of his thought. “Frei’s Types,” *New Blackfriars* 75 (1994): 184-193.

3 Frei, *Types of Christian Theology*, 93.


5 Frei, *Types of Theology*, 94

6 Ibid.
Locating Kerr remains difficult. Recently, the publication of *Twentieth-Century Catholic Theology* (2007) inspired extensive, mixed, and at times polemical review. In many cases, *Twentieth-Century Catholic Theologians* became a rallying point for Roman-Catholics of various stripes. R.R. Reno saw the text as support for a renewal of Thomistic scholasticism in theology (in some form). Francesca Murphy found the text too uncharitable to Hans Urs von Balthasar. Meanwhile, Stephen J. Pope found it entirely too charitable to von Balthasar. William Portier gives the most careful and nuanced review, pointing out the important transition which takes place in chapter eight when von Balthasar enters the scene. Moreover, Portier demonstrates the text’s target of criticism: the recent advent of “nuptial mysticism” as an official form of Catholic theology.

Nevertheless, when it comes to locating Kerr’s book on the spectrum of Catholic theology, Portier is somewhat flummoxed. While he asserts the book should be located in “the recent literature of the Thomist resurgence,” referencing the work of Ralph McInerny and Romanus Cessario, O.P. as exemplars, he then hesitates: “But Kerr is no simple neo-scholastic. More subtle and indirect, Kerr’s book is less straightforward in its advocacy of Thomism than McInerny’s or Cessario’s.” True. One needs merely read

---


8 Portier, “Thomist Resurgence,” 496.
Kerr’s chapter (six) on Rahner, wherein he defends the Jesuit against all critics (except Rahner himself, that is) and suggests that in time, Rahner’s and von Balthasar’s projects “may well come to seem more complementary than conflicting.”\(^9\) Indeed, something out of the ordinary is going on here.

Several factors would require consideration in order to give a full explanation for Kerr’s elusiveness. To name a few, Kerr’s interests range from analytic and continental philosophy to medieval and modern theology (and philosophy). His geographical location, in Edinburgh, Scotland (and all that climate entails in terms of politics, demeanor, style, etc.) would have to be discussed. One would need to address his theological inheritance as a member of the English Dominican Province and Editor of *New Blackfriars*, where the shadow of Herbert McCabe looms large. Like McCabe, Kerr is working from a concoction of voices rarely mixed in North America: Wittgenstein with Aristotle with Marx with Aquinas. This thesis cannot possibly offer a full explanation. Its aims are far more modest. I am concerned with only one of the aforementioned “voices”: Wittgenstein.

Does Wittgenstein actually influence Kerr’s theology? This thesis will argue in the affirmative. Very quickly, though, another question arises: What does it mean to be influenced by Wittgenstein? And another: *Which* Wittgenstein are we talking about? Logical positivists, ordinary language philosophers, deconstructionists, feminists, the list goes on – many claim their own “Wittgenstein.” Which is Kerr’s?

\(^9\) Kerr, *Twentieth-Century Catholic Theologians*, 104.
Careful analysis of Kerr’s sources reveals that when it comes to Wittgenstein, Kerr frequently reads him through the lens of Stanley Cavell. In support of my suggestion, consider the following as evidence:

1. Between December 1982 and April 1983, Kerr published a series of four articles discussing Wittgenstein and his importance for theology. The second installment, “On the Road to Solipsism,” drives toward a Cavellian point, whose thoughts on solipsism and skepticism are the subject of the closing section. Moreover, Cavell’s is the final word in the series.

2. The Preface to the first edition of *Theology After Wittgenstein* states “My debts are many: I have tried to record them as I go along, but I owe far more than my references might suggest to the weird and wonderful works of Stanley Cavell, from which I have received endless delight and illumination.” While Cavell is only cited three times in the first edition, they are important moments. Most notably, Kerr concludes the pivotal third chapter with Cavell, and then returns to him in bringing the text to its conclusion.

---


13 Ibid., 75-76, 187-188. As a note, Kerr later, in the Postscript to the second edition, rescinds his final comments which follow upon his reference to Cavell, but not the two pages of Cavell which precede it. Kerr (partially) accepts the criticism of Russell Reno that he stressed immanence so heavily in the first edition to the detriment of transcendence, and sets out to set the record straight. He admits, “Wittgenstein…would certainly have respected the desire to ‘make ourselves immortal’,” 199. If one recalls that concurrently with the publication of the second edition of *Theology After Wittgenstein*, *Immortal Longings* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997) was also published, wherein
3. The Postscript to the second edition of *Theology After Wittgenstein* climaxes in yet another affirmation of Cavell, this time on skepticism, in the final two pages of the text.¹⁴

4. *Immortal Longings* claims as its starting point Stanley Cavell’s remark that “for the later Wittgenstein, the metaphysical tradition ‘comes to grief not in denying what we all know to be true, but in its effort to escape those human forms of life which alone provide the coherence of our expression’.”¹⁵ Perhaps a cursory comment, but in chapter six Kerr gives an overview of Stanley Cavell’s philosophy as one of a set (of seven) philosophers/theologians who give various expressions of the desire for “transcending humanity.” Concerning Cavell (as well as Charles Taylor and Martha Nussbaum), Kerr calls his account “tentative and self-doubting,” to his merit! Cavell resists the temptation to become “monolithic,” as in the case of Martin Heidegger, Iris Murdoch, and Luce Irigaray. He goes on to praise Cavell’s “insistence on the ‘truth’ of skepticism as the endless interrogation of ultimate values (which) is, in its way, an unstoppable oscillation between immanence and transcendence.”¹⁶ From Kerr’s perspective, oscillation is not such a bad thing.

5. Cavell, unexpectedly, pops up in the pivotal chapter two of *After Aquinas*, entitled “Overcoming Epistemology.” While it is a single reference, the chapter’s staging of the

---

¹⁴ See chapter five for an extensive consideration of the Postscript, which suggests that one of the things it accomplishes is a directive on how to read *Theology After Wittgenstein* that is markedly Cavellian.


¹⁶ Ibid., 161. What is perhaps most suggestive about *Immortal Longings* (for our purposes) is that Cavell seems to occupy the place of Wittgenstein in the volume.
problem, out of which Kerr thinks Aquinas (with Wittgenstein) can help us, is the same we see Kerr resolving via Cavell in New Blackfriars and Theology After Wittgenstein: to wit, skepticism.\textsuperscript{17}

6. Chapter four of “Work on Oneself” treats the problem of “other minds” in modern (analytic) philosophy, with a focus upon the problem’s implications for psychology.\textsuperscript{18} Kerr concludes the discussion with an overview of three figures as a response to skepticism about other minds: John Wisdom, Stanley Cavell, and Richard Eldridge. As Wisdom is a major influence on Cavell, and Cavell a major influence on Eldridge, the focus of the chapter is on Cavell. Once again, this chapter concludes the volume.

7. In 2008, The Centre for Theology and Philosophy at the University of Nottingham sponsored the Grandeur of Reason Conference in response to Pope Benedict XVI’s Regensburg Address. The papers delivered there were published in 2010 in a volume entitled The Grandeur of Reason: Religion, Tradition, and Universalism.\textsuperscript{19} Kerr’s contribution was published as “‘Zwar Instinkt aber nicht Raisonnement’: From

\textsuperscript{17} In After Aquinas, Kerr actually uses the term “Cartesianism.” I argue later in the thesis (chapter five) that “Cartesianism” is, for Cavell, one of a network of terms which are expressions of the more foundational problem of skepticism, to which Kerr gives a remarkably Cavellian reading in the New Blackfriars articles and Theology After Wittgenstein. “For Stanley Cavell, for example, the set of problems which philosophers know as ‘Cartesianism’ – how much we can know of the world or of other people’s minds or of anything transcendent – is only an intellectually refined expression of an age-old desire to escape the contingencies of history and limits of language. In short, the threat of skepticism is the flip side of the longing for immortality.” Fergus Kerr, After Aquinas: Versions of Thomism (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 22.


His aims are to “overcome the self-imposed limitation of reason to the empirically falsifiable,” as Benedict states in the Address. Given the extensively empiricist frame of the British mind (he cites Hilary Putnam in support of this assertion), Kerr turns to Wittgenstein to “think his way out.” Cavell shows up for the heavy lifting. Having set the chapter up with Hume and the fact-value distinction, and following a somewhat idiosyncratic Marxist detour, Kerr inflects the *Investigations* with a “moral dimension.” To accomplish this, Kerr draws upon Cavell’s account of “convention” in Wittgenstein, which Cavell refers to as a form of *attunement* (more on this in chapter two). For Cavell’s Wittgenstein, this *attunement* is the ground from which language grows, and therefore moral judgment grows as well. Cavell thereby renders a reading of Wittgenstein in consonance with Hume (to a point), which, Kerr submits, might lead out of empiricism. He concludes the essay with a suggestion (in a final footnote) to read Cavell and Richard Eldridge.

---


24 He also mentions Paul Johns(t)on, but points out that Cavell and Eldridge are more complex. Kerr, “‘Zwar Instinkt aber nicht Raissonement,’” 397.
More could (and will) be said.

This is not to say that the sole influence on Kerr’s reading of Wittgenstein is Stanley Cavell. Moreover, Cavell is not alone in what some might regard as a minority interpretation of Wittgenstein. The reading I outline in the pages which follow is distinctively Cavellian, but not exclusively so in all respects. Cavell’s philosophy, particularly as regards his interpretation of Wittgenstein, possesses many resonances with the now significant minority of philosophers whose interpretation of Wittgenstein might be called “therapeutic”: Cora Diamond, John McDowell, Rush Rhees, Elizabeth Anscombe, and others. Nevertheless, Cavell is the source Kerr returns to repeatedly, with the least criticism, and at the most pivotal moments for explicating Wittgenstein’s philosophy and (as this thesis will argue) developing theology in light of Wittgenstein.

A Methodological Overview

The aims of this thesis are merely descriptive, not evaluative. I do not intend to judge whether or not Kerr’s application of Wittgenstein (or Cavell) to theology is a generally worthwhile endeavor, whether it is the appropriate interpretation of Wittgenstein that he applies, or whether the appropriation I describe succeeds or fails. Moreover, while the thesis proximately aims to give an explanation for Kerr’s elusiveness, it does not give the question more than a partial, suggestive response. To

---

25 Peter Geach, Norman Malcolm, John Wisdom, and M. O’C. Drury also appear frequently, although only Drury appears with comparable frequency to Cavell. However, Drury’s influence is more circumscribed for Kerr to the discussion over Wittgenstein’s own religious beliefs. Cavell, on the other hand, flits in and out of Kerr’s texts, more often than not popping up in pivotal moments. John Wisdom only appears in connection with Cavell, and Cavell is always called upon to clarify Wisdom’s convoluted arguments. Unlike Cavell, both Malcolm and Geach received mixed review from Kerr.

26 Alice Crary makes this connection between these five particular figures in her Introduction to The New Wittgenstein, ed. Alice Crary and Rupert Read (NY: Routledge, 2000).
give a full explanation would require a great deal of effort to describe the landscape of contemporary theology, and then to locate Kerr, which would make the task entirely too difficult. The elusiveness is merely the prod which gets this inquiry going (if one can excuse a somewhat crass bovine analogy). It is intended as a step toward a fuller explanation, but an important, even essential step. These constraints force me to limit my claims to the following: Fergus Kerr’s interaction with Stanley Cavell’s Wittgenstein influences Kerr’s theology.

My case is made in two phases. First, in chapters two through four, I give an account of how Cavell reads Wittgenstein. I argue that Cavell’s interpretation can be described according to two themes, related to one another as a problem (skepticism) to response (philosophy as therapy). The second phase (chapters five and six) demonstrates that Kerr’s engagement with Wittgenstein is marked by these themes, and that the Cavellian themes extend into his broader theological work.

Chapter two outlines Cavell’s account of “the truth of skepticism.” Key to this account is his assertion that skepticism is naturally true – that so long as we operate according to its challenge of our language (that it rests upon less-than-certain criteria) we must face “the truth of skepticism.” For Cavell, our language does not rest upon necessary criteria, but is made possible by our attunement to one another, via our shared “forms of life” - nothing more. But this is not the problem of skepticism. Our recognition of the truth of skepticism arouses an anxiety about the certainty of our knowledge and language. The problem of skepticism is our tendency, when faced with its truth, to

---

27 It is important to note that I am resisting the inclination to use the term “solution,” as the more tentative (and ambiguous) “response” is more fitting.
engage in a philosophical deflection which guides us back into imagining our language and knowledge rests upon more than “forms of life.”

Wittgenstein’s methods, on Cavell’s read, aim at the removal of these deflections, deflections which give rise to philosophical illusion. Thus, Wittgenstein’s philosophy is therapeutic – it aims to remove philosophical illusions so that we can see the truth that is already there. Chapters three and four describe that therapy (the response to skepticism). Chapter three is an excursus on Cora Diamond’s account of Wittgenstein’s early philosophy in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*.28 The turn to Diamond is intended to clarify Cavell’s description of philosophy as therapy, which is expressed intermittently and imaginatively throughout *The Claim of Reason*. Diamond develops the theme more systematically. Against P.M.S. Hacker, Diamond argues that Wittgenstein’s aim in the *Tractatus* is therapeutic. On Diamond’s read, Wittgenstein, in the *Tractatus*, guides his reader into imagining his propositions are meaningful, only to realize eventually that the same propositions were nonsense and we were deeply attracted to imagine them otherwise. In this way, Wittgenstein performs a therapy on his reader. Cavell reads the *Investigations* in a correlative way. Chapter four takes Cavell’s early, important essay “The Availability of Wittgenstein’s Later Philosophy” to draw a comparison between Diamond and Cavell. In this way I sketch out an account of philosophy as therapy which, in methodically guiding the reader to see her own illusions, allows for a kind of self-knowledge.

In chapter five I consider four “moments” in Fergus Kerr’s oeuvre wherein he engages, explicitly, with Wittgenstein’s philosophy. I argue that the Cavellian themes

---

perdure throughout, although we can see development in Kerr’s engagement with them. The chapter demonstrates that, when it comes to Kerr’s engagement with Wittgenstein, Cavell exerts a profound influence. Chapter six then attempts to demonstrate how this engagement with Cavell’s Wittgenstein extends into Kerr’s other, more theological work (that is, the work which doesn’t engage, explicitly, with Wittgenstein). The key here is Kerr’s engagement with Rahner. By attempting to tell the story of Kerr’s long and complex relationship with Karl Rahner I show that Cavell’s Wittgenstein colors Kerr’s engagement with contemporary Catholic theology. To do so, I move through three “phases” of Kerr’s work: early (1980s), middle (1990s), and later (2000s). Roughly, Kerr transitions between the early and middle phases from what was an inchoate, and at times un(der)developed criticism of Rahner’s theology to an appreciation (even a commendation). Kerr’s engagement with Russell Reno’s The Ordinary Transformed is pivotal in this shift. However, I also demonstrate that the Cavellian themes persist in spite of his change of sympathy with regard to Rahner. Finally, I suggest that the themes hover in the background of Kerr’s most recent publications, most notably in his engagement with twentieth-century Catholic theology of which Twentieth-Century Catholic Theologians, the text which gave so many reviewers fits, is the paradigmatic case. Thus, the thesis concludes with a partial explanation for the narration Kerr gives in this controversial text, which partially explains the maelstrom of response it incited.
CHAPTER TWO

STANLEY CAVELL AND THE TRUTH OF SKEPTICISM

That the justifications and explanations we give of our language and conduct, that our ways of trying to intellectualize our lives, do not really satisfy us, is what, as I read him, Wittgenstein wishes us above all to grasp. This is what his “methods” are designed to get us to see. ... If philosophy is the criticism a culture produces of itself, and proceeds essentially by criticizing past efforts at this criticism, then Wittgenstein’s originality lies in having developed modes of criticism that are not moralistic, that is, that do not leave the critic imagining himself free of the faults he sees around him, and which proceed not by trying to argue a given statement false or wrong, but by showing that the person making the assertion does not really know what he means, has not really said what he wished. But since self-scrutiny, the full examination and defense of one’s own position, has always been part of the impulse to philosophy, Wittgenstein’s originality lies not in the creation of the impulse, but in finding ways to prevent it from defeating itself so easily, ways to make it methodical.

Stanley Cavell, The Claim of Reason

The following three chapters (two through four) attempt to clarify the debt Kerr owes to Cavell by outlining two themes (related to one another as problem and response) of Cavell’s philosophy (both derived from Wittgenstein) picked up by Kerr. First, in this chapter I present the problem: to use Cavell’s phrase, “the truth of skepticism.”29 To accomplish this, I give an overview of chapter two, “Criteria and Skepticism,” of Cavell’s

29 The use of “philosophical skepticism” infers not only epistemological skepticism (the sense in which skepticism is most often used in this thesis), but the whole family of related issues in all branches of philosophy upon which the modern problems of other minds skepticism (skepticism’s most characteristic form of expression in modern philosophy according to Cavell) extend. To give a few examples from Kerr and Cavell: tensions between idealism and empiricism, behaviorism in philosophy of psychology, the problem of the “other” in postmodern philosophy. For Cavell, all of these issues are derivations of skepticism. This is because the skeptical problem is foundational to humanity, and therefore foundational to philosophy.
*The Claim of Reason*. The two chapters which follow (three and four) present Cavell’s second theme (the response): philosophy as therapy. However, insofar as Cavell’s *The Claim of Reason* (the text which treats these themes and Wittgenstein most extensively) is someone oblique with regard to the second theme, due to Cavell’s fusion of analytic philosophy with literary criticism and biography in Part IV,\(^{30}\) I turn first (in chapter three) to Cora Diamond’s work on the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* for a more lucid description of what is intended in speaking of Wittgenstein’s philosophy as therapeutic. I then return to Cavell in chapter four, and an earlier (than *The Claim of Reason*) and seminal essay, “On the Availability of Wittgenstein’s Later Philosophy,” in hopes that, by bringing Cavell into conversation with Diamond, it will become clear as to what Cavell intends when he interprets Wittgenstein’s philosophy as therapeutic.\(^{31}\)

**“Criteria and Skepticism”**

*The Claim of Reason* is the most influential work of Stanley Cavell, Walter M. Cabot Professor Emeritus of Aesthetics and General Value Theory at Harvard University. As the text’s subtitle suggests, its central concerns are Wittgenstein, skepticism, morality and tragedy. *The Claim of Reason* is a patchwork of content from his dissertation and

---

\(^{30}\) The first theme, philosophical skepticism, is easier to treat on its own as it is the subject of Part I of *The Claim of Reason*, the most systematic and lucid sections due to their origins in Cavell’s dissertation. The other parts, which treat the response to skepticism advocated by Wittgenstein (among other issues) are more oblique and aphoristic, particularly the most relevant Part IV, “Skepticism and the Problem of Others,” the sections of which Kerr cites most frequently in (among other places) *Immortal Longings*. Cavell, in the Preface, refers to his “quasi-formal decision to let [The Claim of Reason’s] final part, Part Four, expand in its own irregular rhythm of preoccupations. … Part Four, by far the longest single part, then takes an unpredicted leap from, or against, the relative consecutiveness of the earlier parts, setting forth a sequence of variously discontinuous responses to that earlier material, questioning and extending its questions, encouraging a freedom of responsiveness to the fact that philosophy continuously finds itself averse to various ordinary words it seems unable to do without”, xii. Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality and Tragedy*, new ed. (NY: Oxford University Press, 1999).

\(^{31}\) This view of philosophy as therapy is related, for Cavell, to his contention that Wittgenstein’s philosophy aims at self-knowledge (see discussion in chapter four).
new sections, which gives the text a somewhat meandering tone (a tone Cavell might celebrate as fitting to his tasks). Part I, “Wittgenstein and the Concept of Human Knowledge,” is an extended discussion of a series of interrelated and central Wittgensteinian themes (for instance, criteria). In what follows, I give an overview of the second chapter, “Criteria and Skepticism” as an entrée into the theme of “the truth of skepticism,” with which the entirety of The Claim of Reason is concerned.

