

*What we must pass over in silence.  
Silence and the Mystical for  
Wittgenstein and Russell*

*De lo que deberíamos callar.  
El silencio y lo místico en  
Wittgenstein y Russell*

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ABSTRACT

Ludwig Wittgenstein's and Bertrand Russell's views on mysticism show their intense interest in this subject and how they explored its nature and possibilities. Wittgenstein, who had abandoned his Catholic faith as a teenager, became a religious searcher, which began from his fears of the terrors of war. He had enlisted as a soldier to fight for Austro-Hungary during which his terror of war led him to pray to God for refuge. The fortuitous discovery of Leo Tolstoy's book, *The Gospel in Brief*, opened Wittgenstein's mind to the importance of Jesus and led him to value Christianity once more. Russell's interest in mysticism appears in a published article written in 1914 and seems to have been one of curiosity, rather than religious. From a young age, Russell became extremely interested in mathematics and he came to perceive that this subject might be called mathematical mysticism. In both cases, Wittgenstein and Russell shared a keen interest in mysticism, with Wittgenstein concluding in his *Tractatus* that the mystical was transcendent while Russell chose to examine how mysticism and empiricism might complement each other.

KEYWORDS

WAR; MYSTICISM; TRACTATUS; ETHICS; RELIGIOUS EDUCATION.

RESUMEN

Los puntos de vista sobre el misticismo de Ludwig Wittgenstein y Bertrand Russell muestran su intenso interés por esta materia y cómo exploraron su naturaleza y posibilidades. Wittgenstein, quien de adolescente había abandonado su fe católica, se convirtió en un buscador religioso, lo que comenzó desde sus miedos a los terrores de la

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guerra. Se había alistado como soldado para luchar por el Imperio Austrohúngaro, periodo en el que su terror a la guerra le llevó a rezarle a Dios por refugio. El descubrimiento fortuito del libro de León Tolstói *El evangelio abreviado* le abrió la mente a Wittgenstein hacia la importancia de Jesús y le condujo a valorar de nuevo la cristiandad. El interés de Russell por el misticismo aparece en un artículo publicado en 1914 y parece deberse a la curiosidad, más que a la religiosidad. Desde muy joven a Russell le interesaron mucho las matemáticas y llegó a percibir que esto podría entenderse como misticismo matemático. En ambos casos Wittgenstein y Russell compartieron un interés apasionado por el misticismo, con Wittgenstein concluyendo en su *Tractatus* que lo místico era trascendental, mientras que Russell eligió examinar cómo el misticismo y el empirismo se podrían complementar el uno al otro.

#### PALABRAS CLAVE

GUERRA; MISTICISMO; TRACTATUS; ÉTICA; EDUCACIÓN RELIGIOSA.

### I. INTRODUCTION

WITTGENSTEIN'S INTRODUCTION TO MYSTICISM probably began in 1912 when he read William James's book, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. This book is wide-ranging in its topics and would have had an immediate appeal to a young man like Wittgenstein who, at this stage of his life, was eager to become a better person. He had studied engineering in Germany and then at the University of Manchester where, in the latter case, he carried out research on kites in the field of aerodynamics, an area which was then beginning to appeal, including to those who had ambitions to learn to fly. Wittgenstein's interest, however, lay in his determination to understand the mathematical foundations of aerodynamics which led to his interest in logic and when he contacted Bertrand Russell about the latter, Russell, who decided to become his tutor at Trinity College, advised Wittgenstein to study for a degree in Philosophy and Music at Trinity College, Cambridge. Russell discovered that Wittgenstein was an exceptionally gifted student, and they soon became friends discussing as equals problems in logic and philosophy and of life itself, often late into the night. It should also be said that Wittgenstein's choice of music was undoubtedly inspired by his love of music since he came from a musical family and was a gifted pianist, like his brother Paul. It was in 1912 that Wittgenstein wrote enthusiastically to Russell about the effect that William James's book, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, had on him. Here is what he said:

“Whenever I have time now, I read William James’s *Varieties of Religious Experience*. This book does me a lot of good. I don’t mean to say that I will be a saint soon, but I am not sure that it does not improve me a little in a way in which I would like to improve very much.”<sup>1</sup>

