

The Expression of Wonderment

I

Wittgenstein's Lecture on Ethics has provided a frequent point of reference for discussions of the trajectory of his changing views on sense and nonsense, and on the nature of ethical and religious utterances. In this lecture, Wittgenstein tries to clarify the possibilities of habitation and expression which language offers to value, and pronounces them to be severely limited. His thesis that 'a certain characteristic misuse of our language runs through *all* ethical and religious expressions' (*LE*, 9) is supported by a description of three particular experiences which he takes as exemplars of absolute value, and for which he tries to show that they resist articulation in language which makes sense. These are the experience of absolute wonderment at the existence of the world ('how extraordinary that anything should exist', 'how extraordinary that the world should exist'); the experience of absolute safety ('I am safe, nothing can injure me whatever happens'); and the experience of guilt. With respect to talk about safety, the misuse of language emerges as a leap from the particular to the general: 'to be safe essentially means that it is physically impossible that certain things should happen to me and therefore it's nonsense to say that I am safe *whatever* happens'. With wonderment, the case is slightly different, and involves a different attention at the pragmatic circumstances in which we will say 'I wonder': 'to say "I wonder at such and such being the case" has only sense if I can imagine it not to be the case...it is nonsense to say that I wonder at the existence of the world, because I cannot imagine it not existing' (*ibid*). The haunting metaphor he leaves us with is that of language as a 'cage' which we desire to run our heads against but to little avail – our valuables remain beyond the reach of language, and thus, in a real sense, beyond ours.

The view of language reflected in the Lecture may have been one which Wittgenstein was set to grow out of, and any interpretive effort would need to take these shifts into account. Here, my aim will be much more modest and much less interpretive. For one may recognise in Wittgenstein's remarks an invitation to reconsider the sense of our utterances of value which one may yet gainfully respond to, in that it gives us a foothold for grappling with a sense we already have that these experiences and values pose a special challenge to our expressive efforts. The particular example I will focus on is that of wonderment at the existence of 'all there is', and the contention I will seek to examine more closely is that the verbal expression we give to this experience (and here one needs to *assume* that one can pick it out at all as a 'this') is nonsense insofar as predications of wonderment at a certain thing only make sense if we can imagine that thing not to exist (or: 'we say "I wonder at..." when we can imagine it not to be the case'). I will begin by suggesting some reasons for considering the notion of imagination implicit in Wittgenstein's remarks a problematic one – these being reasons deriving from the nature of the remarks in which this notion is utilised. My next task will be to explore how this frees the possibilities of expression, and my aim will be less to argue for a definitive proposal than to touch up possibilities of responding and to explore some of the difficulties (and allurements) they involve.

II

The difficulties attaching to Wittgenstein's invocation of imagination may start to become visible by noting that, clearly, if the ability to (say we) wonder is dependent on the ability to imagine a certain state of affairs – namely that all we see before us might not have existed – our more immediate interest must be to discover what the latter ability consists in. Yet what would that be if not once more a question about the use of language? Here, we would need to suppress the impulse to take flight to extra-linguistic realms by the petulant claim 'one can imagine anything one wants!'. For if we only learn what it is to imagine through learning to speak (and thus to speak about imagining), talk of imagination would be subject to the type of necessities expressed in the typical Wittgensteinian question 'in what circumstances

do we say...?’ and in the concern with what goes before an instance of speech and what follows it.

Yet the impulse to take flight is one which would be peculiarly apt in this particular case. For imagination is a concept unlike, for example, that of knowledge in that the criteria for its use and the behavioural prequels and sequels for it are often fairly wide and liberal in the language games we are familiar with. It is not an epistemic status concept for which we seek strict criteria that would allow us to determine whether in a particular case the concept applies or fails to apply. Unlike the sceptically uttered question, ‘Do you really know?’ the question ‘Have you really imagined?’ strikes a queer note, as would charging another with a *mistake* in his self-attribution of imagination (‘In fact you haven’t *really* imagined’). And that is not simply because we have been trained to suspect this of being an unWittgensteinian request to report an event that has taken place in the mind, but because we are not accustomed to making claims of failure or success about imagination and distributing values of truth and falsehood over such claims.