Cavell opens the chapter by distinguishing between what he calls the Malcolm-Albritton view of criteria (purportedly derived from Wittgenstein), and Wittgenstein’s own view of criteria. For both views, Cavell contends, criteria are seen as responses to skeptical doubt. However, in each case the form of response is distinct. Cavell outlines the Malcolm-Albritton view as follows, in order to cast what he will contend is Wittgenstein’s own view into relief:

…[the Malcolm-Albritton] view, it seems to me, contains ideas of the nature of skepticism and of Wittgenstein’s response to it which more or less obviously derive from these sources: (1) from a sense of Wittgenstein’s relation to skepticism as one of refuting it, or trying or wishing to refute it, or taking himself to refute it; and accordingly (2) from a sense of skepticism as saying (precisely the thing that this construction of criteria is made [in] order to overcome) that we can never know with certainty of the existence of something or other; call it the external world, and call it other minds.

---


34 Cavell, The Claim of Reason, 37.
Cavell retorts, “these ideas I find untrue to Wittgenstein.” The problem, he goes on to show, is that the Malcolm-Albritton view operates according to the picture which skepticism gives of itself – it accepts skepticism’s conclusion and then issues a response “on skepticism’s terms.” Wittgenstein’s philosophy seeks to “discover and alter” these terms.35

To clarify Cavell’s criticism, consider the following conversation:

M: He is in pain.
S: How do you know?
M: Can’t you see? He is holding his jaw?
S: But might it not be a sign of something else? Confusion perhaps?
M: But he is also groaning.
S: And might that not also be a sign of confusion? Or a nervous habit? Or any number of things? How can you be certain?

S (the skeptic) has raised a question of certainty, or necessity, as opposed to the form of knowledge M expresses. What are we to make of this lack of what the skeptic has called “certainty”? And what should we say about this form of knowledge which lacks “certainty”?

The Malcolm-Albritton view sees in criteria a solution to this line of questioning. Cavell quotes Albritton:

That a man behaves in a certain manner, under certain circumstances, cannot entail that he has a toothache. But it can entail something else. … Roughly … it can entail that … under these circumstances, [one] is

35 Ibid., 38.
justified in saying that the man has a toothache. … Or: … it can entail that he almost certainly has a toothache.\(^{36}\)

So the satisfaction of a certain criterion (behavior in this case) justifies to the point of near certainty our assertion (that he is in pain). Cavell, in his italics, draws attention to the hinge of the issue. What is meant by “justified” and “almost”? The sense is unclear, thus Albritton’s notion of criteria is not entirely helpful in answering the skeptic’s challenge. Rather, it amounts to a veiled form of assent to skepticism. The veiling is important; lurking under the veil is a disappointment with our language. Cavell’s claim is that, in spite of Malcolm and Albritton’s insistence otherwise, Wittgenstein’s consideration of criteria is not intended as a surmounting of skepticism on its own terms.

Of course, Malcolm and Albritton might aver, “How then can we ever know whether another person is actually suffering pain?” But why do they have such “disappointment over the failure (or limitation) of knowledge”?\(^{37}\) On Cavell’s reading, Wittgenstein’s discussion of criteria (and indeed his later philosophy as a whole) derives “its importance from the problem of skepticism,” but is not intended as a “refutation of skepticism. … That is, it does not negate the concluding thesis of skepticism … On the contrary, Wittgenstein … rather affirms that thesis, or rather takes it as undeniable, and so shifts the weight.”\(^{38}\) For the sake of simplicity – and at risk of over-simplification – we might give a typology of the three parties as follows:

**Skepticism**: accepts its concluding thesis; “that we can never know with certainty of the

---

\(^{36}\) Ibid., 39.

\(^{37}\) Ibid., 44.

\(^{38}\) Ibid., 45.
existence of something or other.”

Malcolm-Albritton: seeks to negate the concluding thesis of skepticism, but amounts to a veiled assent which disguises its own disappointment.

Wittgenstein: takes the concluding thesis as undeniable, but “shifts the weight.”

One way to describe a “shift of weight” is as a “shift of concern.” The skeptic, Malcolm, and Albritton are concerned with “certain” knowledge, paradigmatically expressed in logical syntax (and often accompanied with distinctions between “knowledge” and “belief”). Wittgenstein is concerned with what we actually call “knowledge.”

The two chapters which follow (three and four) seek to demonstrate how it is that Wittgenstein “shifts the weight” of the skeptical thesis. However, for now, I want to remain with the moment prior to the “shift” – the acceptance of the skeptical conclusion. What makes this acceptance distinctive from the “veiled” assent we saw in Malcolm and Albritton? In response, I want to clarify the Cavellian phrase “the truth of skepticism.”

The Truth of Skepticism

The point I have been trying to make is that Cavell (and Wittgenstein) admit human knowledge does not possess the certainty the skeptic, Malcolm, and Albritton worry over. The sort of knowledge which has been imagined by the skeptic, Malcolm, and Albritton, knowledge to which we would attach the attribute “certain” or “necessary,” is unavailable to human beings. On this point, Wittgenstein and skepticism agree. But so what? Why should we be so worried over this form of knowledge? In order to respond to skepticism, Malcolm and Albritton are forced to accept a conception of

---

39 Ibid., 37.
knowledge which is not experienced by human beings (call it certain knowledge), and then attempt an articulation of human knowledge on the terms of certain knowledge. At this point, Wittgenstein is distinct both from skepticism and its respondents; both those who answer skepticism’s questions affirmatively or negatively (Cavell lumps together phenomenalism and critical realism in this category). Both affirmative and negative responses are “expressions of skepticism:” they make sense “only on the basis of ideas of behavior and of sentience that are invented and sustained by skepticism itself.”

Cavell drives the point home:

If the fact that we share, or have established, criteria is the condition under which we can think and communicate in language, then skepticism is a natural possibility of that condition; it reveals most perfectly the standing threat to thought and communication, that they are only human, nothing more than natural to us. One misses the drive of Wittgenstein if one is not – as to my mind what I have excerpted from Malcolm is not – sufficiently open to the threat of skepticism (i.e., to the skeptic in oneself); or if one takes Wittgenstein – as to my mind what I have excerpted from Albritton does – to deny the truth of skepticism.

“The truth of skepticism”; this is the phrase Cavell will return to and elaborate throughout his career. Skepticism is natural. For Cavell, the problem of skepticism is not so much its thesis that we cannot know other minds or objects in the world with certainty. Rather, “the truth of skepticism” is significant insofar as it renders the skeptic’s criteria superfluous. Wittgenstein, on Cavell’s read, is helpful in his refusal to “go in” for the terms of skepticism. He admits the truth of skepticism. To do away with its possibility would be just as much a denial of human nature as a wholesale abdication to solipsism.

Cavell’s account makes possible a contentment with the nature of human knowledge. For

---

40 Ibid., 47. Italics mine.

41 Ibid. N.b. I omitted the Malcolm quote, found on p. 38, for the sake of brevity.
this reason, Cavell will play with the paradox of Wittgenstein’s simultaneous humility and arrogance. It is why, for Cavell, human life and language is always a thing of beauty and of terror. Moreover, it is the source of temptation to _deflection_ - refusal to accept human finitude. Philosophical deflections tempt us to return to the logic of skepticism; for instance, that there exists, and we have access to, some extra-human picture of knowledge/criteria in comparison with which actual human knowledge/criteria will always fall short. Wittgenstein never denies the truth of skepticism, but in accepting it in his own (distinctive) way, he gives an account of human life and language that doesn’t leave us “chafed by our own skin” (or, disappointed by our finitude). In this way, Cavell presses skepticism to an existential level; it says something about human existence. For Cavell, drawing upon Wittgenstein, what it is to be a human being is to remain open to the truth of skepticism, because all that we rely upon in our language is an _attunement_ to one another. As Cavell says in a later essay,

> That on the whole we do [understand one another] is a matter of our sharing routes of interest and feeling, modes of response, senses of humor and of significance and of fulfillment, of what is outrageous, of what is similar to what else, what a rebuke, what forgiveness, of when an utterance is an assertion, when an appeal, when an explanation—all the whirl of organism Wittgenstein calls “forms of life.”

We possess no more certain view of language. Reliance on _attunement_, on sharing “forms of life”, generates an anxiety. This anxiety leads to our tendency towards deflections, towards returning to the infinite number of imaginings whereby we fall back into the logic of skepticism. The problem goes deep; all the way down to the bottom of human knowing.

---

My brief excursus on “the truth of skepticism” serves as a prolepsis to the two chapters which follow, wherein I turn to Cora Diamond (chapter three) and then return to Stanley Cavell (chapter four) to discuss the second theme Kerr takes from Cavell: philosophy as therapy. In this chapter, I outlined the problem of skepticism, together with Cavell’s distinctive response: an acceptance (expressed in the phrase “the truth of skepticism”) and a “shift of weight.” This weight-shift is the subject of the two chapters which follow.
CHAPTER THREE
EXCURSUS: CORA DIAMOND’S THERAPEUTIC TRACTATUS

The right method of philosophy would be this: To say nothing except what can be said, i.e. the propositions of natural science, i.e. something that has nothing to do with philosophy: and then always, when someone else wished to say something metaphysical, to demonstrate to him that he had given no meaning to certain signs in his propositions. This method would be unsatisfying to the other -- he would not have the feeling that we were teaching him philosophy -- but it would be the only strictly correct method.

Ludwig Wittgenstein, Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus 6.53

Stanley Cavell’s prose is superb, but arduous.43 Or, as Kerr puts it, “weird and wonderful.”44 Cavell’s imagination, together with his difficult aims, prevent him from developing many of his themes as thoroughly or as systematically as might prove helpful for further development (or, if his reviewers are any indication, even basic comprehension). Cora Diamond has written extensively over the past thirty years on Wittgenstein and carved out her own distinctive reading of Wittgenstein’s philosophy which both Diamond and Cavell have attested as consonant with Cavell’s interpretation of Wittgenstein.45 Her work, no less subtle or difficult, has engaged Wittgenstein along

43 His unorthodox form of writing has been the source of criticism, but Stephen Mulhall defends Cavell’s style as appropriate to his commitments, particularly the orientation to self-knowledge towards which his work aims. See Stephen Mulhall, Stanley Cavell: Philosophy’s Recounting of the Ordinary (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 283-284.


45 See, in particular, their respective essays in the volume Philosophy and Animal Life, wherein each make explicit their debt to one another. See also Alice Crary’s outstanding introduction in The New
more systematic lines, particularly the earlier Wittgenstein for which she has developed a
“resolute reading” (more on this later). For this reason, it will be illuminative to tease
out her reading of Wittgenstein, in order to give our final description of Cavell’s account
of Wittgenstein.

This chapter proceeds in three phases. First, as background, I compare James
Conant’s position on the relationship between the Tractatus and Gottlob Frege with Peter
Geach’s position. The comparison will focus on the accounts of nonsense and elucidation
attributed to Gottlob Frege and the Tractatus by Geach and Conant. This serves as
background upon which we can understand Diamond’s interpretation of the Tractatus
(Frege figures heavily in Diamond’s interpretation of Wittgenstein47). Second, remaining
with the theme of nonsense and elucidation, I will describe the debate between Cora
Diamond and P.M.S. Hacker over Wittgenstein’s aims in the Tractatus. Diamond’s case
against Hacker eventuates in her contention that Wittgenstein’s philosophy has a

---


46 I will draw upon James Conant’s work as illuminative of Diamond’s own reading of the
Tractatus, but my primary interest will be in Diamond’s work and her development of this reading to
address the question of the task of philosophy. Conant is helpful in clarifying certain aspects of Diamond’s
work, and has written extensively on her reading (so much so that many now refer to the “resolute reading”
of the Tractatus as the Diamond-Conant reading). Nevertheless, I wish to focus on Diamond, as Conant’s
work tends toward a more radical (and at times violent) form of anti-metaphysical argumentation (e.g.
James Conant, “Mild Mono-Wittgensteinianism,” in Wittgenstein and the Moral Life: Essays in Honor of
Cora Diamond, ed. Alice Crary (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press), 29-142; “Why Worry About the Tractatus?” in
Post-Analytic Philosophy, ed. Barry Stocker (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2004), 167-192.) Conant’s assets
(his ability to distill complex concepts into straightforward prose) press him beyond the exceedingly careful
and nuanced claims of Cora Diamond, whose work resists such radical tones (see, for example, her
measured assertions in “Eating Meat and Eating People,” in The Realistic Spirit, 319-334.)

therapeutic aim. Third, Cora Diamond’s essay, “Ethics, Imagination, and the Tractatus” will be called upon to extend Diamond’s therapeutic insight.\textsuperscript{48}

**Conant and Geach on Frege and the Tractatus**

Drawing upon Peter Geach’s classic article on Frege and Wittgenstein,\textsuperscript{49} James Conant develops his own account of Frege’s conceptions of nonsense and elucidation, as well as their criticism in the Tractatus.\textsuperscript{50} Frege treats the subject, famously, in “On Concept and Object,” wherein he responds to Benno Kerry’s claim that concepts can be objects. Kerry’s proposition “the concept horse is a concept easily attained” is a clear violation of Frege’s third principle of logical syntax in The Foundations of Arithmetic: “never lose sight of the distinction between concept and object.”\textsuperscript{51} As a violation of the principle, the statement is therefore nonsense. Frege diagnoses Kerry’s mistake by retorting that Kerry has confused the psychological with the logical sense (a violation of the first principle of The Foundations of Arithmetic) in his use of “the concept horse” for the object of the proposition. That is, he thought of “concept” as an idea, or a mental picture, rather than in its strictly logical sense (which will be demonstrated momentarily).


Violation of the third principle eventuates, in this case, in the appearance of a proposition which possesses meaning, but is in reality nonsensical.

Conant demonstrates that Frege’s haggle with Kerry forces Frege to clarify his notion of nonsense, as well as what exactly he intends by the terms “concept” and “object.” The problem is, “concept” and “object” are indefinable. Per Conant, “For something to count as a definition, for Frege, it must be possible to invoke it in proofs…Nothing of the sort is possible, Frege maintains, for those terms occurring in his elucidatory remarks that refer to logically primitive categories.”

Concept and object are such terms – they refer to logically primitive categories. How, then, can Frege express his claims without defining them? Here he capitulates that words are necessary, but insists they must be elucidated by means of “hints.” Consider the following, taken from Frege’s defense of his definition of “concept” pace Kerry:

Kerry contests what he calls my definition of ‘concept.’ I would remark, in the first place, that my explanation is not meant as a proper definition. … On the introduction of a name for what is logically simple, a definition is not possible; there is nothing for it but to lead the reader or hearer, by means of hints, to understand the word as it is intended.

These “hints” are Frege’s account of elucidation, and what Conant and Geach term “elucidatory nonsense.” Hints, for Frege, serve a propaedeutic purpose. They communicate something unsayable. According to Geach and Conant, this forms the

---

52 Conant, “The Method of the Tractatus,” 386.


54 As Conant demonstrates, Frege clarifies what he means by “elucidations” (Erläuterung) elsewhere, which is also translated “explications,” and “illustrative examples”; Gottlob Frege, “On the Foundations of Geometry: Second Series (1906)” in Collected Papers, ed. Brian McGuinness et. al. (NY: Basil Blackwell, 1984), 300; “Logic in Mathematics,” in Posthumous Writings, 207. Conant should take care, however, that he not make too much of the occurrence of Erläuterung elsewhere – it is not always illuminating when considered in other essays, particularly those dealing in the logic of mathematics.
background for Wittgenstein’s say-show distinction.\textsuperscript{55} The contention becomes more apparent when Frege claims elucidations have no place in the system of science. They serve, rather, as intermediate steps, which are to be tossed aside (anticipating Wittgenstein’s ladder).\textsuperscript{56}

What Conant terms “elucidatory nonsense” is characterized by the presence of some thought, underlying the nonsensical expression. As Conant puts it, “Frege says certain things that by his own lights are nonsense, and what we (his readers) are to do is attend not simply to what he says (since it is, after all, nonsense) but to “the thought” that his words fail to express but attempt to gesture at.”\textsuperscript{57} The presence of “thought” is manifest in the necessity for “hinting” in order to convey to the uninformed reader that something is there. Nonetheless, that something cannot be conveyed in Frege’s logical syntax.

Conant makes a distinction between two conceptions of nonsense. The first conception he calls substantial. It distinguishes between two kinds of nonsense: mere and substantial nonsense. Mere nonsense “expresses no thought;” substantial nonsense “expresses a logically incoherent thought.” Mere nonsense is gibberish (e.g. Caesar is a prime number); substantial nonsense is a “violation of logical syntax” (e.g. red is a color).\textsuperscript{58} According to the substantial conception of nonsense, elucidation consists in

\textsuperscript{55} “Some fundamental aspects of the Wittgensteinian saying/showing contrast are already to be discerned in Frege’s writings.”; Geach, “Saying and Showing in Frege and Wittgenstein,” 55. Conant agrees: “I think Geach is right to think that Wittgenstein found in Frege a conception of what cannot be said but only “shown”; “The Method of the \textit{Tractatus},” 382.

\textsuperscript{56} See Geach, “Saying and Showing in Frege and Wittgenstein.”

\textsuperscript{57} Conant, “The Method of the \textit{Tractatus},” 390.

\textsuperscript{58} Conant, “The Method of the \textit{Tractatus},” 380.
showing what cannot be said (to use the Tractarian\textsuperscript{59} idiom). Hence, so long as the
\textit{Tractatus} is read along these lines, Wittgenstein is seen as offering minor criticisms of
the Fregean project while retaining the same basic outlook on language, nonsense, and
elucidation.\textsuperscript{60}

The second, rival conception of nonsense Conant calls \textit{austere}. Here there is no
distinction between kinds of nonsense – all nonsense is “mere” nonsense.\textsuperscript{61} There is no
thought underlying nonsense, it is merely nonsensical and therefore expresses no thought
whatsoever. Any suggestion of underlying thought, or substance, or depth, is nothing but
illusion. To think nonsense somehow represents underlying thought is, as Conant is apt to
say, mistaking the bait for the hook. According to the \textit{austere} account of nonsense,
elucidation consists in demonstrating the philosophical illusions we are prone to fall into
in our attempts to speak with sense. Elucidation is therapeutic.

To clarify, consider the following proposition: “A is an object.” Both Frege and
Wittgenstein agree the statement is nonsensical. For Frege, the nonsense is substantial (so
long as whatever A is falls under the category of all objects), insofar as the statement

\textsuperscript{59} For Frege, the sentence “Red is a color” violates logical syntax in locating a concept (color) in
the position where there should be an object. Nevertheless, it is suggestive of some greater identity which
we somehow know (that red \textit{really} is a color), but we cannot say it. We must hint at it by speaking
nonsense, but it gestures at something that \textit{really} is true. N.b. I use Tractarian to speak of the philosophical
outlook of the \textit{Tractatus}, \textit{a la} James Conant, not in reference to the 19\textsuperscript{th} c. Oxford Movement.

\textsuperscript{60} The problems of sense and nonsense are analogous problems in Frege and Wittgenstein. There
is also present in the \textit{Tractatus} a critique of the Fregean “concept,” specifically, of its confusion between
formal concepts and proper concepts (4.126). Wittgenstein ultimately sides with Russell’s theory of
descriptions (in his own way) over Frege’s propositional logic, all the while holding Frege in the highest
esteem. Cora Diamond’s essay “Throwing Away the Ladder: How to Read the \textit{Tractatus}” covers
Wittgenstein’s precise debt to Frege and Russell in this regard in section II, \textit{The Realistic Spirit}, 186-193.