Wittgenstein’s interest in “improving” books would later include Tolstoy’s *Gospel in Brief*, *St. Augustine’s Confessions*, Dostoevsky and other Russian writers, *The Writings of St. John of the Cross* and many more. He developed an emotional attachment to their writings and absorbed them into his way of life as welcome influences that he took to heart. As one such text, James’s book stands out as being in claiming his attention with its Lectures on topics such as religion, saintliness, the Reality of the Unseen and many more. The book itself was published in 1902 on foot of its appearance in the same year in the prestigious Gifford Lectures in Edinburgh which its author, William James, was invited to give. The result was that *The Varieties of Religious Experience* quickly became a classic alongside James’s other book, *The Principles of Psychology*. It was structured, as was said, as a Lecture series with topics that must have been read by Wittgenstein. These included James’s Lectures on Religion and Neurology, The Reality of the Unseen, the Sick Soul, Conversion, Saintliness and The Value of Saintliness and Mysticism and Philosophy. These topics were examined in depth by James and no doubt later by Wittgenstein, particularly the Lectures on mysticism and philosophy. Whatever Wittgenstein gleaned from reading James’s Lectures on mysticism was probably to hand or at least in mind when Wittgenstein wrote his *Tractatus* especially its last few pages where Wittgenstein writes about the mystical. One interesting point about Russell’s 1914 article, “Mysticism and Logic” is that though published in 1914, there is no mention that we know as to whether or not Wittgenstein had read or been told about Russell’s article by, for example, its author. This may have been due to Wittgenstein’s absence when he returned to Vienna to fight as a soldier for Austro-Hungary in World War 1. It was likewise with Russell who became an outspoken critic of the war which resulted in his imprisonment as a pacifist and thereby being unable to talk to Wittgenstein until the war was over. When his *Tractatus* was complete, Wittgenstein invited Russell to read the *Tractatus* with a

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<sup>1</sup> See R. B. Goodman, *Wittgenstein and William James*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

view to publication which led Russell to write to his friend, Lady Ottoline, where he mentioned that Wittgenstein had become a mystic in addition to which there were other factors that confirmed that such was the case. Here is what Russell said in his letter:

“I had felt in his book (the *Tractatus*) a flavour of mysticism but was astonished when I found that he has become a complete mystic. He reads such people like Kierkegaard and Angelus Silesius and seriously contemplates becoming a monk. It all started from William James’s *Varieties of Religious Experience* and grew not unnaturally during the winter he had spent alone in Norway before the war when he was nearly mad.”

Russell was obviously startled to find Wittgenstein so changed in outlook i.e., from logic to mysticism and his letter to Lady Ottoline, confirms that other influential factors such as his reading of Soren Kierkegaard and Silesius (the latter being a mystic as we are told in James’s book). In addition, Wittgenstein’s decision to become a monk was fulfilled to some extent after the war when he went to work in a monastery for a couple of weeks but then chose not to continue and instead began training as a teacher of elementary school, a career that he stayed with until the mid-nineteen twenties when he resigned from his teaching post to pursue his fulltime interest as a lecturer in philosophy at Trinity College, Cambridge, a position he held until he retired as Professor of Philosophy in the late 1940’s when he came to Ireland to complete his work on Part 2 of *Philosophical Investigations*.

To return to Russell’s surprise about Wittgenstein’s new interest in mysticism, as Russell said, the latter also identified some telling aspects in Wittgenstein life such as his choice of isolation in Norway before the war and his madness, as additional proofs of Wittgenstein’s state of mind. His need for isolation and his need to be alone in order to think better, as Russell saw it, contributed to his “madness”, a worrying factor in his life to which he admitted in *Culture and Value* in 1946:

“I often fear madness. Have I any reason to assume that this fear does not spring from, so to speak, an optical illusion: of seeing something as an abyss which is close by, when it isn’t.” (CV, 61e)

These disturbing features also signified the complexity of the man and his fragility from a psychological and personal point of view. Such fragility

was very evident in his initial experiences as a soldier for Austro-Hungary in World War 1 for which he had enlisted from a sense of duty and possibly to test his own character in the conflict.

## II. WITTGENSTEIN THE SOLDIER

The experience of war certainly changed Wittgenstein's experience of life in conflict by demonstrating the terror that he wrote so movingly and truthfully about and in which he felt compelled to pray to God for safety and refuge from the conflict and these prayers inevitably led him to take more seriously the importance of religion, as we shall see. His biographer, Brian McGuinness, tells us about Wittgenstein's initial wartime difficulties as the following extracts show:

"Today, very early we abandoned the ship with everything in it... The Russians are on our heels. Have lived through frightful scenes. No sleep for thirty hours, am feeling weak and see no external hope. It is all over with me now, may I die a peaceful death mindful of myself. May I never lose myself."<sup>2</sup>

A short time later, Wittgenstein exclaimed:

"Now I may have an opportunity to be a decent human being because I am faced with death. May the spirit enlighten me." (ibid.)