Such a custom would have involved thinking of imagination as an action or process that has been completed and brought to an end. By contrast, what is striking about our familiar usage is that it is often understood as an imperfect or incomplete effort – one that is not expected to ‘succeed’ in the sense of obtaining mastery over its object or securing it in its grasp. The invitation to imagine can appear as an invitation to extend our awareness of a *lack* of mastery, of cognitive limitations – though not one that produces despair, but one that excites and tantalises. Walking down the road on a windy day one sees the leaves being driven along the pavement and says to himself, ‘Imagine what it must be like to be driven along like that!’. Less fancifully and more commonly: ‘Imagine what it must be like to be schizophrenic, to be born a dwarf, to be deaf-mute, to die in a plane crash, to have experienced Palestine in the 1st century AD...’ These invitations which one makes to oneself or to others would often not be satisfied by an earnest and arduous effort to grasp something that terminates in *success*, but by the effort itself as expressing a willingness and openness to contemplate the possibility that there is something there that could be grasped, though perhaps not within *my* grasp. Often they would be connected with a sense of awe, the sensation of a mind that

recognises its limits precisely by throwing stones beyond them and hearing the distant echo of a splash. Less: 'I have imagined' and more: 'Imagine!', 'Try to imagine', 'I can (cannot) imagine', 'Can you imagine?', 'Have you ever imagined?'. Nothing could be more out of place here than to raise a cavil about whether one has *really* imagined.

If this is all so, and if even to challenge the application of the concept and to raise the question of criteria would strike us as incongruous, it is important to wonder how one comes to raise the question in this case. This is to go no further than a rehearsal of Cavell's simple but significant observation, that the question about pragmatic contexts is *itself* subject to pragmatic constraints if it is to make sense – i.e. 'when do we say 'when do we say...?''

Questions about how a given person is using some word can sensibly arise only where there is some specific reason to suppose that he is using the word in an unusual way. (Cavell 1976: 37).

In this case, what gives sense to our talking about the criteria for talking about imagination is simply the fact that an instance of such talk was placed (by Wittgenstein) in dispute - or rather, what was disputed was not our ability to *talk* about imagination, but our ability to *imagine* a given state of affairs, on which our *talk* of wonderment at the world was said to hinge. But if claims are not normally made with respect to imagination, what is it that gives sense to this one?

The answer to this question feeds into decisions about how to read the transformations of Wittgenstein's method and outlook. For while it is not part of our usual language-games to make *claims* about imagining, one context in which such claims are in fact made is philosophical argument. The probative and justificatory concerns of such a context puts our concepts under unusual strain, for this is a game in which words are made to carry higher consequences and things of value (conclusions, epistemic goods) are made to depend on them. In such claim games, one may find oneself wondering whether one can *really* imagine what it's like to be another person, or whether one can *really* imagine a state of affairs which could never be actualised. And with the higher consequences that are carried by our use

(the nature of modality, the possibility of knowing other minds), one feels the need to turn the screw of the standards of application, and thus finds himself *disputing* ascriptions of imagination, and thinking of it in terms of failure or success. Take a statement such as 'I can imagine being ten times more intelligent': if one rejects that this can 'really be done' with arguments about the impossibility of imagining this state of affairs, this must be at least in part because it is the habit of hearing such statements ('I can imagine what it is like to be a bat') as *claims* or in *claim-games* that calls up the response of rejection. One would not have disputed it had one heard it, say, as a wistful utterance one might make after hours of racking his mind to solve a particular mathematical problem ('Sometimes I imagine what it must be like to be ten times smarter and I feel like banging my fists against the prison-walls of my mind' – we accept this as bound up with the expression of frustration). The predicament of philosophical games is that the attempt to dispute an application cannot be accomplished save by looking back to the ordinary use one would make of the concept – a usage that is not governed by crystalline, hard-and-fast rules, but leaves concepts 'with blurred edges' and 'not closed by a frontier' (*PI* 71, 68); this may in fact be especially true with respect to the concept of imagination. And of course this consultation of the ordinary is precisely what is so difficult to do once the concept has come to appear 'consequential', for the lack of exactitude with which ordinary usage has made peace can hardly satisfy the sense of high consequence nurtured in the justificatory game of philosophy. One is, in the end, driven to admit that there is little one can show for the insistence that such or such a thing 'just *can't*' be imagined; that the use one makes of imagining is often open-ended and more liberal than one might, at such times, wish.