\textsuperscript{61} Or, in Cora Diamond’s terms, “plain” nonsense. \textit{The Realistic Spirit}, 95f. However, as P.M.S.
Hacker has pointed out, Diamond’s translation of “\textit{wird einfach Unsinn sein}” in the Preface as “will be
\textit{plain} nonsense” is problematic, as the undeclined \textit{einfach} is better translated as the adverb “simply,” ergo
“will be simply nonsense.” “Was He Trying to Whistle It,” in \textit{The New Wittgenstein}, 357 n.8.
elucidates something that is ontologically true (and necessary for logical syntax), but is inexpressible in the terms of logical syntax (insofar as the predication “object” violates its laws). The early Wittgenstein, on the other hand (at least as read by Conant), reads the sentence “A is an object” as nonsense because the predicate “object” has not been given meaning. As Cora Diamond says, “Anything that is nonsense is so merely because some determination of meaning has not been made.”\textsuperscript{62} Were meaning attached to the term “object” in our language, the proposition could thereby be evaluated in terms of its truth-value, and would therefore have sense. However, the use of the statement “A is an object” in logical syntax is, in fact, nonsensical insofar as it attaches no meaning (use) to the predicate.\textsuperscript{63}

Notice the shift Wittgenstein has made away from Frege at this point. For Frege, nonsense arises as a result of “putting an item of one logical category in the place where an item of another category belongs.”\textsuperscript{64} For Wittgenstein, on the other hand, nonsense arises because a sentence “merely contains a word to which, in its use…, no meaning has been given.”\textsuperscript{65} “Caesar is a prime number” is not nonsense because we know, really, what Caesar is and Caesar does not belong to the class of prime numbers (concerning which we also really know what they are). Rather, the sentence is nonsense because

\textsuperscript{62} Diamond, \textit{The Realistic Spirit}, 106. Diamond and Conant tend to speak at some variance regarding the relationship between Wittgenstein and Frege. For Diamond, particularly in her earliest essays on Frege (1977-80), she sees Wittgenstein’s early philosophy as a development of Frege’s thought. However, by the time of “Throwing Away the Ladder” (1984-85) she has nuanced her view of the relationship between Wittgenstein and Frege, featuring the influence of Russell on Wittgenstein more prominently; \textit{The Realistic Spirit}, 176-204. Conant, on the other hand, tends to draw greater disparity than Diamond between Wittgenstein and Frege.

\textsuperscript{63} Diamond gives an account of the sense in which she understands “meaning” as “use” in “What Nonsense Might Be,” in \textit{The Realistic Spirit}, 95-114.

\textsuperscript{64} Conant, “The Method of the \textit{Tractatus},” 415.

\textsuperscript{65} Diamond, “Throwing Away the Ladder,” 197.
Caesar, as it is used in the sentence, has been given no meaning in our language such that one could predicate to it “a prime number.” This would not, however, be impossible.

Now we can see the divergence between Conant and Geach. For Geach, Wittgenstein shares Frege’s view of nonsense and elucidation, he merely develops it further in the *Tractatus*. “Frege held…that there are logical category distinctions which will clearly show themselves in a well-constructed formalized language, but which cannot properly be asserted in language. Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* accepts (this) from Frege.”66 While Conant grants to Geach that Frege’s view of nonsense is of the substantial variety, he claims that Wittgenstein’s own view of nonsense is austere. According to Conant, “the *Tractatus* is to be seen as resolving the tension in Frege’s thought between (substantial and mere) nonsense in favor of the austere view.”67 Furthermore, Conant claims the standard interpretation of the *Tractatus* has neglected this insight. In following Geach, the “standard interpretation” mistakes Wittgenstein’s account of nonsense for the substantial variety, which, in fact, he overturns! Provocatively, Conant calls the account of substantial nonsense representative of the “common ground between positivist and ineffability interpretations of the *Tractatus*.”68

I have taken time to tease out this distinction between accounts of nonsense in Wittgenstein and Frege (as explained by Peter Geach and James Conant) as background to Cora Diamond’s debate with P.M.S. Hacker over the aims of the *Tractatus*. Hacker defends an “ineffability” interpretation of the *Tractatus* – most notably expressed by the

---

66 Geach, “Saying and Showing in Frege and Wittgenstein,” 55.
67 Conant, “The Method of the *Tractatus*,” 381.
68 Ibid.
contention that for Wittgenstein (at least in the early philosophy) the say-show distinction holds and makes possible speech which “shows” the ineffable.\textsuperscript{69} The section which follows details Hacker’s case and Diamond’s response, which eventuates in her claim that the \textit{Tractatus} (as well as Wittgenstein’s philosophical aims more generally) possesses a therapeutic aim.

\textbf{Diamond and Hacker on the \textit{Tractatus}}

Peter Hacker’s \textit{Insight and Illusion} expresses the standard interpretation of the \textit{Tractatus} and the substantial conception of nonsense.\textsuperscript{70} His opening section, “Wittgenstein’s Early Conception of Philosophy,” treats the subject of nonsense in his remarks on “Philosophy and Illusion.” Here he follows Max Black’s distinction between \textit{Sinn} (sense), \textit{Sinnlos} (senseless) and \textit{Unsinnig} (nonsense), assigning tautologies and contradictions (degenerate propositions) to the category “senseless”, and claiming they “neither say, nor try to say anything, (although) they show the logical structure of the world. They show the limits within which all possible worlds must be contained.”\textsuperscript{71}

\textsuperscript{69} The ineffability reading of the \textit{Tractatus}, and in a related way Wittgenstein’s later philosophy as well, has been taken up by many philosophers and theologians. By this idea, I mean to infer assertions which include an insistence that Wittgenstein’s interest in language is to draw its limits in order to gesture what lies beyond (which is more important). With regard to the \textit{Tractatus}, G.E.M. Anscombe gives such an interpretation with regard to the say-show distinction; \textit{An Introduction to Wittgenstein’s \textit{Tractatus}} in \textit{Wittgenstein Studies} (London: Continuum, 1996). See also the memoir of Paul Engelmann, \textit{Letters From Ludwig Wittgenstein, With a Memoir}, trans. L. Furtmüller (Oxford: Blackwell, 1967). Amongst theologians, see Herbert McCabe, “The Logic of Mysticism,” in \textit{God Still Matters} (London: Continuum, 2002), 13-28.

\textsuperscript{70} P.M.S. Hacker, \textit{Insight and Illusion} (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), see esp. 18-24. I will be using the first edition, as it is the edition Cora Diamond critiques in her essay “Throwing Away the Ladder: How to Read the \textit{Tractatus},” in \textit{The Realistic Spirit} (the revised edition (1987) was not yet released). For Hacker’s criticism of the readings of Conant, Diamond, et. al. see, for instance, “Was He Trying to Whistle It?” in \textit{The New Wittgenstein}, 353-381.

\textsuperscript{71} Ibid., 18. For Max Black’s account, see \textit{A Companion to Wittgenstein’s \textit{Tractatus}} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964), 378ff. The distinction is drawn from \textit{TLP} 4.46-4.466.
Nonsense, on the other hand, covers those propositions which Wittgenstein calls “nonsensical pseudo-propositions” (*TLP* 4.127).

After distinguishing between *Sinnlos* and *Unsinnig*, Hacker begins his anatomy of nonsense. Within the class of nonsensical pseudo-propositions (propositions which “violate the rules of logical syntax”⁷²) he distinguishes between *covert* and *overt* nonsense. Overt nonsense is easily perceived to be gibberish (e.g. “Colorless green ideas sleep furiously”). Covert nonsense, on the other hand, is not so apparent, yet nonetheless violates the principles of logical syntax. It must be clarified (this is the task of philosophy); “freed from the obscurities of grammar.”⁷³ Under the category of covert nonsense exists another subdivision: illuminating and misleading nonsense (or, we might say, substantial and mere nonsense). To sum up, Hacker’s propositional anatomy can be arranged as follows:

A. Sense (*Sinn*)
B. Senseless (*Sinnlos*)
C. Nonsense (*Unsinnig*) (nonsensical pseudo-propositions)
   1. Overt
   2. Covert
      a. Illuminating
      b. Misleading

With these distinctions of nonsense in view, Hacker turns to the subject of the say-show distinction. As he observes, the distinction is grounded in Wittgenstein’s metaphysics, which posits a parallelism between language and reality such that the

---

⁷² As Conant points out in his criticism of Rudolf Carnap’s account of elucidation, this manner of speaking about “violations of logical syntax,” when it occurs in Wittgenstein, is always specific to a type of violation, which Conant terms “cross-category equivocation.” Per Conant, the problem, in Carnap’s case, is a mistake over what Wittgenstein means by the term “formal” category. This manner of reading nonsensical pseudo-propositions is apparently accepted by Hacker, thereby broadening the category of “violations” to include the anatomical account which will follow. Conant, “The Method of the *Tractatus*,” 414-415.

⁷³ Ibid., 19.
structure of language reflects the structure of the world (the “picture theory of language”). According to the Tractatus, logical analysis progressively reveals increasingly simpler, more complete levels of language. At the simplest point stands the name (in language), which corresponds to the object (in the world).\textsuperscript{74} These objects possess form and content; internal (e.g. color) and external (e.g. red) qualities respectively. Furthermore, corresponding to the object’s internal properties (in reality) is the name’s logico-syntactical category (in language). Likewise, corresponding to the object’s external properties is the name’s referent (Bedeutung).

As I am typing a black pen is lying upon my desk. The pen possesses internal (color) and external (black) qualities. Now, were I to describe my pen using the Tractatus’ “picture theory of language” (the structure of language reflects the structure of the world), then I would say something like; the object in reality (the pen) is reflected in language by a name (“pen”). If I were to assert “The pen is black”, my proposition would have sense. Why? Just as the pen possesses internal (color) and external (black) qualities, the name we have given the object (“pen”) possesses corresponding logico-syntactical categories (“color”) and reference (“black”). Now, if I were to formulate another proposition, “Black is a color”, I immediately run into a problem: “color” has no reference! To what does it refer? Thus, I cannot say “Black is a color” without producing nonsense. But, according to Hacker’s take on the early Wittgenstein, what I can do is show what I’m trying to say. By translating my proposition (“The pen is black”) into logic notation (B) I show what I cannot say. I show a variable (the space into which I put the value “B”), although I cannot say it. In Hacker’s dense prose:

\textsuperscript{74} This is, roughly, the logical atomism Wittgenstein takes from Russell.
[The logico-syntactical category of names] is expressed in a notation by the variable for which the name is a value, which tacitly embodies the syntactical formation-rules for that name and for all names of objects of that ontological type. A formal concept therefore is the variable which shows the form of the objects over which it ranges. The form of the object is shown in that its sign is a substitution instance of a given kind of variable. Concepts (forms) are defined, in Fregean jargon, by their characteristic marks (Merkmale), i.e. the essential properties of the items falling under them. But formal properties, i.e. the combinatorial possibilities of objects, are not themselves objects, and cannot be named. They are shown in the notation by features of those symbols by which have the identical range of possible syntactical combinations.\footnote{Ibid.}

So Hacker recounts the say-show distinction in the \textit{Tractatus}. However, Cora Diamond finds two problems with his account: (1) his account of nonsense as covert (more on this later); and (2) his oversight of Wittgenstein’s ultimately anti-metaphysical aims.

Diamond calls Hacker’s interpretation of the \textit{Tractatus} “chickening out” by admitting a “realism of possibility.”\footnote{Diamond, “Throwing Away the Ladder,” 194.} This possibility, which Hacker refers to as the “combinatorial possibilities of objects,” is \textit{real} for Hacker’s Wittgenstein. This realism is problematic. “It involves holding that the things we speak about are members of this or that logical category, really and truly, only we cannot say so.”\footnote{Ibid.} Diamond laments the prominence of this interpretation of the \textit{Tractatus}. She enumerates two signs of this sort of interpretation: (1) the idea of a “realm of necessities underlying our capacity to make sense as we do;” and (2) the idea of violating principles of logical syntax “by using a term in what, given its syntax, goes against what can be said with it.”\footnote{Ibid., 194-5.} Hacker’s account of illuminating nonsense (and the correlative violations of sign (2) above), rests upon the
reality of a “realm of necessities” (sign 1). The difficulty of this reading arises when considering three “moments” in the *Tractatus*, the three Diamond cites repeatedly in her work: (1) the *Preface*, (2) 5.473-5.4733, and (3) 6.54. These selections she calls the “frame” of the *Tractatus*:

*(Preface)* The book deals with the problems of philosophy and shows, as I believe, that the method of formulating these problems rests on the misunderstanding of the logic of our language. Its whole meaning could be summed up somewhat as follows: What can be said at all can be said clearly; and whereof one cannot speak thereof one must be silent.

The book will, therefore, draw a limit to thinking, or rather -- not to thinking, but to the expression of thoughts; for, in order to draw a limit to thinking we should have to be able to think both sides of this limit (we should therefore have to be able to think what cannot be thought).

The limit can, therefore, only be drawn in language and what lies on the other side of the limit will be simply nonsense.

*(5.473)* Logic must take care of itself. A possible sign must also be able to signify. Everything which is possible in logic is also permitted.

…

In a certain sense we cannot make mistakes in logic.

*(5.4733)* Frege says: Every legitimately constructed proposition must have a sense; and I say: Every possible proposition is legitimately constructed, and if it has no sense this can only be because we have given no meaning to some of its constituent parts.

*(6.54)* My propositions are elucidatory in this way: he who understands me finally recognizes them as senseless, when he has climbed out through them, on them, over them. (He must so to speak throw away the ladder, after he has climbed up on it.) He must surmount these propositions; then he sees the world rightly.

Earlier, in clarifying the difference between Frege and Wittgenstein, I considered the proposition “A is an object.” Now I would like to return to that proposition, considered in relation with another, in order to clarify the difference between Diamond and Hacker.
Consider the following:

(a) A is an object.
(b) Socrates is frabble.

For Hacker, these two sentences are both nonsense, albeit of different kinds. Sentence (b) is overt nonsense, mere gibberish. Sentence (a), on the other hand, is covert nonsense of the illuminating variety. It goes wrong by using a logico-syntactical category ("object") as if it were a name. The sentence is nonsense, but the truth it attempts to express is real. Its reality is revealed in the impossibility of its expression! For Diamond, sentence (a) and sentence (b) are both plain/merely/simple nonsense. "'A is an object' is no more than an innocently meaningless sentence like 'Socrates is frabble'; it merely contains a word to which, in its use as predicate noun, no meaning has been given."79

The three "moments" of the Tractatus cited above are benchmarks of Diamond's reading of the Tractatus. Taken collectively and considered as a "frame" to the text, these propositions undermine much (all?) of the Tractatus; the say-show distinction, logical atomism, the picture theory of language. For Diamond, this is the point. The critical move to support her own interpretation, which denies the anatomy of nonsense rendered by Hacker and others, is to take 6.54 in its plainest sense. Wittgenstein, when he says to "throw away the ladder," means for the reader to actually throw it away – all of it! Hacker is all pretension: "To chicken out is to pretend to throw away the ladder while standing firmly, or as firmly as one can, on it."80

79 Ibid., 197. It is a similar point to the one I made earlier with regard to Frege and Wittgenstein on the sentence “Caesar is a prime number.”

80 Ibid., 194.
For Diamond, then, elucidation takes on a different character. The problem is not that we have attempted to say something that can only be shown. Rather, the problem is the illusion that there is something not to say:

“A is an object” is no more than an innocently meaningless sentence like “Socrates is frabble”; it merely contains a word to which, in its use as predicate noun, no meaning has been given. But we inflate it, we blow it up into something more, we think of ourselves as meaning by it something which lies beyond what Wittgenstein allows to be sayable. We think it has to be rejected by him because of that. We think of there being a content for it, which according to his doctrines, no sentence can have. But this conception of what we cannot say is an illusion created by our taking the word “object,” which works in meaningful English sentences where it has a wholly different grammatical function. When Wittgenstein says that we cannot say “There are objects,” he does not mean, “There are, all right, only that there are has to get expressed another way.” That the sentence means nothing at all and is not illegitimate for any other reason, we do not see. We are so convinced that we understand what we are trying to say that we see only two possibilities: it is sayable, it is not sayable. But Wittgenstein’s aim is to allow us to see that there is no ‘it.’

What Wittgenstein hopes to clarify by his philosophy is the illusion of the Tractatus itself. To riff on Conant, the Tractatus is its own target, not its doctrine. What Wittgenstein aims to elucidate is not the logico-syntactical structure of the world, but our own philosophical illusions. His aim is not to reveal the world, but ourselves. Thus, Diamond says Wittgenstein’s philosophical aims are therapeutic. Logical elucidation in the Tractatus is put to use to clarify, not some superstructure of reality (call it the rules of logical syntax), but to clarify our own illusions. The analogy is not to the mathematician (or the butcher!), but to the therapist guiding patients away from their own illusions (by allowing them to see their illusions) in order to see themselves more clearly: “Work on

81 Ibid., 197.
philosophy—like work in architecture in many respects—is really more work on oneself. On one’s own conception. On how one sees things. (And what one expects of them.)”

“A certain problem arises when reading the closing statements of the Tractatus with Diamond’s account of austere nonsense. What are we to make of Wittgenstein’s statement: “My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually recognizes them as nonsensical, when he has used them – as steps – to climb up beyond them. (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it.)” But haven’t we said that all nonsense is simple nonsense, so the claim to understand nonsense is unintelligible? The distinction Wittgenstein makes, and Diamond brings out, is between understanding me (a person) and recognizing them (propositions). So, Wittgenstein closes the Tractatus with this cryptic series of comments which asserts that one must understand his speaking of nonsense. Given the weight Diamond places upon the “frame” of the Tractatus, it behooves her to explain how we can understand someone who speaks nonsense.

In “Ethics, Imagination and the Method of Wittgenstein’s Tractatus,” Diamond offers an explanation of how understanding someone who speaks nonsensical propositions might be possible. Pace G.E.M. Anscombe, who Diamond uses to express

---


84 Together with a series of comments Wittgenstein makes to Ludwig Ficker following its publication. In particular, Diamond keys in on Wittgenstein’s claims that the Tractatus has an ethical aim, and that it should be read with the introduction and conclusion in mind – they are the keys. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Briehe an Ludwig von Ficker*, ed. G. H. von Wright (Salzburg, 1969).
the view of substantial nonsense we encountered earlier, Diamond makes clear that understanding another’s statement of nonsense cannot be thought to be a revelation of something ineffable which must be shown. Rather, Diamond will describe this phenomenon as an exercise of the imaginative capacity to “share imaginatively in the inclination to think that one is thinking something in it. …imaginatively let myself feel its attractiveness.” This she calls a particular use of the imagination.

To clarify this use, she contrasts it with the use of the imagination with which one imagines oneself speaking metaphysically (to wit, the imagination of the speaker of substantial nonsense). In the case of metaphysical imagination, there is a distinction made between mere and substantial nonsense sentences which we have seen. However, in the use of the imagination which Diamond is developing, the distinction is not between mere and substantial nonsense-sentences, but between:

…different roles that imagination has in our coming out with nonsense-sentences. Nonsense-sentences are as it were internally all the same; all are einfach Unsinn, simply nonsense. Externally, however, they may differ: in a particular case of the utterance of a nonsense-sentence, its utterance may fail to reflect an understanding of oneself or of others; it may depend on this or that type of use of imagination. But there is no way of taking any nonsense-sentence and saying that, by the sentence it is, it is philosophical elucidation not metaphysical nonsense. For a sentence that is nonsense to be an elucidatory sentence is entirely a matter of features external to it.

Frege makes a distinction between logical and psychological sense. The distinction expresses the attraction the speaker feels toward the metaphysical imagination. Words,

85 It should be noted that Diamond’s therapeutic reading of Wittgenstein is, in many ways, derivative from (among others) Anscombe. However, on this point in the Tractatus Diamond will disagree.


87 Ibid., 159.
considered strictly logically, carry no mental accompaniments (as opposed to psychologically). Nevertheless, as practitioners of language we breed a familiarity with these mental accompaniments. Accordingly, when speaking with these terms we tend to assume they carry the features we associate with them psychologically, “even though the word is not being used in its familiar logical role, and has not been given a new assignment of meaning.”

In this way, the imagination produces an imagined meaning of nonsense, when it is in reality not present.

But Diamond pushes the point forward. In fact, she suggests that such metaphysical imaginings posit an outside position whereby we judge language – the philosophical point of view. It is to inhabit the internal logic of the *Tractatus* which is, by its own claims, intended to be surmounted. Without Diamond’s prodding onward we are prone to “imagine a point of view from which we can consider the world as a whole. That idea, not recognized as an illusion, characterizes the practice of philosophy as it has gone on.”