Another expression of his distress is evident in his concern about duty:

"I do not understand how to do my duty just because it is my duty and reserve all the human being in me for the life of the spirit. I may die in an hour, I may die in two hours, I may die in a month, or not for a few years. I cannot know about it and I cannot do anything for and against it. How then ought I to live in order to hold my own at that moment, to live among the good and the beautiful until life stops of itself."<sup>3</sup>

The above appeals to the spirit no doubt resulted from Wittgenstein's reading of Tolstoy's *Gospel*. McGuinness sums up Wittgenstein's state of mind at this point as follows:

"Generally, before action (Wittgenstein) prays like this: 'God be with me! The spirit be with me.' Sometimes he fears that the spirit has forsaken him or speaks of

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<sup>2</sup> See B. McGuinness, *Wittgenstein: A Life*, p. 221.

<sup>3</sup> See B. McGuinness, *Wittgenstein: A Life*, pp. 221-222.

an icy cold within him. If only he could at once speak properly before things come to a head! He has to struggle to attain the right frame of mind.” (Ibid.)

Despite his fears, Wittgenstein did fight bravely and was officially commended for his courage in action though it seems quite obvious too that his reading of Tolstoy’s *Gospel* helped him considerably in helping him cope with his fears and provided him with the some form of stability. He later told his publisher friend, Ludwig von Ficker, about the effect Tolstoy’s book had on him:

“Are you acquainted with Tolstoy’s *Gospel in Brief*? At its time, this book kept me alive...if you are not acquainted with it, then you cannot imagine what an effect it can have on a person.”

Wittgenstein was captured by the Italians in 1918 and like many soldiers then and since, was deeply traumatised by the conflict and began to consider taking his own life. Three of his brothers some years before had committed suicide, which would seem to highlight very serious difficulties in the Wittgenstein family, but Wittgenstein was fortunate in his friend Paul Engelmann who, by his empathetic and listening approach, helped Wittgenstein to resist his dark inclinations. It was not until the mid-nineteen twenties when he had resigned as a schoolteacher and took up philosophy fully once more that there is no further mention by him of any suicidal tendency. It is worth quoting Wittgenstein’s syllogism about suicide which he wrote about at the end of his *Notebooks* on the 10.1.1917 which read as follows:

“If suicide is allowed then everything is allowed. If anything is not allowed, then suicide is not allowed. This throws light on the nature of ethics, for suicide is, so to speak, the elementary sin. And when one investigates it, it is like investigating mercury vapour in order to comprehend the nature of vapours. Or is even suicide in itself neither good nor evil.” (NB, 91e)

### III. WITTGENSTEIN’S RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

When he looked back at his life in 1950, Wittgenstein stated that

“Life can educate you to ‘believing in God’. And *experiences* too are what does this but not visions, or other sense experiences, which show us the “existence of this

being” but e.g., sufferings of various sorts... Experiences, thoughts, - life can force this concept on us.”<sup>4</sup>

The above passage fits exactly with how Wittgenstein thought about his life at that point and indeed up until his death. Experiences of suffering and thoughts about God, especially God’s judgement, intermingled with his interest in Christianity and provides an interesting example of his wartime discovery that God is in fact the meaning of life. In his *Notebooks 1914-1916* (73e), he wrote the following:

“The meaning of life, i.e., the meaning of the world, we can call God. And connect this with the comparison of God to a father. To pray is to think about the meaning of life.” (N, 73e)

The background to the above statement later led him to tell his former student and friend, Norman Malcolm about an earlier experience that he (Wittgenstein) had as a young man:

“In his youth he had been contemptuous of (religion) but at the age of about twenty-one something had caused a change in him. In Vienna he saw a play that was mediocre drama, but in it one of the characters expressed the thought that no matter what happened in the world nothing could happen to him... Wittgenstein was struck by this stoic thought and for the first time he saw the possibility of religion.”<sup>5</sup>

In fact, Wittgenstein was so taken with this thought that he mentions it once again in his 1929 Lecture on Ethics where he develops the idea further by stating that such an experience of absolute safety was “like saying that we feel safe in the hands of God.”<sup>6</sup> His wartime prayers to God for safety and refuge followed by his reading of Leo Tolstoy’s book, *The Gospel in Brief* and his reading the Bible in its Vulgate Latin form ion to his *Notebook* writings about religion, combined to educate Wittgenstein further about the life of Jesus and the role of God in human life. His friend, Paul Engelmann, also noticed Wittgenstein’s obsession about how he might be judged by God and stated that “at a particularly momentous point” Wittgenstein would exclaim: “When we meet again at the last

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4 CV, p. 97e.