While the language game which Wittgenstein's remarks in his Lecture represent is not one that espouses the kind of argument that seeks to leap over the heads of our words, nonetheless it sets up a context which partakes of the justificatory rather than the descriptive ('this is *nonsense...because*'). However one may place its spirit in relation to the claim-game of traditional philosophy, and however one might describe its position in the continuum of Wittgenstein's changing view and practice of philosophy, it is a game which nonetheless seems to disregard the flexibility of our linguistic usage, and in which one hears *claims*, in which weighty

conclusions *depend*, and in which one is driven to turn the screw on standards of application and to *dispute*.¹ By stipulating the imagination of a certain state of affairs as a condition for the application of a word (wonderment), and thereby ruling against our desire to apply it, Wittgenstein sets up circumstances that invite queries into what counts as imagining and inevitably pull us towards standards of success and failure. As the experiences Wittgenstein is discussing are precisely those that have the highest value for us, and the ability to imagine has been stipulated as a condition for sense, one deals with the concept of imagination as a very consequential thing: one which can deprive us of the legitimacy of speaking about an experience of sublime value, indeed deprive us of the experience itself. ‘Can I *really* imagine the world not existing?’ One asks oneself. And, as this is precisely what has been placed in doubt in this doubt-and-claim game, one is assailed by doubt. Any answer seems numinous; it carries a lot of responsibility. How can one really be *sure...?*

Here, it would seem that the only salve for such uncertainty would be to turn back to the habits of ordinary use and transplant the disputed sentence into a more homely context and away from talk of success and failure. Looking at a starry sky: ‘Can you believe it, that none of this might have existed?’ Only a companion unworthy of sharing the view of the sky with you would turn to you and say: ‘Stuff and nonsense! As if you know what *that* means!’

That is to say, one may simply reject the application of rigid success and failure standards to the case of imagining the world’s non-existence. One might accept an open-continuation, liberal construal of what counts as imagining and say: any number of things would count as being able to imagine the world’s non-existence – whether writing science fiction about parallel worlds or doing metaphysics or sinking deeper into depression at the thought that one might have

¹ Wittgenstein puts the case clearly with some of his remarks in *On Certainty*, where he notes that it is only when someone is speaking with ‘philosophical intention’ that he finds himself driven to dispute his use of words (‘For when Moore says “I know that that’s...” I want to reply “you don’t *know* anything!” ...For if someone says he knows such-and-such, and this is part of his philosophy – then his philosophy is false if he has slipped up in this statement’. *OC* 407-8).

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escaped the intolerable burden of being. There are no images to grasp at here that will give us a handle on what we are trying to imagine; we cannot try to act out this make-believe as we might in other cases (cf. *PI* 391), we can hardly map the implications – there are none. One can only *try* to grasp what it might mean – talk of imagining what it is for the world not to exist would make sense as an invitation that would be satisfied by an effort to imagine, even if this means an awareness of the cognitive limits that make it impossible to entirely ‘succeed’.

There are several reasons why this account of the conditions of sense for our expressions of wonderment might be felt to be incomplete. The most important perhaps is that, while recognising the liberality of our criteria for speaking of imagination, the content of this particular exercise of imagination is so unusual that a firmer sense-giving context seems necessary to support it. That is to say, the satisfaction of the condition Wittgenstein stipulated may seem too thin a criterion, and one needs to go beyond the looser and thinner notion of the ‘circumstances’ where we use a word – a notion which could be satisfied even by the condition ‘only if you can imagine the contrary’ – and to fill a thicker notion of circumstances such as the ones which the later Wittgenstein would have termed a ‘form of life’.