Metaphysical imagining of substantial nonsense, and the ensuing philosophical clarification (and criticism) of this confusion between psychological and logical sense, express (in Frege and the *Tractatus*) the attraction of traditional philosophy. The metaphysical imagination expresses naïve, ordinary belief; the logical clarification expresses traditional philosophy (or, here, the external philosophical investigation, which turns out to be just as metaphysical as the naïve counterpart). From Diamond’s point of view, both are bound by similar metaphysical commitments; both describe *something there*. The *Tractatus* intends to purge its reader from such attractions:

---

88 Ibid.

89 Ibid., 160.
My claim, then, about how we are to read Wittgenstein is that he does not intend us to grasp what can be seen from the point of view of philosophical investigation. On my reading, the book understands the person who is in grip of the illusion that there is philosophy in the traditional sense. It understands him through entering into that illusion in order to lead him out of it; and the upshot will not be any grasp of what can be seen from the philosophical point of view on the world. Here, then, is a description – an external description – of the difference between the propositions of the *Tractatus* and the propositions of the metaphysician. The former are recognized by their author to be plain nonsense, the latter are not; the former are in the service of an imaginative understanding of persons, the latter are the result of a sort of disease of imagination, and the philosopher who comes out with them lacks that understanding of himself which the *Tractatus* aims to secure for us.90

The aim of the *Tractatus* is self-understanding. Its method, most notably this particular activity of the imagination, is therapeutic. By following Wittgenstein’s exercise, imagining he is speaking sense, the reader is led to the realization that Wittgenstein’s propositions are nonsensical. The realization is not only of the philosophical misunderstanding with which the reader previously operated, but also a realization of oneself as drawn, “attracted” to these forms of nonsense as if they were substantial. The goal is to arrive at acceptance (to use a therapeutic idiom): acceptance that “will not be any grasp of what can be seen from a philosophical point of view in the world.”91 It is an acceptance of epistemological finitude. This, in sum, is the method of the *Tractatus*.

This chapter outlined the argument Diamond gives for interpreting Wittgenstein’s early philosophy (*Tractatus*) as aiming at therapy. The truth of skepticism, with its multiple manifestations, is resolved for Diamond by a therapeutic method which purges

---

90 Ibid. This criticism of metaphysical imagination and philosophical clarification parallels Diamond’s criticism of ethics considered as a distinct sphere of discourse within philosophy. (One might make a similar point concerning the form of the criticism with regard to Diamond’s comments on empirical psychology and its accompanying behaviorism on pp. 153-160.) There is no distinct class of sentences which fall under the category ethical in view of their subject matter. “Ethical sentences” can be understood, by a kind of imaginative activity, but the proper method would be elucidation so as to clear away illusion.

91 Ibid.
Wittgenstein’s reader of her illusions. In the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein’s method is to lead his reader into imagining his propositions as meaningful, only to realize eventually that they were nonsense and we were deeply attracted to imagine them otherwise. The chapter which follows employs Diamond to clarify Cavell’s more oblique interpretation of Wittgenstein’s Later Philosophy (*Philosophical Investigations*).  

---

92 One might ask two questions in light of this chapter’s focus upon the *Tractatus*. (1) What significance could the *Tractatus* (which occupies Diamond’s attention) have for the later philosophy? (2) Following upon the first, what account of development could be given if the reader sees in Wittgenstein a consistent therapeutic aim? With regard to question (1), James Conant, in “Why Worry about the *Tractatus*?, considers three stages of Wittgenstein’s philosophical career: the *Tractatus*, the *Philosophical Investigations*, and *On Certainty*. Conant demonstrates how the *Tractatus*’ “quasi-truths” and their demonstration by means of the say-show distinction perdures through standard interpretations of the Later Wittgenstein. The first example he cites is the debate over the private language argument in the *Philosophical Investigations*. According to Conant, the current exposition of the argument against private language rests upon the assertion that something (necessarily) cannot be. Of course, the pseudo-Tractarian appeal to the limits of logical syntax is no longer viable, as Wittgenstein has already repudiated in the *Tractatus* his false confidence in the logical structure of language. Nonetheless, there is a similar retreat to something: “In grasping that there cannot be a private language, they still want there to be something that we grasp. We are told that what is at issue here is a ‘grammatical truth,’ rather than an ‘empirical truth’; but we are also reassured that such ‘truths’ are much less metaphysical than pseudo-Tractarian truths about the logical structure of language and reality.” (172) Conant also claims *On Certainty* is often read from a pseudo-Tractarian vantage. Grammar (*PI*), which replaced logical syntax (*TLP*), is now replaced by linguistic practices. Again “the argument turns on a distinction between two sorts of proposition – in this case, propositions that are situated within the framework of our practices of making and accepting knowledge-claims and propositions that seek to articulate constitutive features of that framework.” (177) In response to question (2), Conant, in another essay, posits a slow transition across three phases (Early, Middle, and Later Wittgenstein), divided by the return to philosophy in 1929 and the drafting of the rule-following sections of the *Philosophical Investigations* (particularly §133) in 1937; James Conant, “A Development in Wittgenstein’s Conception of Philosophy: From “The Method” to Methods,” in In Sprachspiele verstricht - oder: Wie man der Fliege den Ausweg zeigt, ed. Stefan Tolksdorf and Holm Tetens (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010), 55-80. Continuity is established by a uniform therapeutic aim, but there is development across the three phases in terms of method. In the early Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus*, he believed he had solved all philosophy’s problems in his (singular) method established in the *Tractatus*’ pages. There was nothing left to do but retire. In his return to philosophy, Wittgenstein still believes he has given the method for solving philosophy’s problems, but that the method must be practiced in a variety of ways based upon a variety of circumstances. This is new work for the philosopher. In the final phase, Wittgenstein came to see that there were a variety of methods to address the varieties of problems which arise in doing philosophy. It should be noted that the specifics of Conant’s account might be debated by Diamond and others propounding a resolute reading of the *Tractatus*.  

---
CHAPTER FOUR

STANLEY CAVELL’S THERAPEUTIC INVESTIGATIONS

Because the breaking of such control is a constant purpose of the later Wittgenstein, his writing is deeply practical and negative, the way Freud’s is. And like Freud’s therapy, it wishes to prevent understanding which is unaccompanied by inner change. Both of them are intent upon unmasking the defeat of our real need in the face of self-impositions which we have not assessed (§108), or fantasies (“pictures”) which we cannot escape (§115). In both, such misfortune is betrayed in the incongruence between what is said and what is meant or expressed; for both, the self is concealed in assertion and action and revealed in temptation or wish. Both thought of their negative soundings as revolutionary extensions of our knowledge, and both were obsessed by the idea, or fact, that they would be misunderstood—partly, doubtless, because they knew the taste of self-knowledge, that it is bitter.

Stanley Cavell, “The Availability of Wittgenstein’s Later Philosophy”

Cavell composed “The Availability of Wittgenstein’s Later Philosophy” in 1969 in response to David Pole’s The Later Philosophy of Wittgenstein (1958). His response is not favorable: “What I find most remarkable about this book is not the modesty of its understanding nor the pretentiousness and condescension of its criticism, but the pervasive absence of any worry that some remark of Wittgenstein’s may not be utterly obvious in its meaning and implications.”93 This should come as no surprise, as Cavell goes on to observe; Pole is neither the first nor the last to assume Wittgenstein is saying something he is not. The Tractatus is famously misunderstood, according to Wittgenstein himself, by Russell and the logical positivists. By making an example of Pole, Cavell

93 Cavell, Must We Mean What We Say?, 45.
builds his case that Wittgenstein, as appropriated by many ordinary language philosophers, is misunderstood. Furthermore, he argues that the distinctive literary form of the *Philosophical Investigations* is purposive, and understanding that purpose clarifies how and in what way interpretations such as Pole’s go wrong. In this chapter, I outline Cavell’s criticism of and response to Pole in order to limn Cavell’s interpretation of Wittgenstein’s Later Philosophy. In the chapter’s close, I develop the parallel between Diamond and Cavell in order to clarify what Cavell is up to: interpreting Wittgenstein’s philosophy as therapeutic.

“The Availability of Wittgenstein’s Later Philosophy”

The opening sections of Cavell’s essay outline what he perceives to be Pole’s errors with respect to his interpretation of the “rule-following considerations” of the *Philosophical Investigations*. Pole ironically attributes to Wittgenstein the account he attempts to overcome.⁹⁴ Cavell neatly summarizes Pole’s interpretation of the rule-following considerations as follows:

1. The correctness or incorrectness of a use of language is determined by the rules of the language, and “determined” in two senses:
   a. The rules form a complete system, in the sense that for every “move” within the language it is obvious that a rule does or does not apply.
   b. Where a rule does apply, it is obvious whether it has been followed or infringed.
2. Where no existing rules apply, you can always adopt a new rule to cover the case, but then that obviously changes the game.⁹⁵

---

⁹⁴ We can begin to see a Cavellian strategy emerging, if we keep in mind his criticism of Malcolm and Albritton I outlined in chapter two.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 48.
This is precisely the opposite account of the rule-following considerations Cavell would give. As he points out, Pole’s account holds merely for constructed languages. Rather, Cavell claims that Wittgenstein attempts to demonstrate, both in his rule-following considerations as well as throughout the *Philosophical Investigations*, that rules and language do not actually work in the way Pole describes in everyday language. To make this point, Cavell reflects upon Wittgenstein’s aims in the *Philosophical Investigations* in developing an analogy between language and games to make possible an investigation of rule-following. Per Cavell, the analogy arises from their both being practices (following a rule and playing a game, that is). The upshot of this observation is that rule-following cannot be conceived as activity done in reference to something external to the practice. When we speak of someone obeying or disobeying a rule, we mean to infer that something “can be done correctly or incorrectly—which just means it can be done or not done.” But that is all. It is not that it can be done or not done according to external rules which operate as a superstructure according to which it becomes immediately apparent whether or not something has been done accordingly (a la

---


97 Ibid. The irony here is that the constructed language of logical positivism is quite clearly the target of Wittgenstein’s later philosophy (and, perhaps, his earlier philosophy as well – see chapter three on Diamond’s “resolute” reading of the *Tractatus*).

98 Ibid., 49.

99 Ibid., 50.
Pole [1a]). Wittgenstein will always stop short of this sort of metaphysical position.

“(Rules are) a matter of what Wittgenstein, in the *Blue Book*, refers to as “conventions” (p.24), and in the *Investigations* describes as “forms of life” (e.g., §23).”

Moreover, Cavell makes two observations regarding Wittgenstein’s use of “rules.” First, the appeal to rules allows Wittgenstein to “formulate one source of a distorted conception of language;” that is, Wittgenstein, in speaking about rules in language, demonstrates the tendency to take ordinary language as an impure form of a more exact language (e.g. mathematics). This sort of philosophical prejudice forces a foreign standard of precision upon human language, which eventuates in disappointment with human forms of knowledge (the point made in chapter two). Second, Wittgenstein’s aim in speaking about rules and “appeal to rules” is to demonstrate how inessential they are to language. This is because it is not rules that require description, but rather the “forms of life.” At this point, Cavell gives an extended expression of what constitute “forms of life” for Wittgenstein:

We learn and teach words in certain contexts, and expect others, to be able to project them into further contexts. Nothing insure that this projection will take place (in particular, not the grasping of universals nor the grasping of books of rules), just as nothing insure that we will make, and understand the same projections. That on the whole we do is a matter of our sharing routes of interest and feeling, modes of response, senses of humor and of significance and of fulfillment, of what is outrageous, of what is similar to what else, what a rebuke, what forgiveness, of when an utterance is an assertion, when an appeal, when an explanation—all the

---


101 Ibid.

102 Ibid., 51.
whirl of organism Wittgenstein calls “forms of life.” Human speech and activity, sanity and community, rest upon nothing more, but nothing less, than this. It is a vision as simple as it is difficult, and as difficult as it is (and because it is) terrifying.\textsuperscript{103}

Notice what has transpired. Cavell, in granting that our language does not possess the “purity” or “certainty” of mathematics, “shifts the weight” to what \textit{actually} requires description – not rules, as Pole’s method suggests, but “forms of life.” Rules for Cavell serve as a foil against which Wittgenstein can express what he intends as a description of language. Rules are to be conceived neither metaphysically (as universals), nor as an expression of deliberately chosen conventions likened unto a book of rules, but rather as conventional in the sense of “forms of life” expressed above. If rules are to be descriptive of our language, then to speak of “breaking them” is simply a description of a loss of communication. The rule-following considerations are a means to expose the inaccurate image with which philosophers so often operate, and to clarify the roots of our language: “forms of life.”

The following sections of the essay extend Cavell’s discussion of Pole on the issue of “decision,” which is an extension of his comments on rules. After the section on “decision,” Cavell broadens his criticism to analytic philosophy more generally, in order to clarify the sense in which Wittgenstein is a philosopher of ordinary language.\textsuperscript{104} For Pole, Wittgenstein sets up a tension between the language of traditional philosophy and

\textsuperscript{103} Ibid., 52. \textit{N.b.} the importance of this quote is made manifest in a series of essays by John McDowell, all of which utilize it as a centerpiece for their argument: “Non-Cognitivism and Rule-Following,” “Wittgenstein on Following a Rule,” and “Virtue and Reason,” \textit{The Monist} 62 (1979): 331-350.

\textsuperscript{104} As Cavell notes in his introduction to \textit{The Claim of Reason}, J.L. Austin was instrumental in his development as a philosopher (as well as his perseverance in the discipline). However, in this essay Cavell is clarifying his own tenuous relationship with ordinary language philosophy (see, for instance, the transition from his remarks which bring together Wittgenstein and ordinary language philosophy in 63-65 and those in which he distances the two in 58-59).
everyday language, preferring the latter to the former. Wittgenstein might give this sort of impression on the face of the matter. However, on Cavell’s reading, Wittgenstein seeks, in a certain sense, to dissolve the distinction between philosophical language and everyday language.105 For Cavell, the object of real interest is not only that the distinction lacks meaning – “Such assertions do not say that the philosopher has “changed the meaning of his words” (what meaning do they now have?)” – but furthermore that the tendency to introduce such distinctions betrays Cavell’s point regarding philosophy and skepticism.106 In a pair of paragraphs, he asserts that “Wittgenstein is, then, denying that in the (apparent) conflict between philosophy and common “beliefs” (assumptions?) of ordinary men, philosophy’s position is superior,” but “(neither) is Wittgenstein saying that philosophy’s position is inferior to that of common men.”107 His elaboration on the second point is the section to which Kerr returns repeatedly:

Perhaps one could say that [Wittgenstein] wishes to show that, in its conflict with (skepticism of) “what we all believe,” the philosopher has no position at all, his conclusions are not false (and not meaningless), but, one could say, not believable—that is, they do not create the stability of conviction expressed in propositions which are subject (grammatically) to belief. … For Wittgenstein, philosophy comes to grief not in denying what we all know to be true, but in its effort to escape those human forms of life which alone provide the coherence of our expression. He wishes an acknowledgment of human limitation which does not leave us chafed by our own skin, by a sense of powerlessness to penetrate beyond the human conditions of knowledge. The limitations of knowledge are no longer barriers to a more perfect apprehension, but conditions of knowledge überhaupt [“in general”], of anything we should call “knowledge.”108

105 The phrase “in a certain sense” should be read emphatically, as the simplicity of such a dissolution could be misleading.

106 Ibid., 61.

107 Ibid.

108 Ibid., 61-62. See, for example, Fergus Kerr, Theology After Wittgenstein, 76, 187.
Wittgenstein seeks to give an account of language which remains within human forms of life (or, as Cavell expressed earlier and eloquently, the “whirl of organism”). This is the context in which we can understand Wittgenstein’s enigmatic expressions that he seeks to “leave everything as it is,” (PI §124) or that we “bring words back from their metaphysical use to their everyday use” (PI §116). But how does Wittgenstein’s philosophy leaves us, as it were, unchafed? At this point, Cavell’s essay becomes quick and unpredictable. In what follows I attempt to answer the question by bringing the closing sections of Cavell’s “On the Availability of Wittgenstein’s Later Philosophy” into conversation with Diamond’s interpretation of the Tractatus from the previous chapter.

**Diamond and Cavell**

One of Cavell’s favorite ways that Wittgenstein leaves us “unchafed”, and there are many, is that we “bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use” (PI §116). But “how do we accomplish the task of bringing words back home? How do we know when we have done it?” Cavell begins to answer the question via a criticism of “other philosophers” who think of the knowledge of everyday language as requiring observation and verification, as if it were a form of empirical knowledge. In this case, the response to the question “What should we say … ?” is answered by a search for

---

109 For Cavell, the appeal to ordinary language is one of Wittgenstein’s many therapeutic methods in the Investigations: to which we might add, defining “a game”, imagining another language, imagining a beetle in a box, etc. The methods are diverse (just as the therapist's methods are diverse) because the illusions they seek to cure are diverse.

110 Ibid., 62.
data, “matters of fact,” attained, for instance, by the methods of sociological research.

This would be to miss the significance of the question for Wittgenstein.  

Neither Wittgenstein nor the ordinary language philosopher, when he asks “What should we say (would we call) … ?” is asking just any question about the use of language. He is, in particular, not predicting what will be said in certain circumstances, not, for example, asking how often a word will be used nor what the most effective slogan will be for a particular purpose.

What Wittgenstein and the ordinary language philosopher are after is not a list of facts, but “what would count as various ‘matters of fact’.” Following a characteristically unexpected detour through Kant, Cavell goes on:

If it is accepted that “a language” (a natural language) is what the native speakers of a language speak, and that speaking a language is a matter of practical mastery, then such questions as “What should we say if … ?” or “In what circumstances would we call … ?” asked of someone who has mastered the language (for example, oneself) is a request for the person to say something about himself, describe what he does. So the different methods are methods for acquiring self-knowledge…

111 There is a parallel point here to the one Diamond makes regarding empirical psychology in section I of “Ethics, Imagination, and the Method of Wittgenstein’s Tractatus.”

112 Ibid., 64.

113 Ibid.

114 Ibid., 66. By “methods,” Cavell calls to mind PI §133 (“There is not a philosophical method, though there are indeed methods, like different therapies”) and the aims of Wittgenstein’s later (and early?) philosophy. Method, uniform in the Tractatus (bringing the reader to recognize Wittgenstein’s propositions as nonsense), is now diversified into methods in the Investigations (for one example among many, imagining everyone has something in a box which they intend to refer to as a beetle, but cannot see inside anyone else’s box). Furthermore, it should be noted that this strong emphasis on self-knowledge is heightened to a distinctive level for Cavell. I am indebted to Brad Kallenberg for pointing out to me that Wittgenstein never uses the term “self-knowledge.” “Work on oneself” is the closest idiom (Culture and Value 24), and Cavell’s concerns are not foreign to Wittgenstein, but Cavell is certainly pushing his interpretation in a strong way. The later phases of “On the Availability of the Later Wittgenstein” display a concern with the modern self (seen in Cavell’s link to Kant and emphasis upon self-knowledge) which makes sense of Cavell’s later philosophical development, wherein Emerson and Thoreau increasingly occupy a central place. See Stephen Mulhall, Stanley Cavell: Philosophy’s Recounting of the Ordinary, particularly the shape whereby the text transitions to these interests, which mirror Cavell’s historical development.
Self-knowledge: just the sort of thing a therapist aims at (Freud flits about the later sections of “The Availability of Wittgenstein’s Later Philosophy”). Cavell grows even more convoluted in the closing pages, but we can begin to see that Cavell’s interpretation of Wittgenstein’s question “What would we say if …?” is a therapeutic one. Now, in drawing a parallel to Diamond, we can clarify Cavell’s account.

What Cavell discovers in the empiricist’s response to the ordinary language philosopher’s question (“What would we say if…?”), Diamond unearths in the metaphysical imaginings of substantial nonsense: to wit, the attraction of a certain illusion. The attraction is present in Cavell’s earlier discussion of the rule-following considerations, both as Pole’s Wittgenstein understands rules as a superstructure and in the conventionalist’s account of a book of rules. Likewise, it is present in Cavell’s later discussion of the empiricist’s assumption that the question “What would we say if…?” to require observation, verification, and data. To give in to these attractions is to express discontent with the limits of human knowledge, to accept the truth of skepticism on its own terms (and hence to be bound by its logic).

Wittgenstein’s response, upon seeing how deep the attractions run, is to “shift the weight.” The aim is not to present a new, more “certain” account of rules or logic or ethics or human psychology. Rather, the aim is to guide the reader away from worry over “certainty” to self-knowledge (the weight shift). How is the shift accomplished? Philosophical therapy. For Diamond, philosophical therapy is found in the method of the Tractatus. For Cavell, it’s found in the investigations of ordinary language:

“How do we know what we say (intended to say, wish to say)?” is one aspect of the general question “What is the nature of self-knowledge?”

115 Ibid., 68.
As Diamond blurbs on the back cover of *The Claim of Reason*, lauding the volume, “again and again, Cavell shows us how in philosophy we make mysteries of ourselves and others, and fail to see the genuine sources of mystery in our lives.”