5 See N. Malcolm and P. Winch, *Wittgenstein: A Religious Point of View?*, London: Routledge, 1997, p. 7.

6 See L. Wittgenstein, *Lecture on Ethics*, p. 49.

judgement.” This was accompanied “with an indescribably inward-looking gaze in his eye, his head bowed, the picture of a man stirred to his depths.” This fear or concern about God’s judgement remained with Wittgenstein to the end of his life and notably on April the 15<sup>th</sup> the month of his death, he had this to say about how he might be judged: “God may say to me: ‘I am judging you out of your own mouth. You have shuddered with disgust at your own actions when you have seen them in other people’” (CV, p. 99e). The phrase was probably taken FROM Wittgenstein’s reading of St. Augustine’s *Confessions* when Augustine similarly chastised himself as follows:

“And what was it that I was so willing to excuse, what did I so fiercely condemn if I detected it in others but the very cheating, I practiced myself? If I was caught out and accused of cheating, I was more apt to lose my temper than to admit it?”  
(*Confessions*, p. 31)

Finally, there is Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* with its references to “the mystical” and “what we cannot talk about” which will now be explored in the next section.

#### IV. WITTGENSTEIN AND THE MYSTICAL

Although most of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* is concerned with logic, in his last few pages from propositions 6.371 to 7 (the final proposition in his book) he discusses a number of issues which either lead up to or include “the mystical.” For example, proposition 6.371 states that “the whole modern conception of the world” is that “people today stop at the laws of nature, treating them as something inviolable, just as God and Fate were treated in past ages” (prop. 6.372). More importantly in proposition 6.41, he declares that

“The sense of the world must lie outside... If there is any value that does have value, it must lie outside the whole sphere of what happens and is the case... It must lie outside the world.”

In the past, such statements would be called “metaphysical”, a term disliked by Wittgenstein, though that being said, what lies outside the world appears to be what is in fact mystical. In the next set of propositions, he writes about ethics and the consequences for ethical rewards and punishments, ethics and the will and the happy man. Wittgenstein had



some difficulties with happiness probably due to his demanding friendships and often his sharpness with people. In his *Notebooks 1914-1916* (N. 73e), he says that “the man who is happy is fulfilling the purpose of existence.”<sup>7</sup> Later, he adds to this saying (N.78e): “I keep on coming back to this! Simply the happy life is the good life... The happy life seems to be in some sense more *harmonius* than the unhappy.”<sup>8</sup>

Wittgenstein struggled to be happy yet he was perhaps too intense to allow himself to live a *harmonius* life. Returning to ethics (prop. 6.421), he declares that “It is clear that ethics cannot be put into words. Ethics is transcendental. (Ethics and aesthetics are one and the same.)” When he later became aware of the difficulties in understanding the *Tractatus*, he wrote to von Ficker to tell him that it was not what he (Wittgenstein) had written that was important but what he had *not* written. He then advised von Ficker to read the Preface to the *Tractatus* and then proposition 7 i.e., “what we cannot talk about we must pass over in silence.” These puzzling remarks are summarised by Wittgenstein as signifying that the “aim of the book” was to unravel the linguistic problems in philosophy by drawing “a limit to the ...expression of thoughts” since “the whole sense of the book” might be summed up as follows:

“What can be said at all can be said clearly and what we cannot talk about we must pass over in silence.”<sup>9</sup> Wittgenstein ends his Preface by insisting that what “the value of the book consists (in) is that it shows how little is achieved when these problems (i.e. the problems of philosophy and language) are solved.”<sup>10</sup> It is no wonder that many readers, including Russell himself, found the *Tractatus* so difficult to understand especially since Wittgenstein seems at the end to have dismissed the whole exercise as pointless.

Following on from his views on ethics, he mentions death, telling us in proposition 6.4311:

“Death is not an event in life: we do not live to experience death. If we take eternity to mean not infinite temporal duration but timelessness, then eternal life

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7 See P. Quinn, *Wittgenstein on Thinking, Learning and Teaching*, p. 83.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 84.

9 TLP, p. 3.

10 *Ibid.* p. 4.

belongs to those who live in the present. Our life has no end just as our visual field has no limits.”

He discusses the immortality of the soul describing it as being “as much of a riddle as our present life.” He adds that

“the solution of the riddle of life in space and time lies *outside* space and time” and that “It is not the solution of any problems of natural science that is required.” (prop. 6.4312).

The stage is now set for a more detailed discussion about the “mystical” and what it implies.