This source of disquiet can be met by the observation that there *is* a particular form of life and language-game where such effort at grasping, and such wonderment, find a home and which supports these types of utterance – and that is the religious. It is in this form of life (or: some forms of this form of life) that we learn to think about what is worldly and otherworldly, and to speak about a form of life that is not our own and that will be our own. It is there that the wedge strikes at the root of the world and separates it from ‘what was before it’, even if accompanied by a pandemonium of difficulties as to how the ‘before’ can be spoken of and how the limits of our concepts can expand to contain that other realm. The world is seen as the product of divine creation that came into being at a given point in time (‘time’), and what connects the present and the otherness of the ‘before’ is a concatenation of finite causes and effects which our eye may follow and thereby acquire a sense of the historical, of the contingent, of the finite. The world is seen as a limited whole; as created; as contingent (Wittgenstein: ‘as a miracle’). This is the world seen from the outside - that is to say, from God’s point of view. One is *trained* to look at it under

this light, to think of how different things might have been. (The argument from design trains us to marvel at regularity; the cosmological argument trains us to conceive of finitude (and does one need to *believe* in the argument in order to be trained by it?); the mystic petitions God – in the manner of certain Sufi masters – to deepen his bewilderment and make him marvel the more. One is trained to think counterfactually in the – in some types of the – religious form of life).

Whether one says one really knows what one means when one says ‘the world is contingent’ might depend on whether one says one really knows what one means when one says ‘God is just’ or ‘God is beautiful’. And here is where one might turn back to look at the ways in which responding to the invitation to imagine is not expected to terminate with a success claim, but would be satisfied by the effort to entertain a possibility, to throw the ball towards an object of comprehension without expecting one will be entirely able to keep up with it. What may be more important here is the effort to imagine, rather than the success – the effort to know what one means in saying these words, the desire to mean them, to entertain the possibility of limits to both the world and one’s mind. To imagine the world not existing would be to strive to imagine it.

To say this is to echo some of the remarks made by Cora Diamond (2000: 157-8) in her account of the imaginative attempt to understand the utterer of nonsense, ‘an exercise of the capacity to enter into the taking of nonsense for sense’, to ‘let myself feel its attractiveness’, which involves *wanting* to speak a language in which the nonsensical words have determinate sense (and thus *wanting* the forms of life that underpin them). Yet one does not, in this case, want to lead or be led out of this perspective or to be cured of one’s tendency to find it attractive (which Diamond suggests is an important difference between ethical and non-ethical philosophical nonsense sentences – *ibid*, 161. Cf. *LE* 11, where Wittgenstein classes ethical with religious utterances, and both as nonsense. Yet this nonsensicality he sees as constituting ‘their very essence. For all I wanted to do with them was just to go beyond the world and that is to say beyond significant language’).

The similarity with her account would be limited if one accepts the religious form of life as one that supports such sentences about ‘wonderment’ and the ‘world’, for then these sentences will not be nonsense - except insofar as their

meaning is taken 'on credit', in expectation of the forms of life that will flesh them with determinate sense. This account would underwrite one's language by participation in (or experience of the attraction of participation in) the religious form of life, making space for talk of wonderment, of the world, of the ability to imagine it as non-existent – thus, it would make room for a kind of stepping-out of the world to look at it from the outside. In using such speech one would be, as it were, imaginatively trying to enter the perspective of a God.

There are several reasons why one may reject these sense-giving capacities of the religious form of life. Above all, one might judge, with Cavell, that

we have not mastered, or we have forgotten, or we have distorted, or learned through fragmented models, the forms of life which could make utterances like "God exists" or "God is dead" ...bear all the weight they could carry, express all they could take from us. We do not know the meaning of the words. (Cavell 1979: 172-3)

One might view the religious life as a form now extinct (and yet isn't this what renders Cavell's remark disquieting – the implication that there is just *one* type of forms of life that would support our utterances, that there is such as thing as *the* meaning of such words?); or one which exists outwardly, but not inwardly – a case of forms of life supporting a use of words in which the latter, while not nonsense, are vacuous (and this is to raise up a notion of sincerity or authenticity that beckons towards a positive evaluation of the role of privacy and inwardness in supporting the meaning of one's words).