“The Availability of Wittgenstein’s Later Philosophy” includes a major theme of Cavell’s interpretation of Wittgenstein, manifest in *The Claim of Reason*: the nature of the problems Wittgenstein sets before himself justifies his peculiar style. The later philosophy is, according to Cavell, a confession – hence the aphorisms, the games, the interlocutors.

It contains what serious confessions must: the full acknowledgement of temptation (“I want to say …”; “I feel like saying …”; “Here the urge is strong …”) and a willingness to correct them and give them up (“In the everyday use …”; “I impose a requirement which does not meet my real need”). … In confessing you do not explain or justify, but describe how it is with you. And confession, unlike dogma, is not to be believed but tested, and accepted or rejected. Nor is it the occasion for accusation, except of yourself, and by implication those who find themselves in you. There is exhortation…not to belief, but to self-scrutiny.\(^{116}\)

Testing, self-accusation, exhortation, self-scrutiny: the multiple methods deployed in Wittgenstein’s later philosophy are employed to accomplish these for his readers. Again, Wittgenstein’s philosophy is therapeutic.

Wittgenstein doesn’t go in for the secondary questions as if they were the primary. According to Cavell, he remains resolutely concerned with the fundamental question of self-knowledge. “Our problem is not that we lack adequate methods for acquiring knowledge of nature, but that we are unable to prevent our best ideas—including our ideas about our knowledge of nature—from becoming ideologized.”\(^{117}\)

\(^{116}\) Ibid., 71.

\(^{117}\) Ibid., 69.
are distracted, deflected, caught in illusion, bewitched, and in need of therapy, in need of Wittgenstein’s methods. Cavell, closing “The Availability of Wittgenstein’s Later Philosophy,” draws a final parallel with Wittgenstein’s philosophy: “…like Freud’s therapy, (Wittgenstein) wishes to prevent understanding which is unaccompanied by inner change.” Diamond and Cavell’s therapeutic interpretation of Wittgenstein’s philosophy have real gains: they return philosophy to the fundamental concerns of human life, concerns which arise naturally from the human condition. Their resolute reading of Wittgenstein as a bold thinker in the face of skepticism, the attraction of philosophical illusions, and the natural temptation to “flee our skin” produces philosophy at once innovative and human.

For Fergus Kerr, Cavell’s philosophy is a source of “endless delight and illumination.” In these three chapters, I have attempted to express why Cavell (and Diamond) might be a source of endless delight. This I have done by outlining two themes of Cavell’s philosophy (the second of which I clarified in drawing upon Cora Diamond): (1) the problem, “the truth of skepticism”; and (2) the response, philosophical therapy. The chapters which follow seek to describe the ways in which these Cavellian themes illumine Kerr (chapter five), and the ways in which Kerr finds in them openings for engagement with contemporary theological discourse (chapter six).

---

118 Ibid., 72.
CHAPTER FIVE
STANLEY CAVELL’S WITTGENSTEIN AND FERGUS KERR

The skeptic is correct – we cannot have certainty about another’s inner life, but that does not lead to solipsism or madness. On the contrary, we are always already related in a variety of commonalities that constitute our life together – but the temptation to placid immersion in the communal is as destructive of humanity as illusory aspirations of escaping it. It is a denial of our humanity to aspire to the condition of the worldless self, but it is just as much a denial of our humanity not to have such an aspiration.

Fergus Kerr, Theology After Wittgenstein

To this point, I have suggested (chapter one) that Stanley Cavell is a major influence on Fergus Kerr’s interpretation and application of Wittgenstein. In chapters two through four, I gave an outline of the two Cavellian themes (derived from Wittgenstein) which are particularly influential on Kerr: (1) “the truth of skepticism” (chapter two); and (2) philosophy as therapy (chapters three and four). Moreover, I related the themes together in terms of (1) problem and (2) response. In this chapter, I will support my earlier assertion that Cavell influences Kerr’s interpretation of Wittgenstein in terms of the two Cavellian themes. In order to do so, I will have to demonstrate their continued significance. Thus, this chapter proceeds in two phases. First, I will outline Kerr’s earliest work on Wittgenstein, a series of four articles which appear in New Blackfriars between December 1982 and April 1984. These four articles provide the background to Kerr’s first book, Theology After Wittgenstein. Following my outline of the articles’ argument, I will demonstrate how Kerr expresses the Cavellian themes therein. I will then briefly
outline and survey Cavell’s themes as they find expression in three phases of Kerr’s career: (1) the first edition of *Theology After Wittgenstein* (1986) for which the articles are a run-up; (2) the postscript to the second edition of *Theology After Wittgenstein* (1997); and (3) “Work on Oneself”: *Wittgenstein’s Philosophy of Psychology* (2008). In covering these three phases, each separated by approximately a decade, and spanning all of Kerr’s book-length publications to this point, I will show both (1) the consistent expression of Cavell’s themes in Kerr’s engagement with Wittgenstein, as well as (2) the developments which Kerr’s engagement with Cavell undergoes. The chapter which follows will extend my consideration of the Cavellian themes into Kerr’s explicitly theological work (work not exclusively concerned with Wittgenstein).


Between December 1982 and April 1983 Kerr submitted a series of articles to *New Blackfriars* on the subject of Wittgenstein and theology: “Wittgenstein and Theological Studies,” “On the Road to Solipsism,” “Stories of the Soul,” and “Demythologizing the Soul.” The articles express the basic logic of Kerr’s application of Wittgenstein to theology, and betray the Cavellian themes as central to this process. In what follows, I first give a general overview of the shape the argument takes across the four articles. Once the argument is seen comprehensively, I attempt to (1) express the Cavellian themes contained therein, and (2) to demonstrate the way in which Kerr applies them to theology.

The *New Blackfriars* articles began as a reflection on the thirtieth anniversary of the posthumous publication of Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations* (1953). Kerr asserts, while the importance of the text for philosophy is indisputable, “the use of the
book remains as difficult and controversial as ever.” Kerr’s aim in the series of articles is to consider the use of Wittgenstein’s later philosophy, specifically with regard to theology. This use he describes as “an essential therapeutic propadeutic.”120

Kerr’s argument runs as follows: Wittgenstein’s influence on theology, as of 1983, has been insignificant apart from “the mare’s nest of ‘Wittgensteinian Fideism’,” which Kerr critiques on the grounds of its misreading of the Wittgensteinian phrases “language games” and, correlativey, “forms of life”.121 He then goes in search of something “more interesting” from the *Investigations*, which he begins to describe as a “discipline of reticence” developed from Wittgenstein’s assertion that “I am not a religious man but I cannot help seeing every problem from a religious point of view.”122 Reticence toward what? On Kerr’s read, reticence is directed toward the picture of “thinking as a process inside the head” (Locke is the paradigmatic figure) and this picture’s corresponding problems of other minds skepticism, toward which the *Investigations*’ methods aim. This picture, Kerr asserts, is ubiquitous in theology, particularly in its account of the soul, which is too often correlated with the Lockean picture of thought as a process inside the head.123 This notion of the soul in Catholic theology is, in a roundabout way, the focus of the following three essays.

The subsequent essay, “On the Road to Solipsism,” extends Kerr’s discussion of Wittgenstein’s importance in the realm of the philosophy of psychology, specifically with


121 Ibid., 500-502. It should be noted that Kerr does not include D.Z. Phillips into this group, as he criticizes Frei for making this inclusion in “Frei’s Types,” 188-189.


123 Ibid., 505-508.
regard to the account of the soul and the problem of solipsism. Kerr opens with W.V.O. Quine whose behaviorism aims to overcome solipsism (1983: 76-78). Nevertheless, solipsism is resilient. For instance, solipsism informs notions of prayer as interior acts of the mind. Proust is then put to use to make a Cavellian point about solipsism: “…philosophical skepticism about how direct and certain our knowledge of other people’s minds may be, has roots deep in ordinary everyday experience. At some time or another, most of us have had the shock of discovering that we had totally misread somebody else’s expression.” The response to solipsism is Wittgenstein’s picture of talking as “acting together.” This is the therapy Kerr thinks theology needs.

Wittgenstein’s response to solipsism carries implications for Christian accounts of the soul, and so Kerr opens “Stories of the Soul” by locating the *Investigations* in conversation with Augustine’s *Confessions* (the text with which Wittgenstein opens the *Investigations*). Kerr wants to retrieve something like an Aristotelian account of the soul, over against the Platonic account which purportedly carries a body-soul dualism (and has a linguistic extension in Augustine’s view of language as “words naming things”). “In

---

124 Ibid., 78-81.

125 Ibid., 81. One could press Kerr for more examples of the ubiquity of these derivations of philosophical skepticism (thinking as a process inside the head, the disembodied soul, etc.) in Roman-Catholic theology, but he speaks merely of the example of interiorized prayer at this point. To supplement the example, see chapters one and eight in *Theology After Wittgenstein*. In particular, chapter one builds the case for the ubiquity of what I am calling derivations of skepticism, which Kerr expresses under a family of terms/concepts in *Theology After Wittgenstein*: e.g. Cartesianism, the deficient angel, solipsism, finitude as flaw, and, finally in the Postscript to the Second Edition, skepticism.

126 Ibid., 81-83. Italics mine.

127 Ibid., 83-85.

128 He is careful to acknowledge that Aristotle includes a “*certain* body/soul dualism.” (125) Nevertheless, he contends that Aristotle is helpful insofar as solipsism is no problem for him – other minds skepticism is “so remote from Aristotle’s way of thinking.”
the end, however, something like Aristotle’s assumptions have to be retrieved. But it is no use just ‘adopting’ them; they have to be won.”129 Kerr, following Wittgenstein, locates “the ancient myth of the soul that pre-exists the body” in Augustine’s theory of meaning at Book I of The Confessions.130 As Kerr perceives, many will oppose his claim; surely we aren’t all body-hating Platonists these days? Perhaps not, but the picture of language derived from Platonic mind-body dualism (the picture which Kerr calls “symbolist,” the mind naming things exterior to it) continues in spite of the Platonic anthropology’s disappearance. “(The) demolition of the “words name things” doctrine of meaning [aka “symbolist”] cuts the ground from under what is left of the ancient myth of ourselves as isolated homunculi “looking out from our heads”.” The response, Kerr suggests, is found in Cavell’s exposition of Wittgenstein’s aims: “to put the human animal back into language.”131

Kerr’s final installment gives a reading of the Philosophical Investigations (Part I) which aims to “demythologize the soul.”132 If we recall Kerr’s opening statement of his first essay (to wit, Wittgenstein’s later philosophy can serves as an “essential therapeutic


130 This myth, with its commensurate picture of language and meaning, is expressed in the following: “Little by little I began to notice where I was, and I would try to make my wishes known to those who might satisfy them; but I was frustrated in this, because my desires were inside me, while other people were outside and could by no effort of understanding enter my mind.” (I.6,8) “I taught myself, using the mind you gave me, O my God, because I was unable to express the thoughts of my heart by cries and inarticulate sounds and gestures in such a way as to gain what I wanted or make my entire meaning clear to everyone as I wished; so I grasped at words with my memory; when people called an object by some name, and while saying the word pointed to that thing, I watched and remembered that they used that sound when they wanted to indicate that thing.” (I.8,13) Augustine of Hippo, The Confessions, trans. Maria Boulding, O.S.B. (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1997). For an interesting and startlingly similar criticism of this mythical view of language as naming things (and its corresponding view of the mind), see Fergus Kerr, “Russell vs. Lawrence and/or Wittgenstein,” New Blackfriars 63 (1982), 430-439.


propadeutic” for theology) the basic logic of Kerr’s interest in Wittgenstein for theology begins to emerge. It runs, roughly, as follows: (1) there is a problem in modern philosophy, expressed paradigmatically in other minds skepticism (as Cavell claims); (2) the problem is expressed in Christian theology’s tendency toward body-soul dualism (explicitly or implicitly); (3) Wittgenstein provides a therapy for the problems of modern philosophy (e.g. solipsism); (4) this therapy can be extended to purifying Christian accounts of the body-soul relationship; (5) which renders a demythologized account of the soul, and therefore a demystified account of knowledge and language.133

Kerr’s application of the Cavellian themes should be clear enough by now. The problem of skepticism is as foundational for Kerr as Cavell, and given an extension in the body-soul dualism which Kerr claims is ubiquitously resilient in Catholic theology (manifest in the residue of the dualist account in our pictures of words naming things, as well as the picture of thought as interior to the mind expressed in notions of interiorized prayer).134 In turning to Wittgenstein, Kerr suggests a therapeutic response to these skeptical problems. He is less explicit as to what this entails, but can be forgiven as

133 On Kerr’s read, Wittgenstein targets all these forms of what Kerr terms “dualism” in the Philosophical Investigations. They are all interrelated, which Kerr expresses neatly in “Demythologizing the Soul,” 189-190: “Actually there is a great deal of dualistic thinking around, Manichean ideas, metempsychosis, and so on. … Wittgenstein is out to unmask the more sophisticated and sublimated varieties. For example: if one is inclined to agree that language is necessary only for communication – i.e. that it isn’t essential for thought – one is succumbing very likely to just one further version of that ancient hankering after the soul’s independence of the body. Secondly: if one is attracted by the idea that one has some self-awareness prior to one’s insertion into the language community, or that one has a knowledge of one’s own mental states (sensations, feelings, thoughts) prior to, and independently of, one’s ability to speak – once again this seems like the old myth of the soul, all the more difficult to nail because of the more elaborate epistemological jargon. Thirdly, and lastly, if you have a profound sense of the split between your interior life and your external behavior you may once again be mesmerized by the dualistic myth....”

134 We could just as easily say Protestant theology, as Kerr himself builds the case for these and related problems in Karl Barth, Schubert Ogden, and Gordon Kaufman (among others) in the first chapter of Theology After Wittgenstein.
Theology After Wittgenstein is concerned to cover this gap. What Kerr is after, in the end, is an anthropology likened unto Aristotle’s (Kerr might also say Aquinas) for whom skepticism is never a problem.\footnote{Whether or not Kerr’s appeal to Aristotle is accurate or helpful is debatable.} This, for Kerr, would allow theology to begin to realize Wittgenstein’s famous contention that “the human body is the best picture of the human soul.” (\textit{PI}, p. 178)

\textit{Theology After Wittgenstein (1986)}

The first edition of \textit{Theology After Wittgenstein} opens (in Part I) with an overview of the problematic modern view of the self (chapter one), in which Kerr has in mind the Cartesian self which recurs in modern theology.\footnote{His examples are diverse: Karl Barth, Karl Rahner, Hans Kung, Don Cupitt, and Timothy O’Connell, Peter Chirico, Gordon Kaufman, and Schubert Ogden. Kerr, \textit{Theology After Wittgenstein}, 7-23.} The chapter closes with a Cavellian point (although Cavell is not cited here): the modern view of the self is not only problematic (he explicitly mentions solipsism and skepticism), but possesses a “continuing psychological and imaginative appeal.”\footnote{Ibid., 26.} Chapter two turns to Wittgenstein’s “religious point of view.” It is, in many ways, a perplexing chapter. Kerr relies extensively on the varieties of memoirs of Wittgenstein by his friends (most notably, M. O’C. Drury and Norman Malcolm\footnote{Norman Malcolm, \textit{Ludwig Wittgenstein: A Memoir}, 2nd ed. with Wittgenstein’s letters to Malcolm (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984); for M. O’C. Drury, see Rhees, \textit{Ludwig Wittgenstein: Personal Recollections.}}) to make surprisingly little of Drury’s cryptic recollection of Wittgenstein’s comment that he “cannot help seeing every
problem from a religious point of view.”139 By the chapter’s close, though, Kerr’s emphases are clear enough:

A non-metaphysical understanding of the place of the self in nature and history would certainly encourage resistance to the antipathy to the body which is so characteristic of one ancient and powerful religious tradition; and renouncing a certain nostalgia for spiritual purity might clear the way for another look at the Christian religion.140

On Kerr’s read, Wittgenstein’s aims are “to bring the soul back into the body.”141

Part II is a well-received series of (four) chapters on Wittgenstein’s philosophy which seeks to “change the subject.”142 Specifically, the chapters aim at a description of Wittgenstein’s later philosophy by outlining a series of his targets (Haldane’s term): solipsism, private objects, idealism, and empiricism. These chapters, while tremendously helpful, read like a primer on Wittgenstein’s philosophy for theologians. Part III returns to the discussion of the opening two chapters with the intervening overview of Wittgenstein in view. Chapter seven picks up the issue of Wittgenstein’s own theological views, and can be read as a complement to chapter two. In both cases, the memoirs figure prominently. In both cases, Kerr registers confusion over the cryptic, enigmatic comments Wittgenstein’s friends’ record.


140 Ibid., 52.

141 Ibid., 200.

Chapter eight turns explicitly to Christian theology. The extension of what was Cartesianism, solipsism, skepticism, etc. earlier is (once again) the Christian view of the soul “as a ghost inside the body.” Of course, this is not the “official” Christian view. Nevertheless, Kerr contends that the myth of the soul remains subterranean, manifest in the recurrence of antipathy to the body in the history of Christian spirituality. This only makes the problem more difficult:

The only real problem for theologians in reading Wittgenstein lies in reluctance to acknowledge that the myth of the soul, even after all these centuries of official ecclesiastical rejection, has as strong a grip on our imagination as it ever had on Origen or his monkish followers.

Wittgenstein’s therapy goes to the source, “deep down,” clearing away the metaphysical illusions which recur in Christian theology. However, Kerr contends, once the therapy has been undergone, it becomes “awkward and embarrassing” to reenter the conversations he outlined in chapter one as expressions of the Cartesian self in modern theology. The awkwardness is due to the fact that the subject has changed (that is, the Cartesian subject). Unfortunately, he’s not entirely sure how to proceed, so he

---

143 Kerr, *Theology After Wittgenstein*, 168. “The mentalist-individualist conception of the self owes much of its imaginative power and psychological appeal to the vitality of the myth of the soul as a ghost inside the body.”

144 Ibid., 169.

145 Ibid.

146 Ibid., 170. Note that Kerr is talking about specific metaphysical illusions. This point is missed in Russell Reno’s charges of pure immanentism in *The Ordinary Transformed: Karl Rahner and the Christian Vision of Transcendence* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995).

147 Ibid.
completes the chapter with a “half dozen or so issues” loosely related to this change of subject.\footnote{Kerr justifies the scattered and tentative nature of his final chapter by noting the lack of company in such an endeavor. His point is that, as theology and philosophy are practiced in the Anglo-American tradition, philosophy proceeds up to a point (in discussing the existence of God), but proceeds no further. What he finds in Wittgenstein is an opening for doing “philosophy inside theology.” The point is too obscure at this phase, and his practice too tentative, but this point will be developed in Kerr’s later works.}

*Theology After Wittgenstein* is implicitly structured according to the Cavellian themes. In Part I, Kerr diagnoses one derivation of Cavell’s truth of skepticism: the “myth of the soul” in Christian theology. Kerr contends that the myth, in modern theology, is a correlate of the Cartesian self. The Cartesian self, for Cavell, is an extension of the foundational problem of skepticism, and Kerr affirms this connection in opening Part II with a discussion of solipsism (“I can only be certain of the existence of my own mind” – Cavell’s paradigmatic case of the modern expression of skepticism). Part II, in outlining a series of Wittgenstein’s “targets” (and assault upon them), guides the reader through a kind of therapy. One trademark of the therapeutic process here is its resistance to the categories of traditional philosophy (e.g. realism v. anti-realism). The reader, emerging from the therapy of Part II, then reencounters the problems of Part I in the realm of modern theology. Here Kerr is tentative, but the shape itself underscores the importance of Cavell. While citations of Cavell flit in and out of the text, the basic structure of the Cavellian themes perdures.\footnote{I would like to reiterate my earlier contention that Cavell is not alone in giving Wittgenstein a therapeutic interpretation. The following question might justifiably be put to my argument to this point: Can we not say that this structure Kerr takes from Wittgenstein, with no need for Cavell? Indeed, one might argue that the structure I have outlined here is one another might argue in support of an argument for, say, Rush Rhees or Elizabeth Anscombe as the major influence on Kerr’s interpretation of Wittgenstein. In response, I would first request that the reader withhold judgment until the close of this chapter, and in particular until the close of the commentary of the Postscript to the second edition of *Theology After Wittgenstein* where I point out that Kerr, in clarifying the argument of the original text, gives a summary of Cavell as his last word. Second, I direct attention to my Introduction, wherein I cite the repeated...}
The Postscript to *Theology After Wittgenstein* (1997)

When *Theology After Wittgenstein* was republished eleven years later, Kerr attached a Postscript to the otherwise unchanged text. He opens with a series of responses to his critical reception, gracious and at times brutally honest: “It was a mistake to opt for those whom Aristotle quotes as saying that ‘being mortals, we should think mortal,’ over against his own insistence that ‘we ought, as far as in us lies, to make ourselves immortal.” He treats the criticisms of Francesca Murphy and Russell Reno most extensively in the following section, entitled “Immaneism.” Murphy critiques Kerr’s “post-Wittgensteinian cultural-linguisticism” for missing the importance of the “wonder of being.” Reno’s criticism is that Kerr’s application of Wittgenstein to theology tends toward a pure immanence, and therefore leads to an “intrinsicist” account of nature and grace.

appearance of Cavell in Kerr’s philosophical and theological writings. No other interpreter of Wittgenstein appears so frequently and consistently over the course of Cavell’s oeuvre (Drury is comparable, but as I have argued earlier his influence is more circumscribed for Kerr to the discussion over Wittgenstein’s own religious beliefs). Third, in the closing sections of “Work on Oneself”, Kerr becomes far more explicit about the distinctively Cavellian interpretation he is putting forward. The distinctive marks he lays out there are (1) the foundational problem of skepticism and (2) a response which accounts for the attraction to “fall back in,” as it were. Both of these distinctives have been seen in this overview.