#### V. THE MYSTICAL

In the following propositions to which the mystical is central, Wittgenstein examines, so to speak, the importance of the mystical as in proposition 6.44 where he says:

“It is not *how* things are in the world that is mystical, but that it exists.” (prop. 6.44)

The *Tractatus* provides another way of describing what is at issue in prop. 6.45:

“To view the world *sub specie aeterni* (under the auspices of eternity) is to view it as a whole – a limited whole. Feeling the world as a limited whole – it is this that is mystical.”

One might wonder how such a view could ever be possible for any human being, given the difficulties with language and thought that always represents an obstacle for us, according to Wittgenstein. Perhaps a solution to this dilemma is to be found in propositions 6.52 and 6.521:

“We feel that even when all possible scientific questions have been answered, the problems of life remain untouched. Of course, there are then no questions left and this itself is the answer.” (prop. 6.52)

“The solution to the problem of life is seen in the vanishing of the problem.” (6.521)

Proposition 6.522 continues:

“There are indeed things that cannot be put into words. They make themselves manifest. They are what is mystical.”

This manifestation of what “cannot be put into words” requires the following the following approach from philosophers:

“The correct role in philosophy would really be the following: to say nothing except what can be said, i.e. propositions of natural science - i.e. something that has nothing to do with philosophy. (prop. 6.53)

Wittgenstein then states that:

“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.) He must transcend these propositions and then he will see the world aright.” (prop. 6.54)

The objective to see the world in the right way occurs by accepting that its meaning lies outside the world altogether and hence our limitations of language and thought. Yet, our human dilemma is, as he tells us in his 1929 Lecture on Ethics, is that we are constantly attempting by our very nature striving to find reach what is beyond us. Running up against the walls of our language cage is what we wish to do and seemingly we never desist from trying. The Jesuit theologian Bernard Lonergan put it this way viz. that our philosophical dilemmas can only be resolved theologically. One might also say that what is called the Dark Night of the Soul, according to St. John of the Cross, is resolved by supernatural means. Hence, once again, the implicit and seemingly persistent context of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* which is, whether one likes it or not, a religious one that is Christian in nature.

## VI. WITTGENSTEIN’S 1929 LECTURE ON ETHICS

Some seven years after Russell had successfully arranged for Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* to be published in English, Wittgenstein accepted an invitation at Trinity College Cambridge to give a Lecture on Ethics during which he added to what had already been said by him in his *Tractatus*. The essential aim of this Lecture was to try to understand the distinction between religious metaphors and non-religious or “ordinary” ones. Yet, since the former, according to Wittgenstein, appears to “run up against” the boundaries of language and in Wittgenstein’s words are “nonsensical”. How then should religious metaphors be understood? If one says, for example,

that “He was a lion in battle” or that a particular woman has a “queenly” appearance, we have at least two examples that relate to aspects of people whom we can envisage whereas to talk about “God” or a “loving God” for many people today would make no sense whatsoever. Wittgenstein then argues that although “it is a paradox that an experience, a fact should seem to have supernatural value”<sup>11</sup>, this is because “we cannot express what we want to express and that all that we say about the absolute miraculous remains nonsense”. Yet, contrary to what he has just stated, Wittgenstein himself expresses his personal answer when he tells us that

“at once I see clearly, as it were in a flash of light, not only that no description that I can think of would describe what I mean by ‘absolute value’, but I would reject every significant description that anybody could suggest, *ab initio*, on the ground of its significance. The realisation that our efforts to try to go beyond the world is to go beyond significant language because ‘this running up against the walls of our cage is perfectly, absolutely, hopeless.’”<sup>12</sup>

This is not the end of the matter, however, as far as Wittgenstein is concerned because:

“Since ethics which springs from the desire to say something about the ultimate meaning of life... is still a document of the tendency in the human mind which I personally cannot help respecting deeply and I would not for my life ridicule it.”<sup>13</sup>

The very personal view that Wittgenstein now subscribes may seem unacceptable to some and perhaps many but for him it is clearly personally convincing and in being so, is not that dissimilar from a profession of faith. In a more general sense, the instinct of those who are not satisfied with the apparent “nonsensical” nature of religious metaphors, overcomes or transcends the seemingly paradoxical nature of the latter’s claims. The message here by Wittgenstein is to accept the paradoxical as the key to what lies beyond our rational conclusions, which, from a religious point of view, is also the message of Jesus of Nazareth whose parables and stories constantly demand such faith. In the same way, though perhaps more abstractly, Wittgenstein’s insistence on the silence as a pre-requisite for respecting the “mystical” which no doubt represents that about which we

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11 L. Wittgenstein, *Lecture on Ethics*, p. 49.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 51.