There is a further reason why one might call into question the sense-supporting capacities of the religious form of life: one might judge that this form of life stands on a par with the philosophical one, in drawing drafts on ordinary language. For, should one choose to speak of a certain kind of imagination and wonderment as religious super-concepts, then their relations to our ordinary concepts must appear mysterious, and it becomes hard to grasp the process of training through which the former are acquired. This is to make a move towards conceding the claim made by some, that religious language leans on ordinary

language for its meaning in the way the secondary sense of a word is parasitic on its primary sense, and that it cannot be considered a separate or autonomous segment functioning according to its own logic². For how does one know whether what one experiences is (to be called) wonderment? Here Wittgenstein would have us focus back on the question 'how would one *teach* the word?'. His insistence on raising this question draws attention to the importance of expression and to the fact that criteria for psychological concepts are bound to outward signs and natural expressions ('the human body is the best picture of the human soul' (*PI* Part II, iv). This is to say that the God's-eye perspective on the world, the perspective outside the world, cannot be attained at least in this respect: that for us, stepping outside the world has to be done and to be *taught* in this one – the perspective outside the world is a perspective *in* this one and *on* this one – and wonderment at the existence of the world has to be expressed in this one. And what would this expression be like? The outward picture of wonderment finds one stopping short - riveted to the spot; staring and observing - mouth agape, eyes wide, roving over the object before him. This is a picture which makes it easy to see, not only how we might acquire the concept of wonderment, but also why it would be appropriate to assimilate utterances of wonderment to utterances of pain in considering both to be - not descriptions of mental states - but rather expressions of an exclamatory nature (as

² Those who take such a view of religious language resist the 'compartmentalisation thesis' (the irredentist view which holds it possible to differentiate language into separate spheres of discourse) and insist on the 'overall universe of discourse of which religious language is a part...religious discourse is not something isolated, sufficient unto itself'; religious terms 'cut across activities; they are at home in religious and non-religious contexts' (Nielsen 1967: 207, 205; this essay is reprinted in the collection *Philosophy of Wittgenstein*, vol. 14: *Aesthetics, Ethics and Religion*, along with a number of other essays bearing on the same question). D.Z. Phillips' 'Religious beliefs and language-games', in the same volume (1970), undertakes a defence of the irredentist/compartmentalisation thesis which draws on the distinctions Wittgenstein discusses in his Lecture between the relative and the absolute, putting religious talk beyond the critical attentions of philosophy. It would be facile to ignore the difficulties involved in talking of *religious* forms of life, or indeed religious *forms of life* (the interpretive questions hanging on the latter concept have not ceased to call forth fresh commentaries); but to remarks already tentative, they can only add to their tentativeness and justify it further.

the verbal expression of pain ‘replaces crying and does not describe it’ (*PI* 244)). And this is certainly a picture that does justice to the experience in question, that is, to the experience of a wonderment that stares and observes and gapes at things and could not be furthest from a distant contemplation, but is in fact worldlier than ever, in the world and yet not quite in it.

Yet of course one must still ask: does this give us the picture of this *particular* kind of wonderment, *wondering at the existence of the world*? For if one stares, what does one stare at? At *what* object? What is there to *see* here which can excite our wonderment? The world is not (called) an object of perception. What makes it possible to speak about wonderment at the world? Where does one learn to pick out such an object?

The difficulties become more apparent if one attempts to look more closely at what happens when one attempts to pick out in language the object of one’s wonderment. One eats the world with his eyes, observes and observes again, as though everything was new, noticing things - as one would like to say - in their ‘thereness’. This is a queer word - one which we have no room for in ordinary speech. ‘There it is...’ ‘Look at all this!’ ‘It’s *there*’.

All these ways of putting the matter are highly paradoxical. To observe a thing’s ‘thereness’ is a thing so occult we may well wonder how we ever learnt how to do it, and seems to be just another way of committing the old and well-worn error of conceiving of existence as a predicate - for to observe a thing’s ‘thereness’ would seem to mean just this (insofar as it means anything): that one observes a thing’s existence (insofar as that means anything). One is observing - noting, remarking - ‘that it is’.

Paradox also haunts the expression ‘x is there’ as a way one might express his wonderment. Here I hesitate to write ‘x is there’ as a statement on which to focus: I do not want to say, ‘All of this is there’ because this would betray the way in which the sense of wonderment attaches to the particular things one can *see* - I do not observe everything at once. Yet to say something more specific such as, ‘This clutch of trees is there’ is also not adequate to the situation, as it is not a particular, individual object that forms the exclusive object of wonderment. It is neither everything nor something in particular. So I am left with no single best statement to