150 Ibid., 199. The quotation is taken from the final section of the first edition of *Theology After Wittgenstein* entitled “Thinking Mortal” and which is reproduced identically in the Second Edition, 189.

151 Ibid., 194-199. The criticisms are found in Francesca Murphy, *Christ the Form of Beauty: A Study in Theology and Literature* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995); Russell Reno, *The Ordinary Transformed*.

152 This is yet another example of the difficulty in placing Kerr on the theological spectrum, as Murphy collapses him together with George Lindbeck in a form of cultural-linguisticism which imagines the self as a social construct exclusively. The irony, here, which Kerr himself notes (196, fn 18) is that Lindbeck’s Yale colleague, Hans Frei, locates Kerr together with D.Z. Phillips in type five; Frei, *Types of Christian Theology*, 93.

153 Reno, in *The Ordinary Transformed*, uses De Lubac and la nouvelle théologie as types for intrinsicism. More on this in the following chapter (six).
The final three sections of the Postscript can be read as a response to their criticisms, as well as a commentary on how to read *Theology After Wittgenstein*. The first section, “Wittgenstein’s Religious Point of View,” locates the theme of “wonder of being” in Wittgenstein’s philosophy. Kerr claim’s that one of Wittgenstein’s aims, in “dissipating the fog of philosophy” (another way of talking about therapy) is to “spread around things which are wonderful enough in their being.”154 The fog of philosophy, Kerr goes on to show, is what he attempted to describe under various labels in the First Edition of *Theology After Wittgenstein*. He there described the fog as “the myth of the mind as a ghost within the body” (calling it “Cartesianism,” the mentalist-individualism picture, the “myth of the soul,” etc.). Now, he presses this “myth” (or set of “myths”) back into the depths of the human person’s fears and desires. Platonist dualism, Cartesianism, Lockean pictures of the mind, modern theology’s “myth of the soul”; these are all expressions of a primitive human reality. As in *New Blackfriars*, Proust exemplifies this primitive reality Kerr calls “Promethean.”155 It’s the desire to transcend our own humanity: “the Promethean rejection of God as occupying the space that we should be free to occupy, translate into an endless variety of illusory ways of seeking to transcend our finite condition.”156 What Kerr was calling “Cartesianism” in the First Edition is a derivative of the natural desire for transcendence (he calls it a “secularized

\[\text{154} \textit{Theology After Wittgenstein}, 207.\]
\[\text{155} \text{Ibid., 207.}\]
\[\text{156} \text{Ibid., 207-208.}\]
version,” drawing upon Maritain).\textsuperscript{157} We might say the same about solipsism. What we are seeing is the transposition of Cavell’s “truth of skepticism” into Christian terms.

Recall that Cavell, in his account of skepticism (and criteria) as a “standing threat to thought and communication, that they are only human, nothing more than natural to us,” makes philosophy a pursuit of self-knowledge. Given his talk of Promethean rejections, primitive realities, and existential depths, it is no surprise that Kerr closes the Postscript with Cavell. “No one brings out the depth of Wittgenstein’s concern with the self more powerfully than Stanley Cavell.”\textsuperscript{158} At this point, the case I have been making regarding the influence of Cavell of Kerr’s interpretation of Wittgenstein finds its most explicit expression, worth quoting at length:

For Cavell, the classical (Cartesian) issue of skepticism is not just an academic problem to be given a theoretical solution…His point, in his great work \textit{The Claim of Reason}, as well as in his many essays, is that skepticism cannot be solved. Rather, though it may be forgotten for most practical purposes, it needs to be \textit{lived} as one of the most distinctive features of human existence. Many philosophical approaches have been merely ‘attempt[s] to convert the human condition, the condition of humanity, into an intellectual difficulty, a riddle’. What Cavell invites us to remember, however, is that neither skepticism nor the refutation of skepticism is a philosophical issue in the ordinary sense. On the contrary, both the sense that we have of the uncertainty of our knowledge of the world, of one another, and of ourselves, as well as our confidence in such knowledge, are inescapable features of the human condition. According to Cavell’s reading, Wittgenstein understands ‘the moral of skepticism’, which is that ‘the human creature’s basis in the world as a whole, its relation to the world as such, is not that of knowing, anyway, not what we think of as knowing.’\textsuperscript{159}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{157} For Maritain on “Cartesianism,” see \textit{The Dream of Descartes: Together with Some Other Essays}, trans. Mabelle L. Andison (NY: Philosophical Library, 1944); \textit{Three Reformers: Luther, Descartes, Rousseau} (NY: Scribner’s Sons, 1955).
\item \textsuperscript{158} Ibid., 211.
\item \textsuperscript{159} Ibid., 212. Kerr’s quotations are both taken from \textit{The Claim of Reason}, 493 and 241 respectively.
\end{itemize}
To sum up, Kerr’s defense of and reflection on *Theology After Wittgenstein* which appears in the Postscript to the Second Edition is markedly Cavellian. The problem of skepticism which Kerr outlined in the opening chapters of *Theology after Wittgenstein*, under the label “Cartesianism,” is explicitly shown to be the problem Cavell calls philosophical skepticism. Furthermore, Kerr echoes Cavell’s contention that skepticism is a (the?) deep human problem. His response is also explicitly Cavellian: philosophy, in “dissipating the fog,” serves as a kind of therapy. Theology After Wittgenstein, with its four chapter synopsis of Wittgenstein’s various methods, remains a therapy that modern theology, steeped in “Cartesianism” as it is, still requires.

―*Work on Oneself*: Wittgenstein’s Philosophy of Psychology (2008)―

In 2008, Kerr published a series of lectures he composed for The Institute for the Psychological Sciences entitled “*Work on Oneself*: Wittgenstein’s Philosophical Psychology.” The four lectures are generally self-contained, each treating Wittgenstein’s philosophy as it bears, in a variety of ways, upon the discipline of psychology. Given the self-contained nature of the lectures, I will only consider here the final lecture (four),

160 I should note that in the same year Kerr published the Second Edition of *Theology After Wittgenstein*, he also published *Immortal Longings*, a text which treats Cavell as one of a series of contemporary philosophers whose philosophies (on Kerr’s read) are expressions (each in their own way) of the natural desire for transcendence (God). Kerr’s treatment of Cavell is largely exegetical, and contains the themes I’ve outlined in chapters two through four. It also contains a criticism of Cavell that I attempt to locate in the following chapter, bound up as it is with Kerr’s theology. Thus, insofar as it would add little to the argument I am laying out here, and it contributes to the issues I address in the following chapter, I am postponing my discussion of *Immortal Longings* until chapter six.

although in the following chapter I will consider an earlier lecture. “Wittgenstein and “Other Minds” Skepticism” returns to a familiar theme: the problem of other minds in modern philosophy. Kerr discusses Wittgenstein’s criticism of accounts of “consciousness” in modern philosophy and psychology. William James expresses the network of problems which arise when we think we can answer the question of the self (“what is the self?”) “by describing an entity (consciousness),” rather than “considering the use of the word.” However, “when you purport to turn your attention to your own consciousness you are in search of a nonexisting object.” Wittgenstein extends this criticism into the practice of psychology. Wittgenstein’s latest philosophy seeks to expose a network of illusions in psychology: that human beings possess something called “consciousness”; that there is present a gap or a delay between mind/consciousness and body/brain, that we turn our attention to this mind/consciousness in psychology. Kerr then turns to three voices (John Wisdom, Stanley Cavell, and Richard Eldridge), to suggest these illusions are an extension of a deeper illusion. The figures are arranged chronologically, but Cavell is clearly the key. Earlier, in the New Blackfriars articles, Kerr used Wisdom as a parallel voice to Cavell’s, granting to Cavell the authority of historical connection with Wittgenstein via one of his students. Moreover, Richard Eldridge, Charles and Harriett Cox McDowell Professor of Philosophy at Swarthmore


163 Ibid.

164 Kerr, “On the Road to Solipsism,” 83-85. Kerr notes later the formative influence John Wisdom had on Cavell early in his career, noting that Wisdom led Cavell to reconsider the Investigations, 98. John Wisdom attended Wittgenstein’s classes beginning in 1943 while serving as a Lecturer at Cambridge. His work is primarily in the area of philosophy of psychology (a subject in which Wittgenstein was highly interested while Wisdom was attending classes), hence the interest in this lecture. It is also worth noting that this passage in New Blackfriars is where Proust first appears, again to make a Cavellian point.
College, has published extensively on Cavell’s philosophy. As I said above, Cavell is the key voice.

Kerr finds in Wisdom’s *Philosophy and Psycho-Analysis* an account of philosophy which responds to the problem of solipsism (which emerges from the aforementioned psychological illusions) in a similar way to that in which a psychoanalyst responds to illusions about the past which distort the present. Both respond with, in a word, therapy. But Wisdom’s thought experiments are experimental and tentative. This opens the door for Cavell.

Under the subheading “The Truth of Skepticism,” Kerr begins to outline, once again, Cavell’s distinctive reading of Wittgenstein: Skepticism is not just a philosophical discussion, but “is something that we live…an existential condition, of alienation and strangeness.” We don’t just refute skepticism, but “learn to manage our condition.”

There is a similarity between Wittgenstein and Kant, insofar as they aim at self-knowledge. Wittgenstein, in helping his reader to gain self-knowledge, gives a treatment which allows us to become unashamed of our anxiety (I called this, in chapter two, a form of *contentment*).

---


167 Ibid., 98.

168 Ibid., 99.

169 Ibid., 100.
Kerr’s reflection on Cavell is extended to Eldridge, “(whose) ‘take’ on Wittgenstein is a development of Cavell’s.” Eldridge, who gives his reading of the Philosophical Investigations in Leading a Human Life: Wittgenstein, Intentionality, and Romanticism, makes a point of the unresolved nature of the so-called private language argument (PI §§243ff). Wittgenstein intentionally leaves the question as to whether or not a private language is possible open (or, rather, his interest in the private language argument is not exclusively to demonstrate that there are no private languages). According to Eldridge, Wittgenstein’s goal is to underscore the point that, in spite of our recognition that his criticisms of anything we would call a private language, we continue to feel the attraction to posit something between us and our language. Thus the illusion of a private language creeps back in. It is a similar point to that Cavell makes with the phrase “the truth of skepticism.”

The resonances with the Cavellian themes are, once again, clear. Kerr reiterates, in addressing problems in contemporary philosophy of psychology, the Cavellian description of the problem as skepticism (theme one), inclusive of Cavell’s distinctive attestation to its truth as grounded in our own anxiety over our human condition (expressed via Eldridge). Moreover, the response (theme two) is a philosophical therapy; we learn to “manage our condition.”

In this chapter, I surveyed content across the course of Fergus Kerr’s publications which deal explicitly with Wittgenstein in search of the Cavellian themes outlined in chapters two through four. In four “moments,” spanning from 1983 to 2008, I found the

---

170 Ibid., 103.
171 Ibid., 98.
themes expressed explicitly or implicitly in Kerr’s writing. Kerr’s interpretation of
Wittgenstein has a distinctively Cavellian flavor. However, I have focused in this chapter
on Kerr’s works which explicitly treat Wittgenstein (the *New Blackfriars* articles,
*Theology After Wittgenstein*, and “*Work on Oneself*”). Kerr has also published
extensively, all along the way, in other areas of theology. In the chapter which follows, I
make the case that the influence of Cavell’s Wittgenstein extends to Kerr’s other, more
exclusively theological writings.\(^{172}\)

---

\(^{172}\) Of course, one should recognize that Kerr is resistant to any sharp dichotomy between
philosophy and theology - although he allows a certain autonomy to philosophy (manifest in his criticisms
of Radical Orthodoxy in Fergus Kerr, “A Catholic Response to the Programme of Radical Orthodoxy,” in
46-62. Rather, the distinction I’m making by means of the labels “Kerr’s explicitly Wittgensteinian
writings” and “Kerr’s theological writings” is intended to mark a distinction between Kerr’s writings that
are explicitly concerned with Wittgenstein and those which, according to the claims of this thesis, are
*implicitly* concerned with Wittgenstein. To put it more straightforward, this thesis claims that Kerr’s
writings are *all* Wittgensteinian, only that some are more explicit than others.
CHAPTER SIX

STANLEY CAVELL’S WITTGENSTEIN EXTENDED INTO FERGUS KERR’S THEOLOGICAL ENGAGEMENT WITH KARL RAHNER AND TWENTIETH-CENTURY CATHOLIC THEOLOGY

Cartesianism lies deeply in our culture: the culture to which we belong. To disclose the Cartesianism inside Catholic theology and spirituality is to bring out our solidarity with the people around us. To practice a certain anti-Cartesian therapy in Catholic theology would be to join with many others in our society to remember the corporate and bodily dimensions of human life without which our humanity is forgotten.

Fergus Kerr, “The Need for Philosophy in Theology Today”

The question I set before myself in chapter one was whether or not Kerr’s interpretation of Wittgenstein influences his theology. To this point, I have outlined the influence of Wittgenstein on Kerr with regard to Kerr’s primary interpretive lens: Stanley Cavell. I have demonstrated that the two Cavellian themes outlined in chapters two through four perdure throughout Kerr’s writing, and play a pivotal role in all of Kerr’s publications which deal explicitly with Wittgenstein.

However, in my first chapter, I also cited two sources not explicitly concerned with Wittgenstein in support of my argument that Cavell informs Kerr’s interpretation of Wittgenstein: Immortal Longings and After Aquinas. I also cited a Wittgensteinian interjection, which included Cavell, in an essay which responds to Pope Benedict XVI’s Regensburg Address entitled, “Zwar Insinkt aber nicht Raisonnement: From Hume to
Wittgenstein and Back?” These references (and others) suggest that Wittgenstein (read through Cavell) extends into Kerr’s theology at various stages. But for now, this is mere suggestion. What remains to be shown is whether or not these influences penetrate deeply enough to effect a substantive contribution to Kerr’s theological excurses.

Moving forward, two issues require comment. First, as a reminder, my aims in this thesis are to give a partial explanation for the elusiveness of Kerr’s theology. As I mentioned in the first chapter, a full(er) explanation would require consideration of a number of factors: the range of Kerr’s scholarly influences, his location in Edinburgh, his position as an English Dominican and heir to Herbert McCabe (at least with regard to New Blackfriars), etc. While I cannot possibly offer a full explanation, I hope to demonstrate in this chapter that the “part” of the whole which this thesis represents is, however, an important part. Second, any account which seeks to describe the influence of Cavell’s Wittgenstein on Kerr, given the previous chapter’s argument that the Cavellian influence perdures across Kerr’s oeuvre, must deal with the issue of development. Development will be a major concern of this chapter.

Keeping these issues in mind, the chapter aims to demonstrate that the influence of Cavell’s Wittgenstein does in fact penetrate deeply enough to effect a substantive contribution to Kerr’s theological excurses. Given the range of figures and subjects addressed by Kerr’s theological writings across the decades, I have selected a single figure in order to track Kerr’s engagement over time: Karl Rahner. The selection of Rahner can be justified for the following reasons: (1) From his early publications in New Blackfriars through the recent publications on twentieth-century Catholic theology, Karl
Rahner has been a constant conversation partner for Kerr.173 (2) Kerr’s interaction with Rahner, in what I will call the early and middle phases, is intimately bound up with his interactions with Wittgenstein and Cavell.174 (3) Kerr evidences a significant transition in his interpretation of Rahner in the mid-90s which eventuates in a far more positive evaluation of Rahner’s contribution in Catholic theology.175 (4) Rahner, perhaps more than any other figure, defines the battle lines of contemporary Roman-Catholic theology.176 Thus, in choosing Rahner I select a figure not only central to Kerr’s reflections on Wittgenstein for theology, but also central to the debates over twentieth-century Catholic theology which define the landscape of contemporary Catholic theology.

Taking the issue of development in mind, I divide Kerr’s work into three phases (which roughly mirror the three phases of the previous chapter): what I will call the early, middle, and later Kerr.177 The chapter is divided accordingly, and in each case seeks to


174 See Kerr, Theology After Wittgenstein, 10-14, 170 (taking note of my reading of the structure of Kerr’s argument in the previous chapter); Immortal Longings, Introduction, chapters six and eight.

175 This transition is incited by Kerr’s reception, and partial acceptance, of Russell Reno’s criticism in The Ordinary Transformed.

176 Kerr points out the pivotal place Rahner occupies in mapping the terrain of twentieth-century Catholic theology, with enduring effects to the present, in chapter eight of Immortal Longings. The point is presupposed by Russell Reno in The Ordinary Transformed, and manifest in the critical response to Reno’s text: see, for instance, the review of Robert Masson, “The Ordinary Transformed: Karl Rahner and the Christian Vision of Transcendence,” Theological Studies 58 (1997): 173-175.

177 These divisions are mine and developed exclusively for the sake of the argument of this chapter. As I argued earlier, Kerr is startlingly consistent with regard to his interpretation of Wittgenstein throughout his oeuvre. My phases should not be read as sharp divisions, but merely as a demonstrative tool which (unfortunately) emphasizes development over continuity. The necessity of this negative effect will become clear as the chapter proceeds. The development, as will be clear, should be read as one of an
articulate a response to three questions: (1) How does Kerr read Rahner at this point? (2) How does his interpretation of Rahner relate to the Cavellian themes? (3) How does each phase relate to those which precede? The first phase is exemplified by a series of articles published in *New Blackfriars* between May 1980 and September 1981 under the heading “Rahner Retrospective,” and the parallel reading of Rahner found in the opening sections of *Theology after Wittgenstein*. At this point, Kerr is critical of Rahner, but demonstrates a largely un(der)developed engagement. In the second phase, Kerr reevaluates his earlier criticisms of Rahner (chapter eight of *Immortal Longings*). This reevaluation is inspired and shaped by Kerr’s reception of Russell Reno’s criticisms in *The Ordinary Transformed*. However, while Kerr reconsiders his earlier criticisms of Rahner, he remains committed to the Cavellian themes. In fact, I argue that his renegotiation with Rahner evinces an extension of the Cavellian themes into Kerr’s theology in a way more substantive than what we see in *Theology After Wittgenstein*. Somewhat inconspicuously, Kerr actually brings Cavell and Rahner into dialogue. Finally, in Kerr’s later phase he narrates the story of twentieth-century Catholic theology while the Cavellian themes hover in the background; or so I suggest.

**The Early Phase: Kerr’s Critique of Rahner**

response to nineteenth-century Neoscholasticism. It is a historical account, which suggests Rahner’s theology is best understood as a response to the decidedly negative nineteenth-century engagement with Modernism by Roman-Catholic theologians (at least, officially). On Kerr’s read, Rahner does not aim to accept Modernism wholesale, but is concerned that the wholesale rejection of a previous generation has left Roman-Catholic theology far behind Western culture, to its own detriment. Kerr quotes Rahner:

…if neo-scholastic philosophy, and theology with it, have mostly slept during the modern period, they cannot be spared the task set by modern philosophy just because it might be in decline: the lost ground must at least be made up if theology is to do justice to the spirit of the age which comes after “the modern age”.  