13 *Ibid.*

cannot speak, demonstrates Wittgenstein's religious acceptance of what will show itself to us as and when this happens. In that sense what was described in the 1960's by Vatican 2 as "reading the signs of the times" may well signify one of the answers to any questions we may have about "the mystical."

## VII. BERTRAND RUSSELL ON THE TRACTATUS

In Bertrand Russell' acceptance of Wittgenstein's invitation to read the *Tractatus* with a view to its publication in English there was one specific condition stated by the publishers i.e., that Russell should write an Introduction to the book. This imprimatur no doubt was to highlight the importance of the *Tractatus* by invoking the status of Russell so as to render any difficulties (of which they were many) in understanding Wittgenstein's book by fellow philosophers. In the event, Russell agreed although his Introduction does involve some critical comment, a sample of which may be seen below which is an extract taken from the last few lines of his Introduction:

"As one with a long experience of the difficulties of logic and of the deceptiveness of theories which seem irrefutable, I find myself unable to be sure of the rightness of a theory, merely on the ground that I cannot see any point on which it is wrong. But to have constructed a theory of logic which is not at any point obviously wrong is to have achieved a work of extraordinary difficulty and importance. This merit, in my opinion, belongs to Mr. Wittgenstein's book, and makes it one that no serious philosopher can afford to ignore."<sup>14</sup> (*Tractatus*, p. xxii)

On the face of it, the above conclusion seems fair enough, *post hoc*, although at the time, the Introduction annoyed Wittgenstein himself. However, given Wittgenstein's own change of mind later when he realised and admitted that he had made some mistakes in the *Tractatus*, he decided to rectify these in his later work, *Philosophical Investigation*. The limitations that he discovered were added to by suggestions from his friends Frank Ramsey and P. Straffa and included the limitations of the *Tractatus* in its view of language. He admitted in the Preface to *Philosophical Investigations* that he had "been forced to recognize (such) grave mistakes in what I wrote in that first book."<sup>15</sup> While working on the *Investigations*, Wittgenstein's

<sup>14</sup> L. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, p. xxii.

<sup>15</sup> See the Preface to L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, pp. 3-4.

“new ideas” on language initiated his new understanding of the flexibility of meaning and speech in a much broader way than he had hitherto understood. That being said, he never totally abandoned his interest in the *Tractatus* and, for a while, seriously considered publishing

“those old thoughts and the new ones together: that the latter could be seen in the right light only by contrast with and against the background of my old way of thinking.”<sup>16</sup>

An example of his new thinking about language is indicated on page 15 of the *Investigations* where he describes his language-game which included “Giving orders and obeying them, reporting an event, asking, thanking, cursing, greeting, praying”. He also tells us how interesting it was “to compare the multiplicity of the tools in language and of the ways they are used, the multiplicity of kinds of word and sentence, with what logicians have said about the structure of language. (Including the author of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*.)” Despite the latter admission, he argued that the *Tractatus* should find its place (as the logic of language) in the “multiplicity of the tools in language and the ways they are used.” One important point about the ongoing links between the *Tractatus* and *Philosophical Investigations* is that it was further extended later to include Part 2 of the *Investigations* which Wittgenstein wrote he wrote when he came to Ireland in the late 1940’s following his retirement as Professor of Philosophy at Trinity College, Cambridge.

Such additions also confirm the advice given elsewhere by the Platonic Socrates when he stated his preference for dialogue rather than reading a book on the grounds that though a book’s content is fixed, dialogue and speech constitute an on-going process that maps the continuity of philosophical exchanges. Many writers and readers, including in philosophy, would agree with Plato’s view, especially if they have similarly experienced the incompleteness of their own written work that they may need to re-write part of or even write another book on, as Wittgenstein discovered for himself with *Philosophical Investigations*. In conclusion, one might add that although “the mystical” was no longer an issue in the *Investigations*, which has a totally new “feel” to it in terms, for example, of his language-game theory, his *Culture and Value* which was edited and published after his

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16 Ibid., p. iii.

death by his friend G.H. von Wright, contains to its very end, some very significant and important references to God and judgement and to how important it is to lovingly believe in Christ's Resurrection. Such interests confirm the lesser known and hidden aspects of Wittgenstein's religious life, which are indeed a revelation in themselves.