focus on. This, however, may matter little, as *all* of them are haunted by paradox. This is the paradoxical nature which Wittgenstein brings out when he remarks (*PI* 117): 'If, for example, someone says that the sentence "This is here" (saying which he points to an object in front of him) makes sense to him, then he should ask himself in what special circumstances this sentence is actually used. There it does make sense'. (And such circumstances are not entirely out of the reach of imagination. A set of keys has gone missing and you are suddenly overcome by worry about what this might mean – you fly to the drawer where you keep another set of keys to see if that too is missing. When you see it lying in its proper place undisturbed, you sigh in relief and yet also puzzlement: '*This is here.*') The trouble is that the statements which one is tempted to come out with as expressing this amazement – an amazement that is *in* the world, that speaks of convulsively branched trees, of fowl strutting across close-cropped lawns, of the crisp battlements of medieval churches, and not of concatenations of causes and effects and interplanetary distances – are ones for which a sense-giving home-context *can* be found; but what we have in mind is not that kind of sense that is tied to those kinds of circumstances. We would like to say 'look at those trees' without meaning this as an invitation to look, and with a desire to point, not at the trees, but (*but?*) at their existence; to say 'Here I am!' without meaning this as a reply to someone who was looking for us; to say 'there's the sky!' without implying that we just spotted something we hadn't seen before. We *have* of course spotted something, but it is not the sky itself but the quality we ungrammatically call its 'thereness' – the fact that it is there and has been there all along, as in fact we know, and therefore did not need spotting. One's language seems to let one down, even though here we were not attempting to conduct a survey of the world from afar, from a 'before' and an 'outside' – we could even do without such a concept as 'the world' – and in fact could only have noticed this 'thereness' when things acquired the immediacy of touch.

Such efforts reveal our language to be undergoing similar contortions that seem to indicate a collapse into nonsensicality. One might content himself with gesturing back to the religious form of life as the school in which we learn to use the grammar of the concept of 'world'; or one might dismiss such an answer as

simplistic, as failing to take into account the complex ways in which religion builds on nature, or philosophy and religion build into each other, nor of the complex relations – indeed the historical relations – between a sense of wonderment at the world and a sense of the beautiful and the sublime. For isn't this response of rapt staring a response to beauty? And is it an accident that in the same individual we should find the desire (the capacity) to survey the world from a magisterial vantage point placed outside it as highly developed as the capacity to appreciate the value of aesthetic contemplation – as we do in a figure such as Schopenhauer? (To point out the connection which the latter had for Schopenhauer with the nihilistic quest for loss of self – or indeed (what amounts to the same thing), as Nietzsche points out in his *Genealogy*, with the way it counteracts the torment of sexual desire (1996: 84-5) - would not be to remove the singularity of the combination). What is the link between these two – between the capacity to abstract oneself from one's world and the capacity to throw oneself in, between the two concepts of 'spectator' belonging to each?

Short of answering these questions, what one *can* do here is to suggest, even on the basis of these slender remarks, what type of nonsense wonderment is *not*, by showing the relation in which it stands to the kind of astonishment that directs itself at such a fact as that 'we are conscious'. Wittgenstein discusses the latter in *PI* 412, where he speaks of the manner, reminiscent of a logical sleight-of-hand, with which I can come to 'turn my attention in a particular way to my own consciousness, and, astonished, say to myself: THIS is supposed to be produced by a process in the brain! – as it were clutching my own forehead.' The difference between this sort of astonishment and the one discussed above can be characterised in several ways, but most importantly in terms of the notion of pointing/attending and the outward signs of such attending; and in terms of the idea of stability of conviction or believability which Cavell raises in his work.

Wittgenstein's discomfort with the idea that one can be astonished at such a fact as one's being conscious (that one can, as it were, look at one's consciousness, then turn one's gaze to the brain-process, and declare himself unconvinced that *such* a thing could be produced by *such* a thing) centres on its use of the notion of a private ostension, on its presupposition of our ability to do such a thing as 'point' to

an inner object. ('THIS – pointing to one's consciousness - is queer!' 'There is my consciousness!'). But 'what can it mean to speak of "turning my attention on to my own consciousness"?' Wittgenstein asks. And the attempt to answer takes the form of a description of the outward signs of such attending.

I stared fixedly in front of me – but *not* at any particular point or object. My eyes were wide open, the brows not contracted (as they mostly are when I am interested in a particular object). No such interest preceded this gazing. My glance was vacant...