Rahner goes on to suggest that Catholic theology should avoid a simple dismissal of Liberalism (with Karl Barth in mind). Too many questions remain unsettled.

Kerr’s next installment, “The Historicity of Theology,” proceeds to outline in more detail Rahner’s response to the “Pian monolith.” As Kerr points out, following a century of censure, “Karl Rahner’s is the first systematically post-Kantian rethinking of Catholic theology which has (at least so far) escaped ecclesiastical censure.” The essence of Rahner’s post-Kantian rethinking Kerr describes as “the history-dependent character of all knowledge, meaning and truth”. “Kant’s main discovery was that


179 “Pianische Monolithismus” or Pian monolith is Rahner’s term. Kerr uses the term in reference to the anti-modernism represented, for instance in the encyclical letter Pascendi Dominici Gregis by Pope Pius X. For Kerr, the interest of the “Pian monolith” and Rahner’s response is the tension it reflects over the possibility of pluralist philosophy in Catholic theology. On Kerr’s read, the Pian monolith is a wholesale rejection of pluralist philosophy, in favor of the “monolithic” Neo-thomism. Kerr, “The Historicity of Theology,” 331-336.


181 Ibid.
knowledge depends upon the perspective of the knower as well as upon the nature of the object known. This led to the realization that knowledge is historically conditioned.”\(^\text{182}\)

Of course, this also leads to the realization that knowledge is relative – hence the ensuing hullabaloo over “relativism” in the Modernist crisis of the nineteenth- and twentieth-centuries.\(^\text{183}\) This disturbance over relativism (which, as Kerr points out, was pregnant with political resonances) eventuated in a stultified engagement with modern philosophy. With Rahner, things change: “Karl Rahner’s enduring service to Catholic theology has been to get questions at last acknowledged that have been denied for a hundred years.”\(^\text{184}\)

Two articles of description eventuate in that single sentence of praise, and that’s where the praise leaves off. In the following entry, “Transcendence or Finitude,” Kerr critiques Rahner’s picture of humanity. Kerr sums up the picture as follows: “we are what we are (human beings) because we are constantly being drawn out beyond wherever we actually are by that which enables us to see what is what in our world but itself eludes our sight all the time that it does so.”\(^\text{185}\) What is it that “enables us to see what is what in our world but itself eludes our sight?” God: “All knowledge takes place against the background of the accepted holy mystery [read: God] as the horizon of the asymptotic term and of the questioning ground of any act of knowledge and of its object.”\(^\text{186}\) As Kerr points out, citing several more instances, Rahner’s heavy-handed emphasis upon

\(^{182}\) Ibid.

\(^{183}\) As one example, of many, see Pius X, *Pascendi Dominici Gregis*. Later, in *Twentieth-Century Catholic Theologians*, Kerr uses “the Anti-Modernist” oath as his example.

\(^{184}\) Ibid., 341.

\(^{185}\) Kerr, “Transcendence or Finitude,” 371.

knowledge makes his account possible. For Rahner, knowledge is the most distinctive feature of humanity.  

But Rahner is not blind to epistemological problems. For instance, earlier in *Foundations of Christian Faith* he critiques certain pictures of mind: *tabula rasa*, a mirror, etc. These pictures give rise to the problem of “how an An-sich [(thing) in itself] can enter into the order of knowledge at all.” He continues:

In epistemology, especially in the defense of so-called Realism, of the picture theory of knowledge, or of the correspondence theory of truth, it is these pictures which are always predominant and presupposed as obvious. In all these pictures the known is something that comes from outside; it is something other which announces itself from outside according to its own law and images itself upon the passively receptive faculty of knowledge. … Knowing really has a more complex structure than that!

He moves on after that pithy criticism. Rahner’s dismissiveness irks Kerr. How can Rahner simply do away with this extensive network of problems? Have we not seen that Wittgenstein worked laboriously to overcome these problems and their kin?

Rahner purportedly gives a “more complex” account. Kerr’s crass way of putting the account is “whenever I know anything I also know that I do so and I know myself as I do so.” It is a transcendental derivative of St. Thomas’ epistemology. But does Rahner really thereby avoid the problems of “so-called Realism”, etc.; to wit, that the thing known always comes from “outside”? In Kerr’s judgment: no. “(Rahner) thinks primarily of ‘knowledge of an object presenting itself from without’, and is claiming that in all such knowledge one has an implicit awareness both of one’s knowing and of one’s own

\[\text{knowledge makes his account possible. For Rahner, knowledge is the most distinctive feature of humanity.}^{187}\]

\[\text{But Rahner is not blind to epistemological problems. For instance, earlier in *Foundations of Christian Faith* he critiques certain pictures of mind: *tabula rasa*, a mirror, etc. These pictures give rise to the problem of “how an An-sich [(thing) in itself] can enter into the order of knowledge at all.”}\]

\[\text{He continues:}

\[\text{In epistemology, especially in the defense of so-called Realism, of the picture theory of knowledge, or of the correspondence theory of truth, it is these pictures which are always predominant and presupposed as obvious. In all these pictures the known is something that comes from outside; it is something other which announces itself from outside according to its own law and images itself upon the passively receptive faculty of knowledge. … Knowing really has a more complex structure than that!}

\[\text{He moves on after that pithy criticism. Rahner’s dismissiveness irks Kerr. How can Rahner simply do away with this extensive network of problems? Have we not seen that Wittgenstein worked laboriously to overcome these problems and their kin?}

\[\text{Rahner purportedly gives a “more complex” account. Kerr’s crass way of putting the account is “whenever I know anything I also know that I do so and I know myself as I do so.”}\]

\[\text{It is a transcendental derivative of St. Thomas’ epistemology. But does Rahner really thereby avoid the problems of “so-called Realism”, etc.; to wit, that the thing known always comes from “outside”? In Kerr’s judgment: no. “(Rahner) thinks primarily of ‘knowledge of an object presenting itself from without’, and is claiming that in all such knowledge one has an implicit awareness both of one’s knowing and of one’s own}

\[\text{\[187\text{Ibid., 373.}\]

\[\text{\[188\text{Ibid. Quote from Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 17.}\]

\[\text{\[189\text{Ibid., 375. Kerr actually quotes extensively from Rahner in *Foundations of Christian Faith* (pp. 17-21) before delivering this summary, which he himself admits is too fast, but will serve our purposes here.}\]}

\[77\]
Never mind the confounding nature of the concept – the object remains outside!\(^{191}\)

Having discredited Rahner’s “more complex” epistemology, Kerr proceeds to issue what should by now be a familiar criticism. Rahner, in picturing knowledge as the foundational (transcendental) characteristic of humanity, gives a picture of humanity that chafes against the body. By seeking to understand humanity from some vantage point outside itself (the horizon, mystery, God), he conceives human finitude as a lack. Or so Kerr claims. Kerr then cites Cavell, who “questions whether the age-old (and Rahnerian) conversion of human finitude into a lack is not precisely what philosophers since Nietzsche, including Heidegger and Wittgenstein, have sought to stop, once and for all, so that we can at least discover the sufficiency of finitude.”\(^{192}\) Rahner’s problems receive a Cavellian critique.

Later, when Kerr would come to write *Theology After Wittgenstein*, Rahner is the first theologian to receive criticism. He is, for the early Kerr, the paradigmatic expression of Cartesianism in modern theology. In this case, Kerr contends that Rahner posits a gap between language and concepts – a tell-tale sign of Cartesianism for Kerr.\(^{193}\) Moreover, Rahner describes the subject as “fundamentally and by its very nature pure openness for

---


\(^{191}\) In support of his case, Kerr points out that, while for Rahner *Vorgriff* (pre-apprehension) constitutes humanity (it is, as it were, on the “front end”), for Heidegger, *Vorgriff* “comes very late on the scene.” For Heidegger, *Vorgriff* follows upon a more foundational ‘mood’ (*Befindlichkeit*). This ‘mood’ precedes all knowledge (Kerr cites *Sein und Zeit* 136; Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, SUNY Series in Contemporary Continental Philosophy, Rev. ed., trans. Joan Stambaugh (NY: State University of New York Press, 2010). Kerr, “Transcendence or Finitude,” 376-377.

\(^{192}\) Ibid., 378. Kerr’s account of Rahner is admittedly sketchy at this point. Indeed, Kerr himself repeats his own perplexity over Rahner’s prose both here and in *Theology After Wittgenstein*.

\(^{193}\) Kerr, *Theology After Wittgenstein*, 10-11. See the section on *Theology After Wittgenstein* in chapter five of this thesis for Kerr’s critique of this picture of language.
Absolutely everything."\textsuperscript{194} Thus the Rahnerian subject transcends her own limitations (Rahner mentions time and space). Finitude is lack.

Rahner’s prose is dense and difficult, particularly for the Anglo-American ear. Nevertheless, Kerr remains suspicious of Rahner’s account as, in the end, unaware of its foundational Cartesianism.

Much more evidently needs to be said, but there surely is a \textit{prima facie} case for suggesting that Rahner’s most characteristic theological profundities are embedded in an extremely mentalist-individualist epistemology of unmistakably Cartesian provenance. Central to his whole theology, that is to say, is the possibility for the individual to occupy a standpoint beyond his immersion in the bodily, the historical and the institutional. Rahner’s consistently individualist presentation of the self emphasizes cognition, self-reflexiveness and an unrestricted capacity to know. It rapidly leaves time and place behind.\textsuperscript{195}

Admittedly, this early phase of Kerr’s interaction with Wittgenstein and Rahner is characterized by its nascence. As he himself confesses, his comments are only beginnings, and perhaps misunderstood beginnings at that: “Obviously much more of Rahner’s text would need to be probed; I do not claim to have fully understood even the pages from which I have quoted.”\textsuperscript{196}

In spite of the inchoate form of Kerr’s analysis, what can be seen at this point is that the Cavellian themes underlie his criticism. Rahner’s problem is that, in spite of his insistence that he resists the mentalist-individualist epistemology prominent in modern philosophy ( “so-called Realism”, et. al.), he nevertheless lapses back into a picture of language which posits a gap between mind and language. In \textit{Theology After Wittgenstein},

\textsuperscript{194} Ibid., 12.

\textsuperscript{195} Ibid., 14.

\textsuperscript{196} Ibid., 12.
Rahner is the paradigmatic example of theologians who, thinking they’ve overcome a problem (in this case, of the objects approach from outside, which Kerr takes to be an extension of “Cartesianism”), falls back into its illusions under another guise. Moreover, Kerr’s response mirrors Cavell’s. As I argued in the last chapter, the structure of *Theology After Wittgenstein* is something of a Cavellian exercise, whereby Kerr diagnoses the problems of modern theology in part one (infusing Maritain’s “Cartesianism” with a Cavellian sense), produces a therapy in the form of an overview of Wittgenstein in part two, and then in part three returns to the earlier problems in order to demonstrate how the weight has shifted, as it were. That Kerr has something like this in mind with regard to Rahner is confirmed in his assertion at the opening of his final chapter: “It becomes too awkward and embarrassing to enter into debate with Karl Rahner over the transcendental subject.”197 Thus, Kerr is thoroughly critical of Rahner, even if the criticism is only partially developed, and his solution is markedly Cavellian.198

**The Middle Phase: Reno’s Critique and Kerr’s Response**

It comes as a bit of a surprise, then, to come to the final chapter of *Immortal Longings* and find Kerr giving such strong support to Rahner over against Hans Urs von Balthasar in the debates over nature and grace. Kerr registers his own surprise at the occurrence. Speaking in the Preface of his final chapter he states: “Playing two theologians off against one another, Hans Urs von Balthasar and Karl Rahner, I

197 Ibid., 170.

198 It is perhaps appropriate to remind the reader at this point that when I say a point is “Cavellian,” this is another way of saying it is “Wittgensteinian” for Kerr. By now it should be apparent that the lines are somewhat blurred, even if we see later that Kerr begins to space the two apart.
unexpectedly found my sympathies returning to the latter, in light of the most recent studies of his work.” 199 What transpires in the intervening decade in order for Kerr to shift his sympathies?

As I noted earlier, the critical response to Theology After Wittgenstein was largely positive. Of the few criticisms, Kerr found Russell Reno’s The Ordinary Transformed: Karl Rahner and the Christian Vision of Transcendence the most substantive. 200 Reno’s text, a development of his Yale dissertation, gives an innovative (and controversial) interpretation of Karl Rahner’s theology.

Reno states the thesis of The Ordinary Transformed as follows:

My argument in this study will be that neither a repudiation nor an embrace of the givenness of life expresses the proper form of Christian transcendence. The worldly context is neither the impediment to be overcome, nor the ultimate purpose of God’s initiative for us. Instead, the view I shall defend includes both discontinuity – there really is something new in our new life in Christ – and continuity – this newness includes the givenness of ordinary life. 201

He calls this view “amphibious.” It stands apart from two extremities: radical transcendence and pure immanence. Reno further asserts that only Christianity can manage this amphibious account, in its revelation that “God is love.” 202 Rahner is his source for defending the assertion.

Reno positions Rahner between two capitulations to the aforementioned extremities in Roman Catholic theology. On the side of radical transcendence, he positions nineteenth-century Neo-scholasticism (specifically Matthias Scheeben); the

---

199 Kerr, Immortal Longings, ix.

200 See Postscript to the second edition of Theology After Wittgenstein.

201 Reno, The Ordinary Transformed, 11.

202 Ibid., 12.

81
group which Rahner referred to as *der Pian monolithismus* and charges with “extrinsicism” manifest in the doctrine of *pura natura* (pure nature). On the other side (of pure immanence), Reno positions *la nouvelle théologie* (with specific reference to Maurice Blondel and Henri de Lubac) and their strategy of “linking” nature and grace. Rahner intervenes in the debate, offering a solution to the problem of nature and grace by (1) starting with grace (“God is love”), which (2) redefines the concept of nature, and thereby (3) retains a distinction between nature and grace (overcoming Neo-scholastic concerns), yet renders the distinction “grammatical” rather than ontological (overcoming the concerns of *la nouvelle théologie*).

Reno’s narration of Rahner’s solution is intriguing *in se*, but what is significant for our purposes is the radical difference between Reno’s account and Kerr’s earlier account. Key to Kerr’s criticism of Rahner in both the “Rahner Retrospective” and *Theology After Wittgenstein* is his contention that Rahner’s theology builds upon his transcendental philosophy. In fact, Kerr himself admits that, once inside Rahner’s “system” (it is important to note that Kerr describes Rahner’s theology as a system), Rahner pays “immense rewards in theological assurance and in spiritual stimulus if one goes with the tide.” But Kerr is not concerned with the theological and spiritual aspects

---

203 Ibid., 90-101.

204 Ibid., 101-108.

205 This places Rahner in contradistinction to Scheebeen, for whom “our reality as natural beings should be the clear and evident basis for a theological account of the mysterious order of supernature.” Ibid., 108. As many reviewers point out, this observation is profoundly colored by Barth.

206 By beginning with the revelation that “God is love,” the concept of nature becomes a “remainder concept” founded upon grace, effectively eliminating the possibility of *pura natura*. Ibid., 117.

207 Ibid.

208 Kerr, “Transcendence or Finitude,” 370.
of Rahner’s work in “Transcendence or Finitude”: “This paper is a preliminary exploration of the basic epistemological problems in Rahner’s philosophy of man”. 209 The same is true of Theology After Wittgenstein, which is predominantly concerned with Rahner’s epistemology and philosophical portrayal of human nature. 210

Of course, Kerr’s supposition is relatively standard: “The usual story is that Rahner’s theology is a system, founded on transcendental analysis of the individual person’s subjectivity.” 211 The hinge of Reno’s argument is an undermining of “the usual story” about Rahner. Roughly contemporaneous with the publication of The Ordinary Transformed (1995), Karen Kilby completed her Yale dissertation which gives a revisionist account of Rahner as “nonfoundationalist” (1994). 212 Incidentally, Kerr cites Kilby as one of the “most recent studies of his work” which incited his sympathy for Rahner. 213 For Kilby and Reno, Rahner’s account is thoroughly theological (or can be read this way). Unlike Kerr, Reno begins, not from the transcendental philosophy, but from the proposition that “God is love.”

Reno doesn’t stop with his revision of Rahner. The Ordinary Transformed, following the account of Rahner outlined above, proceeds to give a “patient illustration of the need for a proper account of transcendence in our characterization of the Christian

209 Ibid.

210 Ibid., 10-14.

211 Kerr, Immortal Longings, 176.

212 Karen Kilby, Karl Rahner: Theology and Philosophy (NY: Routledge, 2004). In fact, Reno and Kilby are not in agreement on Rahner, but they both agree that he might not be read as developing a system out of his early philosophical investigations.

213 Kerr’s reference to Kilby in Immortal Longings, 178-180, is to her Yale dissertation, which is the source from which she developed Karl Rahner: Theology and Philosophy; Keren Kilby, “The Vorgriff auf esse: A study in the relation of philosophy to theology in the thought of Karl Rahner,” (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1994).
life.”214 Reno’s “patient illustration” is a criticism of *Theology After Wittgenstein*.

Unfortunately, as Reno confesses, his read of *Theology After Wittgenstein* is less-than-charitable:

…as we develop Kerr’s account of the fate of transcendence we shall push rather hard in directions suggested by the logic of his Wittgensteinian polemic against transcendence, rather than attending to the specific shape of his own positive proposal. This reading of Kerr may violate a basic principle of theological charity (presume orthodoxy!), but such a vice may be necessary in order to flush out certain tendencies in the Wittgensteinian agenda, tendencies which theologians need to understand and avoid.215

I do not wish to detail Reno’s uncharitable criticism. To oversimplify the matter, he charges Kerr with pure immanence, given his heavy emphasis on the ordinary and harsh critique of radical transcendence at all turns (surely the critique of Rahner in *Theology After Wittgenstein* is in mind here). It would take too much time, and, on Reno’s own confession, his critique is not so much directed at Kerr as a view into which Kerr’s has been “pushed.” What is more revealing, and pertinent, is Kerr’s response to *The Ordinary Transformed*.

Kerr reconsiders two issues from the early phase in the wake of Reno’s criticism: (1) transcendence and immanence and (2) Rahner. With regard to the former, he grants that he perhaps over-emphasized immanence in *Theology After Wittgenstein*. Moreover, in the Postscript to the second edition he begins to develop an account of transcendence (or something like it) in light of Wittgenstein. What is striking about his account, though, is that Kerr doesn’t renegotiate his position in conversation with Rahner in the Postscript. Rather, in a series of moves I outlined in the previous chapter (pp. 63f.), Kerr gives an

---

214 Ibid., 13.
215 Ibid., 137, fn. 2.
account of transcendence on Cavell’s terms! That is, he returns to Cavell’s account of skepticism, and redescribes it as a natural desire for transcendence.

The skeptic is correct – we cannot have certainty about another’s inner life, but that does not lead to solipsism or madness. On the contrary, we are always already related in a variety of commonalities that constitute our life together – but the temptation to placid immersion in the communal is as destructive of humanity as illusory aspirations of escaping it. It is a denial of our humanity to aspire to the condition of the worldless self, but it is just as much a denial of our humanity not to have such an aspiration.\(^{216}\)

If we read this passage in light of Kerr’s earlier capitulations that Wittgenstein himself would have “respected the desire to ‘make ourselves immortal’,”\(^{217}\) it seems that Kerr is pressing Cavell’s account of the truth of skepticism into an expression of the natural desire for God.

In fact, this is precisely what we find in *Immortal Longings*. In chapter six, Cavell serves as an expression of the desire for transcending humanity which, as Kerr says in the Preface, reflects the vestiges left by the death of God in contemporary philosophy.\(^{218}\) The chapter outlines Cavell’s position in similar terms to our own analysis in chapters two through four. The themes find explicit expression:

What Cavell wants to uncover is what he calls the truth of skepticism. He is not trying to refute skepticism…Rather, Cavell is engaging with skepticism, trying to uncover what sense of our condition – what experience of our condition – is voiced in versions of skepticism.\(^{219}\)

What happens, according to Cavell, is that ‘a metaphysical finitude’ gets transformed into ‘an intellectual lack.’\(^{220}\)

---

\(^{216}\) Kerr, *Theology After Wittgenstein*, 212.