### VIII. BERTRAND RUSSELL ON MYSTICISM

By contrast, Bertrand Russell's views on mysticism originated in his love for Geometry to which he was introduced at the age of twelve by his older brother, Frank. He was also attracted to mathematics and came to see it as possessing a mystical property, which he called mathematical mysticism. According to his *History of Western Philosophy*, he valued it as being "one of the great events in my life, as dazzling as first love. I had not imagined that it contained anything so delicious in the world."<sup>17</sup>

More importantly for him, it became

"the chief source of the belief in eternal and exact truth as well as belonging in a super-sensible intelligible world... which suggests... that all exact reasoning applies to the ideal as opposed to sensible objects; it is natural to go further and argue that thought is nobler than sense, and the objects of thought more real than those of sense-perception."

Reason and an unchanging and eternal world with access to truth constituted the kind of desirable qualities that he sought and together with his discovery of Plato, demonstrated Russell's need to live in a stable environment defined by ideals of nobility and "eternal and exact truth... and a form of thought that was more real than... self-perception". Russell's personal reasons for seeking out such qualities lay deep within his own childhood during which apparently his mother had an affair with Bertrand's tutor and, in addition, his grandmother was constantly belittling and criticising his mother. These disturbing events appear to have had a long-lasting effect on the young boy who, perhaps inevitably, later sought a more stable way of life. In his essay, *Why I took to Philosophy*, he again praises Plato's importance as a guide to "an unchanging world of ideas of which the world presented to our senses is an imperfect copy."<sup>18</sup> He

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<sup>17</sup> R. Monk, *Bertrand Russell, Mathematics, Dreams and Nightmares*, p. 3.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

disliked the real world, he tells us, “and sought refuge in a timeless world, without change or decay of will-o-the-wisp progress.”<sup>19</sup> In his *Portraits from Memory*, Russell expands further on the nature of mathematics<sup>20</sup>:

“Mathematics, according to this doctrine (i.e., the Platonic teaching), deals with the world of ideas and has in consequence an exactness and perfection which is absent from the everyday world. This kind of mathematical mysticism, which Plato derived from Pythagoras, appealed to me.”

Pythagoras was a mystic who favoured mathematics and music as essential structures of reality although the latter’s belief in the migration of the soul from the body does not seem to be mentioned by Russell nor is Plato’s dialogue, *Phaedo*, which argues for such separation to allow for the soul’s freedom to reach the ideal world of the gods and divinity. Life without the body is Plato’s ideal in the *Phaedo* and that point, as far as we know, is not mentioned by Russell either.

#### IX. RUSSELL ON MYSTICISM AND LOGIC

Russell’s classic article on Mysticism and Logic provides the most useful and very detailed account of mysticism, which was published in 1914. In it, he describes what he calls “two very different impulses” i.e., that of mysticism on the one hand and science on the other. Both have the potential, he says, to function independently of one another and are capable of pursuing the search for clarity and certainty. Russell states that both would benefit even more as follows:

“Metaphysics<sup>21</sup> or the attempt to conceive the world as a whole by means of thought<sup>22</sup>, has been developed from the first, by the union and conflict of two very different impulses, the one urging men towards mysticism, the other urging them towards science. Some men have achieved greatness through one of these impulses alone ...but the greatest men who have been philosophers have felt the need of both science and mysticism: the attempt to, and what always must be, for

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19 Cf. B. Russell, *My Philosophical Development*, p. 210. See also R. Monk, *Bertrand Russell, Mathematics, Dreams and Nightmares*, p. 8.

20 B. Russell, *Portraits from Memory*, pp. 7-8.

21 Russell’s definition of metaphysics (which would have probably been favoured by Wittgenstein himself) opposes that of Aristotle whose concept of being qua being exists above and beyond any other form of existing entities.

22 The phrase “conceiving the world as a whole by means of thought” poses a question as to whether Wittgenstein took his cue from Russell when he used the above phrase.



all its arduous uncertainty, make philosophy to some minds greater than science or religion.”<sup>23</sup>

Here we find the beginnings of the kind of problems that arose for Russell as he tried to fit together but also to separate, mysticism, science and philosophy adding religion to the mix. He sums up his view rather poetically by describing the kind of person for whom:

“The facts of science, as they appeared to him, fed the flame in his soul, and in its light he saw the depths of the world by the reflection of his own dancing swiftly penetrating fire, in such a nature, we see the true union of the mystic and the man of science – the highest eminence, I think, that is possible to achieve in the world of thought.”<sup>24</sup>

Russell’s attempts to lay out such a tableaux would seem to belong to the realm of wishful thinking and, as we know, he chose science as best suited to judge the truth of mysticism presumably implicitly including such non-scientific disciplines as art, mythology, theology, music and the like – some very arrogant and ill-informed omissions indeed. To envisage non-scientific disciplines as being under the remit of adjudication by science and not to be judged by their own experts such as in music and mythology etc. is surely out of date in these more enlightened times. However, Russell is correct in saying that