It is not, Wittgenstein suggests, that there are no contexts in which such astonishment would be appropriate, but that the purpose of this utterance here is not the one which is served by those contexts in which it would make sense (as it would, for example, in the context of certain scientific experiments). In such contexts, one's 'look would have been intent, not vacant'.

The astonishment that takes the world as its object is one that is seeing – its gaze is not vacant but intent, one devours the things one sees before him. If such amazement were to be vacuous, it would not be for the vacancy of one's face. One may thus contrast the possibilities of pointing that are available for the expression of astonishment about the surrounding world with those available for pointing to one's consciousness – to the fact of one's being able to point at all (as it were). And one may try holding up both against the notion of stability of conviction that Cavell speaks of in seeking to illuminate the grounds of Wittgenstein's critique of traditional philosophy and the latter's inability to conflict with 'what we believe' because of its departure from the linguistic cadre in which our beliefs are expressed and in which belief can be a possibility. The philosopher's conclusions, Cavell says, 'are not false (and not meaningless) but not *believable* – that is, they do not create the stability of conviction expressed in propositions which are subject (grammatically) to belief'. He cites the example of Hume, whose sceptical conclusions did not survive his exit from his study into the realm of ordinary life and concerns. 'But what kind of "belief" is it whose convincingness fades as soon as we are not explicitly attending to the considerations which led us to it?' (Cavell 1976:

61). This is a worry which Descartes also expressed after concluding the laborious process of his *Meditations* and while preparing himself for a return to the world, when he spoke of his nature as 'such that I cannot fix my mental vision continually on the same thing, so as to keep perceiving it clearly', and thus of his need to ensure that he should carry his conclusions with him and continue to judge something as true 'even if I am no longer attending to the arguments which led me to judge that this is true' (*Fifth Meditation*).

In challenging the use of the term 'belief' to describe what it is that philosophers come up with at the end of their profound reflections, Cavell would have in mind such examples as scepticism about the reality of the external world or about our knowledge of other minds. In undertaking such reflections, one as it were abstracts oneself from the world in order to create (or, 'thereby creating') a space for a question, and what was previously taken for granted is seen as something strange. And one can see how such a critique would extend to the legerdemain with which one (thinks one) abstracts from one's consciousness and points at it as something strange that stands in need of explanation.

But the 'seeing as strange' which such a fantasy of doubt and belief involves makes it possible to bring Cavell's criteria also to bear to the case under discussion, where one wonders at the existence of the external world; for the only difference, one might say (and one which hardly benefits the cause of the latter question) is that, in the former, the space one opens is a space which has a purpose – it is the space of explanation (no matter that this space, and the possibility of explanation, both turn out to be illusive). Both cases could be described as instances of seeing-as-astonishing; in respect to both, the question of their stability can be raised.

The relevance of Cavell's remarks as a criticism of traditional philosophy is illuminated if they are read with the contents of Wittgenstein's *On Certainty* in mind, and what he says there concerning the solids and the fluids in our enquiries, and the notions of a 'world-picture' and a 'river-bed' in which our modes of inquiry are anchored, in which certain kinds of proposition are placed beyond doubt. On its own, there are difficulties in making a criterion for what is a proper belief such a notion as 'stability' ('of conviction'), if this is taken to mean that the 'belief' should be independent from whatever process it originated from (as though, once one

climbs up by the ladder, one *must* be able to throw it away for one to be properly *up*). The greatest difficulty is that it seems to arise from (what Wittgenstein might fault as) an attachment to a certain sense of how things *ought* to be which shies away from looking at the details of how things are. It seems to ignore the ways in which we in fact shift in and out of beliefs and attitudes: a decision that seemed convincing today may look entirely misguided next week when we forget the conversation (and the emotion, the mood in which this was experienced) that was instrumental in our coming to form it. Both what seems right, and what seems true, seem equally subject to the same vicissitudes whose shifts make us so terrifyingly unpredictable to ourselves.