\(^{217}\) Ibid., 199.

\(^{218}\) Ibid., vii.

\(^{219}\) Kerr, *Immortal Longings*, 120.

\(^{220}\) Ibid.
What is new, according to Cavell, is the **method** by which Wittgenstein tries to bring us to this ‘acknowledgement of limitation’ which will not be felt like a chafing of our skin. ‘What we do [Wittgenstein’s emphasis] is to bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use.’\(^{221}\)

The themes perdure.

What is most intriguing about *Immortal Longings* is the reconsideration of Rahner in the final chapter. In what amounts to a confession, Kerr engages in self-criticism: “It has been maintained that Rahner’s ‘most characteristic theological profundities are embedded in an extremely mentalist-individualist epistemology of unmistakably Cartesian provenance’. … But will this interpretation of Rahner do?”\(^{222}\) Kerr’s quotation is from *Theology After Wittgenstein*. He then proceeds to reinterpret Rahner along the lines of *The Ordinary Transformed*. Rahner’s theology may not be founded on his philosophy.\(^{223}\) It is unsystematic.\(^{224}\) The appropriate context to understand it is not the transcendental philosophy of humanity, but the debate over nature and grace.\(^{225}\) Rahner actually favors a philosophical pluralism, and prefers its own transcendental philosophy as an *ad hoc* apologetic for Modern Catholicism.\(^{226}\) We are a far cry away from the polemics of the early phase.

Earlier I claimed that, while Kerr admits he overemphasized immanence in the first edition of *Theology After Wittgenstein*, he doesn’t address the problem by

---

\(^{221}\) Ibid., 114.

\(^{222}\) Ibid., 176.

\(^{223}\) Ibid., 177.

\(^{224}\) Ibid., 178.

\(^{225}\) Ibid., 179.

\(^{226}\) Ibid., 180.
reconsidering Rahner, but through a redescription of Cavell. Does the wholesale reconsideration of and sympathy for Rahner in *Immortal Longings* undermine the reading I gave of the Postscript to *Theology After Wittgenstein*? Doesn’t Kerr’s organization of *Immortal Longings*, climaxing as it does with Rahner, reflect a growing disappointment with Cavell and his Wittgenstein? In a word, no. In fact, what we see in the close of *Immortal Longings* is an analogy developing between Cavell and Rahner:

Rahner, like Cavell, thinks that we are haunted by an inhuman ideal of human knowledge. The difference is that, for Cavell, what is required is ‘an acknowledgment of human limitation which does not leave us chafed by our own skin’ – chafed, then, ‘by a sense of powerlessness to penetrate beyond the human conditions of knowledge.’

Again Cavell extends into Kerr’s theology.

The middle phase includes a reconsideration of Rahner, but not a withdrawal from the Cavellian themes. The early phase, with its nascent polemic against Cartesianism in modern theology (Rahner being the paradigmatic case), has developed into a more measured reading of Rahner, but the Cavellian (Wittgensteinian) analysis of modern theology and philosophy persists. The point is manifest in the final chapter of *Immortal Longings*. Kerr does not back off his contention that latent “Cartesianism” is problematic, or that it should be ferreted out by Wittgenstein’s methods (philosophical therapy). He simply allows the possibility that Rahner’s theology *could* be read without the latent “Cartesianist” epistemology. Of course, it can also be read with the latent

---

227 Ibid., 182. It is telling that Cavell (alongside Wittgenstein) is the only figure from the preceding seven chapters of *Immortal Longings* who appears as the text draws to a close.

228 Ibid., 175-176.
“Cartesianism”; as a theological system built upon the philosophical and metaphysical analysis of *Geist in Welt* and the early passages of *Foundations of Christian Faith*.229

*Theology After Wittgenstein* was very much an exploratory work. It was innovative, but tentative. For all the overturning accomplished in parts one and two, part three falters a bit. It is not entirely Kerr’s fault: “Philosophical investigation inside theology, in the English-speaking world at least, has hardly found its feet.” He isn’t certain as to what his engagement with Wittgenstein eventuates in when it comes to theology, thus he simply mentions “a half dozen or so issues.”230 Now, in the middle phase’s engagement with Rahner, Kerr begins to find extension of his Wittgensteinian-Cavellian commitments into the realm of theology proper. Rahner is no longer the crypto-Cartesian of *Theology After Wittgenstein*. He may even be of help.

The dominance of an ideal of knowledge as total comprehension, which Rahner seeks to demythologize as determinedly as Cavell, thus distorts theological understanding of the hiddenness of God. But Rahner wants to locate the incomprehensibility of the divine mystery properly, not just to free us from illusory ideals of knowledge.231

Whether or not Rahner’s location of the divine mystery succeeds is another question. Kerr avers that Rahner forces a choice upon us. Quoting Rahner, “It forces upon us the dilemma of either throwing ourselves into the uncharted, unending adventure where we commits ourselves to the infinite, or – despairing at the thought and so embittered – of

---

229 Ibid., 176-177. He cites “one of the best commentators” as evidence of the sort of reading he has in mind – the reading he presumed in *Theology After Wittgenstein*; Gerald McCool, ed., *A Rahner Reader* (NY: Crossroad, 1984). Kerr concludes the note with a suggestive “and many others.”


taking shelter in the suffocating den of our own finite perspicacity.”

But Kerr is unconvinced: “We do not have to choose between the leap in the dark of radical transcendence and hiding in the pure immanence of the familiar world. That is perhaps a theologian’s dilemma that a philosopher of religion would hope to set aside.” Given his earlier comparisons, the philosopher Kerr has in mind may very well be Cavell.

The Later Phase: Twentieth-Century Catholic Theologians

William Portier contends that Fergus Kerr’s *Twentieth-Century Catholic Theologians* is really two books. In a sense, perhaps. But too much should not be made of Portier’s claim. The structure of *Twentieth-Century Catholic Theologians* is intended as a unity. As Portier notes, Kerr opens with Walter Kasper’s declaration; “There is no doubt that the outstanding event in the Catholic theology of our century is the surmounting of neo-scholasticism.”

In chapter one, “Before Vatican II,” Kerr presents

---


233 A full picture would have to admit, and locate, the criticism of Cavell which begins to appear in *Immortal Longings*. While I have been arguing that the Cavellian themes persist throughout Kerr’s writings, and even penetrate into his theological engagements, it is not the case that his evaluation of Cavell’s philosophy *en toto* persists. My argument has been that the themes are the distinctively (although not exclusively) Cavellian lens through which Kerr reads Wittgenstein. With regard to Cavell’s Wittgenstein, Kerr is consistent. However, Wittgenstein is merely one of a plethora of sources of Cavell’s philosophy (albeit a significant one). Wittgenstein (along with J. L. Austin) is the major voice in Cavell’s early *Must We Mean What We Say?* and *The Claim of Reason*, but over time Cavell draws increasingly upon other voices – Shakespeare, Heidegger, Nietzsche, Thoreau and Emerson in particular. Kerr’s substantive engagement with Cavell in chapter six of *Immortal Longings* begins to peel apart Cavell’s Wittgenstein from Cavell. Cavell now continues Wittgenstein’s later philosophy “in a very different mode.” For a more forceful distinction, see “Work on Oneself”, 111.

234 Portier, “Thomist Resurgence,” 496. The two books are divided into those which treat: (1) Chenu (“perhaps”), Schillebeeckx, Rahner, Lonergan, and Küng; and (2) De Lubac, von Balthasar, Wojtyla, Ratzinger, and (judging from Portier’s silence, although it is not clear how this could be) Congar. Also, presumably, the introduction and conclusion relate to both books in their own way (although this isn’t clear either).

235 Ibid.
Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange as the bastion of Neo-scholasticism; the “model Thomist”.

The chapter is largely dedicated to a synopsis of Garrigou-Lagrange’s *Reality: A Synthesis of Thomistic Thought*. Kerr’s interest centers upon Garrigou’s criticism of “alternative philosophies” (alternative to Aquinas’ perennial philosophy, that is), and resilient assertion that, without Aquinas’ philosophy (particularly his metaphysics), Catholic theology is certain to go wrong. Garrigou’s concern is that “neophyte theologians … are so soaked in phenomenalism, idealism, positivism, pragmatism, and so on, that, without serious engagement with these philosophies, they remain under the spell, which means in the end that they discount reason.” To this, Marie-Dominique Chenu, the subject of Kerr’s second chapter and student of Garrigou-Lagrange, dissents. Kerr’s text then goes on to treat a variety of fellow “surmounters” of neo-scholasticism. In this way he provides a primer to twentieth-century Catholic theology.

A year before *Twentieth-Century Catholic Theologians*, Kerr published an article entitled “A Different World: Neoscholasticism and its Discontents” which appears to be a run-up to (and expansion of) the larger volume. Here he discusses the Modernist crisis (which serves as the backdrop to *Twentieth-Century Catholic Theologians*) by describing the struggle between Garrigou-Lagrange and Chenu, his student. The overlap with the opening chapters of *Twentieth-Century Catholic Theologians* is considerable, but in the essay Kerr’s own evaluative voice comes through more clearly.

---


237 Ibid., 14.

Kerr gives a nearly identical account of Garrigou-Lagrange; he is committed to the “perennial philosophy” of Aquinas, and a stringent critic of “alternative philosophies.” The account of Chenu which follows is likewise analogous to the chapter in *Twentieth-Century Catholic Theologians*. Chenu, against his teacher, develops an historical approach to Thomas, reading Aquinas in relation to his patristic sources as well as his Jewish and Moslem dialogue partners. In light of Chenu’s historical reconstruction of Aquinas, he critiques the “baroque scholasticism” of his teachers, trapped as they are “Wolffian rationalism.” Moreover, Chenu’s manifesto, *Une école de théologie: Le Saulchoir*, was bold enough to begin with theology, and then move to philosophy.

Kerr’s essay frames the dispute between Chenu and his teachers, in particular Garrigou-Lagrange, with a portrait of neoscholastic theology via the “Twenty-Four Thomistic Theses.” The Theses, up until Vatican II, were required material prior to the study of theology for all clergy. Against this backdrop, he lays out Chenu’s (and Gilson’s) critique of Garrigou-Lagrange and Neoscholastic Thomism as an extension of eighteenth-century Rationalism. Their critique is dense, and Kerr gives it an ambivalent judgment: “Maybe so.” Kerr remains ambivalent in his own judgments over the whole situation:

---

239 Ibid., 138-141.

240 Ibid., 141-142.

241 Ibid., 143. For extended discussion on Christian Wolff and his influence on Garrigou-Lagrange (according to Chenu who follows Etienne Gilson in this criticism), see pp. 145-147.


243 Kerr publishes a complete list of the Theses between pp. 132-134.
But is it perverse, after the history of Chenu’s conflict with Garrigou-Lagrange, to suggest that, for all one’s gratitude for the historical-contextualist reading of Thomas Aquinas, Chenu’s remarks about the biblical concept of truth are less than satisfactory? Is it not a relief to turn to recent discussions of truth by philosophers in the analytical tradition, from Michael Dummett to Donald Davidson? Is it a surprise to find that they would be more at home with Garrigou-Lagrange’s anxieties about ‘Modernist’ philosophies than with Chenu’s detection of ‘Wolffian rationalism’? No doubt it was high time that the grip of neoscholastic philosophy over Roman Catholic theology was broken, - we could not go on ignoring historical context; but some at least of those who freed theology from rationalism reverted to assumptions about truth, experience, etc., which seem, to say the least, to need a bit of philosophical scrutiny.\(^244\)

Earlier in Kerr’s career (1984), he gave a paper to the Upholland Theological Consultation in light of their founding the Catholic Theological Association of Great Britain.\(^245\) He opens the paper, which includes the same cast of figures and issues as the two “later” texts cited above, with the following assertion:

With all the welcome emphasis, since Vatican II, on biblical studies, patristic \textit{ressourcement}, the historical approach, the ecumenical dimension, pastoral and missionary relevance, and so on, there is still a need, in Catholic theology, for philosophy.\(^246\)

Why? Kerr insists that Catholic theology needs philosophy to “identify the latent Cartesianism in every pious western Catholic’s mind.”

Aristotelian Thomism (otherwise known as Neoscholasticism) was supposed to keep such Cartesianism out of the system. It collapsed in 1962. There must be several reasons for this sudden failure. But the deepest reason for the unexpected failure…is surely that the resistance never went deeply enough.”\(^247\)

\(^{244}\) Ibid., 148.


\(^{246}\) Ibid., 248.

\(^{247}\) Ibid., 253.
He then goes on to list examples of latent Cartesianism in Catholic theology—mentalism in prayer, interiorist volitionism in moral theology, etc. Likewise, he contends, then-contemporary Anglo-American philosophy is latently ("New"ly) Cartesian. "But should Catholic theologians be surprised at the continuing attractions of this Cartesian view of the mind? Isn’t it the ancient dream that intelligence is superhuman?"  

Which brings us back to the Cavellian themes. In "The Need for Philosophy in Theology Today" they occupy the foreground. He asserts that the failure of neoscholasticism, or here "Aristotelian Thomism," was its inability to "cure Catholic theology of Cartesianism." This is the same "Cartesianism" which, we saw, receives a Cavellian (which is to say Wittgensteinian) inflection in the "early" Kerr’s Wittgenstein articles in *New Blackfriars* and *Theology After Wittgenstein*. Just as in the later two texts, Kerr concludes "The Need for Philosophy in Theology Today" with an implicating link between Garrigou-Lagrange and Afrikan Spir, the source from which Chenu contends Garrigou receives his Wolffian Rationalism. But Kerr also voices his displeasure with the emerging theology of Vatican II in his conclusion to the 2006 essay "Neoscholasticism and Its Discontents." What Kerr prescribes in the 2006 essay is philosophical scrutiny—but of what sort? If Kerr’s arguments in these three essays are as interrelated as they appear to be, can we not say that the scrutiny he has in mind is of a

---

248 Ibid., 253-259.
249 Ibid., 259.
250 Ibid.
251 Ibid., 259-260; *Twentieth-Century Catholic Theologians*, 30; "Neoscholasticism and Its Discontents," 147.
252 See quote at the top of p. 92 above.
Wittgensteinian sort – that is to say a *therapy*. In 1984, he contends that Catholic theology need “to practice a certain anti-Cartesian therapy”.

Could the Cavellian themes be hovering in the background of Kerr’s current (“later”) engagement with contemporary Catholic theology? If what I’ve argued to this point holds, perhaps so. It is an admittedly partial explanation of Kerr’s contemporary theological concerns, just as Portier’s two-book argument is a partial explanation of *Twentieth-Century Catholic Theologians*. But together we begin to see a fuller picture of the elusive Fergus Kerr.

**A Partial Explanation**

As I said in the first chapter, this thesis could not possibly offer more than a partial explanation of Kerr’s elusiveness. What I have argued, simply put, is that Kerr’s theology is influenced by Wittgenstein, whom he reads through the lens of Cavell. The persistence of this influence was noted and detailed, and the developing extension and expression of this influence in Kerr’s theological investigations was demonstrated. The influence of Cavell’s Wittgenstein eventuates in the difficulty Kerr’s reviewers find in locating him on the spectrum of Catholic theology. Is he a Neo- or “Resurgent” Thomist? It is difficult to answer in the affirmative given Kerr’s at times harsh critique of Garrigou-Lagrange et. al. on the grounds of a latent “Cartesianism.” Would he fit with those associated with the journal *Communio*? Portier’s review would suggest not, given Kerr’s harsh criticism of De Lubac and “nuptial mysticism.” Moreover, while Kerr admits that the renewal of historical consciousness (at the hands of Chenu and others) was necessary for leading Catholic theology out of its “Wolffian Rationalism,” he remains unsatisfied.

---

253 Ibid., 260.
by *la nouvelle théologie*: “the resistance was never deep enough.”\(^{254}\) What about *Concilium*? Portier (rightly) dismisses the possibility. Given Kerr’s acceptance of Cavell’s Wittgensteinian critique of modernity, any *aggiornamento* we could possibly speak about in connection with Kerr would be a peculiar one. Kerr’s non-standard engagement with Rahner further rules this option out. It seems the best we can say for any of the aforementioned “types” of contemporary Catholic theology is, “In a sense, but…”.

I opened the thesis with the assertion that Fergus Kerr reads Ludwig Wittgenstein through the lens of Stanley Cavell, and this influence has an impact on Kerr’s theology. Chapter two outlined Cavell’s account of “the truth of skepticism.” For Cavell, our language does not rest upon necessary criteria (in this regard, skepticism is true), but is made possible by our *attunement* to one another, *via* our shared “forms of life” - nothing more. Our recognition of the truth of skepticism arouses an anxiety about the certainty of our knowledge and language. The problem we encounter is our tendency, when faced with skepticism’s truth, to engage in a philosophical deflection which guides us back into imagining our language and knowledge rests upon more than “forms of life.”

Wittgenstein’s methods, on Cavell’s read, aim at the removal of these deflections, deflections which give rise to philosophical illusion. Thus, Wittgenstein’s philosophy is therapeutic – it aims to remove philosophical illusions so that we can see the truth that is already there. Chapters three and four sought to describe that therapy (the response to skepticism). Chapter three was an excursus on Cora Diamond’s account of Wittgenstein’s

early philosophy in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Against P.M.S. Hacker, Diamond argues that Wittgenstein’s aim in the *Tractatus* is therapeutic. On Diamond’s read, Wittgenstein, in the *Tractatus*, guides his reader into imagining his propositions are meaningful, only to realize eventually that the same propositions were nonsense and we were deeply attracted to imagine them otherwise. In this way, Wittgenstein performs a therapy on his reader. Cavell reads the *Investigations* in a correlative way. Chapter four used Cavell’s essay “The Availability of Wittgenstein’s Later Philosophy” to draw a comparison between Diamond and Cavell. In this way I sketch out an account of philosophy as therapy which, in methodically guiding the reader to see her own illusions, allows for a kind of self-knowledge.

In chapter five I considered four “moments” in Fergus Kerr’s oeuvre wherein he engages, explicitly, with Wittgenstein’s philosophy. I argued that the Cavellian themes perdure throughout, although we can see development in Kerr’s engagement with them. The chapter demonstrated that, when it comes to Kerr’s engagement with Wittgenstein, Cavell exerts a profound influence. Chapter six then attempted to demonstrate how this engagement with Cavell’s Wittgenstein extends into Kerr’s other writing. The key here is Kerr’s engagement with Rahner. By telling the story of Kerr’s long and complex relationship with Karl Rahner I showed that Cavell’s Wittgenstein colors Kerr’s engagement with contemporary Catholic theology. I moved through three “phases” of Kerr’s work: early (1980s), middle (1990s), and later (2000s). Kerr transitioned between the early and middle phases from what was an inchoate, and at times un(der)developed criticism of Rahner’s theology to an appreciation. Kerr’s engagement with Russell

---


96
Reno’s *The Ordinary Transformed* was pivotal in this shift. However, I also demonstrate that the Cavellian themes persist in spite of Kerr’s change of sympathy with regard to Rahner. Finally, I suggested that the themes hover in the background of Kerr’s most recent publications, most notably in his engagement with twentieth-century Catholic theology. This provides a partial explanation for the narration Kerr gives in *Twentieth-Century Catholic Theologians*, as well as Kerr’s elusiveness.

Much more could be said about Kerr. I don’t consider the other lenses through which Kerr reads Wittgenstein. As I note, M. O’C. Drury is an important factor here. Furthermore, I have not dealt with the second major concern of Kerr’s “later” phase as substantively as one might like: that is, Thomas Aquinas. Given more time, this would be my next question. Furthermore, Kerr’s critique of nuptial mysticism, as well as his suggestive connection of the trend with Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray, might be located in light of what we’ve seen so far. There is also the issue of Kerr’s elliptical relationship with John Milbank and Radical Orthodoxy. Thus, what I’ve offered is only partial - but, as I’ve asserted before, an important part.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


---. “Revealing the Scapegoat Mechanism: Christianity after Girard.” In Philosophy,


---. “Karl Rahner: Theology and Philosophy; The Vorgriff auf esse: A study in the relation of philosophy to theology in the thought of Karl Rahner” Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1994.


101
Translated by Mabelle L. Andison. New York: Philosophical Library, 1944.