“Mystical philosophy in all ages and in all parts of the world, is characterised by certain beliefs which are illustrated by the doctrines we have been considering. Here is first the belief in insight as against discursive analytic knowledge: the belief in a way of wisdom, sudden, penetrating, coercive which contrasted with the slow and fallible study of outward appearance by a science relying wholly upon the senses.”<sup>25</sup>

The doctrines mentioned presumably refer once again to those of Plato and the pre-Socratics. His comparison between belief in insight and his description of “a science relying wholly upon the senses” seems correct though contradictory when one takes into account his mentioned preference elsewhere for empirical science.

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23 See B. Russell, *Mysticism and Logic including a Free Man’s Worship*, p. 20.

24 Ibid. Wittgenstein would have disagreed with this claim, given his view of science as having nothing whatsoever to say about philosophy.

25 Ibid., p. 26.

## X. RUSSELL AND MYSTIC INSIGHT

Russell's conclusion about mystic insight is interesting:

“The mystic insight begins with a sense of a mystery unveiled, of a hidden wisdom now suddenly become certain beyond the possibility of a doubt. The sense of certainty and revelation comes earlier than any definite belief. The definite belief at which mystics arrive are the result of reflection upon the inarticulate experience gained in the moment of insight.”<sup>26</sup>

No one can argue about the validity of what is said above and Russell goes on to describe what may then happen:

“First and most direct outcome of the moment of illumination is the possibility of a way of knowledge which may be called revelation or insight or intuition, as contrasted with sense, reason, and analysis, which are regarded as blind guides leading to the morass of illusion. Closely connected with this belief is the conception of a Reality. This Reality is regarded with an admiration often amounting to worship; it is to be felt always and everywhere close at hand, thinly veiled by the shows of sense, ready for the receptive mind, to shine in its glory even through the apparent folly and wickedness of Man.”<sup>27</sup>

Russell is surely correct once again about many of these claims where he seems to have had something of an insider's view or even to have possibly had some experience of mysticism, from the excitement engendered by his mathematical mysticism earlier mentioned. Whatever the answer, there are undoubtedly some similarities between Russell and Wittgenstein with, for example, both agreeing that mystics have a belief in unity while denying the reality of time and perceiving evil as an illusion. Russell also states:

“From the mystical way of feeling which does not seem to be attainable in any other manner which therefore is to be commended as an attitude towards life (but) not as a creed about the world.”<sup>28</sup>

Russell argues that “the metaphysical creed...(is) a mistaken outcome of the emotion...although inspirer of whatever is best in Man.”<sup>29</sup> In addition, he believed that even though scientific truth is the antithesis of the mystic's “swift certainty”, (it) may be fostered and nourished by “that

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26 *Ibid.*, p. 27.

27 *Ibid.*, pp. 27-28.

28 *Ibid.*

29 *Ibid.*, p. 111.

very spirit of reverence in which mysticism lives and moves.”<sup>30</sup> He does strike a note of warning, however, that any form of

“Insight, untested and unsupported, is an insufficient guarantee of truth, in spite of the fact that much of the most important truth is first suggested by its means.”<sup>31</sup>

This is where the contentious issue about the need for scientific verification vis-à-vis truth enters the arena once again with its potential for the kind of confusion earlier mentioned.

## XI. CONCLUSION

While it is obvious that the implicit and sometimes explicit religious tone in Wittgenstein’s approach to mysticism contrasts greatly with that of Russell, there are some interesting legacies from both thinkers that are very significant. One of Russell’s most significant legacies is represented by his strength of character and courage when facing down public opinion to his own detriment as an academic was his very ethical stance in rejecting the need for war and later still, in the same spirit, co-founding the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND). Both positions were courageous, admirable and necessary as indeed they still remain and they define Russell as a prophet in his time and ours, given the way the world is today both nationally and globally. In the case of Wittgenstein, his intensely impressive understanding of the limitations of language and its constant efforts to distort our thinking our thinking is also salutary and necessary. His insistence on the mystical nature of the unsayable and therefore unthinkable, which requires a disposition of silence, awe and respect, reminds us that the religious and Christian aspects of Wittgenstein’s life of observation and comment greatly shaped his personal journey. One may safely say that in today’s world, he represents one model of how to be human in so far as those who struggle today in whatever ways with the meaning of life, might be somehow inspired by what he had to offer.

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30 Ibid. pp. 29-30.

31 Ibid.

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