A deeper meditation on such aspects of human nature perhaps belongs more properly to a study of the vices of indecisiveness and inconstancy, and of the (uncontrollable) evil of the fragility of the self. Here it seems important to mention them in order to be able to ask about the stability of the experience which expresses itself as an astonishment that anything at all should exist. And to ask this is to ask how it happens that what was previously not seen as astonishing comes to be seen as such. Any answer will have to take into account Wittgenstein's remark that 'seeing an aspect and imagining are subject to the will. There is such an order as "Imagine *this*", and also: "Now see the figure like *this*"; but not: "Now see this leaf green"' (*PI*, Part II, xi, 182). But unlike such orders, the order to 'see the world's factual existence as wondrous' cannot perhaps be obeyed as instantaneously or naturally - as *suddenly* - and it is perhaps Wittgenstein's stress on the will that could shed light on why this should be so: one comes to speak nonsense - extraordinary language - out of a desire to reach beyond the world; and one's seeing the world as extraordinary (as something that makes no sense) would similarly seem to rest on an exercise of desire or will. It is something that (may) need to be *taught*, and only gradually acquire the stability of a habit of seeing. The instability of this way of seeing would be no greater than the instability that generally characterises one's patterns of willing and desiring; it would share in the instability and unpredictability of the self. (At places, Wittgenstein explicitly invites us to marvel, such as when he says: 'Don't take it as a matter of course, but as a remarkable fact, that pictures and fictitious narratives give us pleasure' (*PI* 524), or again: 'Don't look at it as a matter

of course, but as a most remarkable thing, that the verbs “believe”, “wish”, “try” display all the inflexions possessed by “cut”, “chew”, “run” (*PI*, Part II, x, p162). We should not here ask what would count as obeying, or whether we really know how to fulfil the command when it is first issued: the purpose of such invitations is well served by one’s effort to find ways of understanding them. This is one way one might come to see as astonishing something one did not see before).

Such terms (which only hint at the possible ways of reading the question in the light of Wittgenstein’s discussion of seeing and seeing-as in Part II of the *Investigations*) edge towards a vocabulary that belongs to talk of the nature and qualities of the self, and thus inevitably to talk of its virtues and vices. Any such talk would have to decide how to speak of such a habit of seeing in terms of its value, of its place in an order of goods, whether intellectual or moral – for if, on this account of its sources of instability, this way of seeing is essentially teachable, one has to decide why one would wish to learn it or teach it to another. And to answer that question might help one to understand the significance of such experiences, such ways of seeing, to Wittgenstein himself. For while he might have rejected the notion of an external standpoint on mind, thought, world, it is significant that one of his most sensitive interpreters should attribute to him an appreciation of – and desire to inculcate - the kind of wonderment that may grow from within, when he describes him by saying that

what motivates Wittgenstein to philosophise, what surprises him, is the plain fact that certain creatures have speech at all, that they can say things at all. No doubt it is not clear how one might go about becoming surprised by such a fact. It is like being surprised by the fact that there is such a thing as the world. But I do not say that Wittgenstein’s thoughts demand that you grasp these surprises before you begin studying these thoughts. On the contrary, I believe that such experiences are part of the teaching which those thoughts are meant to produce. (Cavell 1979: 15; cf. *LE*,11, which provides the basis for this attribution).

And *why* should one wish to produce such experiences? What is it that they help one see, and see better? Why would one want to go beyond the world? Which is to ask: Why would one want to take up the religious form of life and its freight of meaning and meaning-to-be? For none of the variant accounts of the conditions of sense for expressions of wonderment which were tried out above shed light on this point: why one should desire to acquire the capacity to wonder. If a striving of the imagination constitutes the condition for one's wonderment at the presence of the world, why should one choose to strive? If the religious form of life is what gives the conditions (perhaps building on and refining our natural response and propensities), then why should one choose to participate in it? Why would one *want* to conceive an interest in looking at the world from the outside – in the possibility of transcendence?³

What I have tried to do here is to explore ways in which it is possible for us to reach certain values by language – to reach expressions of wonderment and, more instrumentally, expressions of imagination. As for the questions: why should one will these experiences? And where do they derive their value? These belong to a different story altogether, although a certain will to value them and a certain belief in their value are presupposed in the effort to secure their expression.

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³ It is such difficulties as these that motivate the denial that religious discourse forms a separate sphere that functions according to its own rules of logic; for a ground sometimes given for this denial is that, were this so, this would make it difficult to see how one might choose to annex the religious segment of language; the motives would have to be internal.

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