

The Eloquent Sounds of Silence: Contrasting Intimations of the Ineffable*

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*«They may build,
But I will tear down»*

(MALACHI 1: 4)

*«Αὐτοὶ οἰκοδομήσουσιν,
καὶ ἐγὼ καταστρέψω»*

(ΜΑΛΑΧΙΑΣ 1: 4)

Ludwig Wittgenstein's bearing on the study of religion, and in particular over the tensed subject of the possible meaningfulness of religious language, in the wake of philosophy's "linguistic turn," has been enormous and with good reason: no other figure in modern intellectual history has ever exercised a greater impact on the still on-going debate concerning the validity and limits of theological discourse – of the long discredited, by most modern accounts, Christian kerygma that flagrantly offends reigning assumptions of conceptual legitimacy, seeking as it does to utter the unspeakable, to give voice precisely to what by nature is deemed as Ineffable. Nor can I personally think of any other philosophical figure in the previous century of a similar intellectual magnitude who has sparked so much puzzlement and controversy, or who has been subject to as many radically diverse interpretations (with the exception of Jacques Derrida, perhaps), as Wittgenstein. For, while other towering figures of analytic philosophy, such as Willard Quine and Hillary Putnam, have been almost equally as in-

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strumental in laying the groundwork for the modern, concurrent conceptualization of the world, mind and all meaning, their insights, like those of Wilfrid Sellars and Bertrand Russell before them, are sufficiently lucid as to be confidently restated and incorporated in one's perspective with no sense of ambivalence. Not so with Wittgenstein: the rather cryptic ulterior motives belying his legendary, and ostensibly simplistic, linguistic analysis, are far from immediately apparent, and are further shrouded by hints of mysticism, all of which gives this intriguing philosopher an almost prophetic authority that spawns reverence mixed with controversy.

As a result of his irresistible intellectual charm, Wittgenstein's views have been appropriated by the remotest of patrons: Theologians, atheists, positivists, and skeptics have all claimed him their own, each seeing his condensed but penetrating remarks as more or less corroborating their respective standpoints and ideas. One such example sporting an espousal of Wittgenstein's semantics from a believer's point of view, is the informed and elegantly relayed lecture given before this audience tonight by Michael Grant. Prof. Grant finds Wittgenstein helpful to Christian theology, for a number of reasons that are shared by influential theologians like George Lindbeck¹ and like-minded theist philosophers such as D. Z. Phillips,² another major interpreter of Wittgenstein. Phillips is

1. LINDBECK G., *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: The Westminster Press, 1984).

2. PHILLIPS D. Z., *Wittgenstein and Religion* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), p. xviii. As is well-known, Lindbeck's ground-breaking "cultural-linguistic" model shares much with Phillips' internalism: his thesis may perhaps best be epitomized as an effort to redirect theological attention from the traditional (and vague) question "is Christianity true?" which has acutely confronted all religious claims since the Enlightenment and throughout all modernity, to the more self-contained "What is *Christian*?" As a result of this paradigm shift, says Lindbeck, theologians are at once freer to pursue their agendas undisturbed by realist worries over the objective status of their allegations. Yet contrary to some initial expectations, Phillips is highly critical of Lindbeck's internalism, admonishing it for "being still in the grip of the very confusion he hopes to eradicate." See PHILLIPS, *Faith After Foundationalism* (London & New York: Routledge, 1988), p. 203. His critique of Lindbeck extends over four chapters (15-18) in this work. "What we have seen is that Lindbeck," says Phillips in a wrap-up comment, "while half-realizing that theological doctrines are not descriptions of an object given independently of them, cannot free himself from the tempting and prestigious grammar of that relation, a grammar drawn, in the main, from our talk of physical objects" (ibid, p. 205). By this Phillips simply means that Lindbeck drops two foundationalist theories only to embrace another, of his

known for having creatively explored ways through which the Austrian neo-nominalist's insights can assist theologians in avoiding pointless and vacuous debates, chiefly by steering a more authentically Christian middle course past pseudo-problems such as the so-called "reality" of God or the rational justification of religious belief. Grant clearly follows suit in his own positive assessment of Wittgenstein, similarly structured along the lines of a more or less fideist³ blueprint permissive of a multitude of fresh venues for meaningful theological expression. For one, I find plenty in Grant's and Phillips' account of Wittgenstein's work that is perceptive and useful to sincere and self-critical theologians, and I intend to state these fine points of agreement between my reading of Wittgenstein and theirs. Be that as it may, I should specify right from the outset that, in the main, I have progressively reached an (admittedly tentative and provisional, to be sure), understanding of the Viennese philosopher's true purposes that is essentially at variance with theologically harmonizing interpretations

own making, instead of carrying out Wittgenstein's anti-theoretical method of conceptual clarification to the end. "What is not realized," according to Phillips, "is that what we need is not another, better, theory to succeed foundationalism, but no theory at all. Instead of calling my remarks *Faith After Foundationalism*, they could equally well have been called *Against Theory*" (ibid, p. 195).

3. As a viewpoint, fideism attempts to shield religious beliefs and statements from external criticism (e.g. from the well-known charge that they constitute intrinsically non-falsifiable doctrines) by holding, in the words of Prof. Walter H. Capps, that "the reasons believers give for their religious beliefs presuppose the context from within such beliefs issue," to the effect that "there can be no appeal to an 'objective reality' outside the world of discourse or a 'form of life' to which religious affirmations belong." Thus, from the fideist perspective, as Capps further indicates, quoting Phillips (an articulate spokesman for fideism), "one can only give a satisfactory account of religious beliefs if one pays attention to the roles they play in people's lives," preferably as a participant of this or that religious "language-game," in Wittgenstein's sense of this term. CAPPS, *Religious Studies: The Making of a Discipline* (Fortress Press: Minneapolis, 1995), p. 257. In my view, fideism is by no means altogether wrong in pointing attention to the inner logic of religious beliefs and practices; on the whole, however, I must say that I find it an unsustainable standpoint: not only because of its arbitrary appeal to "autonomous criteria of rationality," which blinds adherents to the real possibility of there being "ongoing but irrational forms of life" (as philosopher of religion Kai Nielsen has perceptively pointed out), but because I believe as well that no faith merits the status of soundness and responsibility unless it sees itself as accountable to the world – and there's no better way for beliefs and ideologies to do so than by having their ontological - existential consequences and implications openly pronounced, so as to ensure that these are publicly tested and, as a result thereof, *revised*.

of these purposes, as adumbrated in the line of Lindbeck, Phillips, and Grant; in my account of Wittgenstein's overall project ("early" and "subsequent" alike), his ulterior intentions are, by all appearances, unsuitable and even obstructive to the free and proper exercise of Christian theology, for reasons that I am now obligated to state and clarify, to the limited extent afforded me in this brief response to this conference's key lecture.

To put my thesis in a nutshell, I have come to view Wittgenstein's core motif (in partial divergence⁴ from "orthodox" accounts of it)⁵ as a Kantian spin-off

4. The Kantian connection in Wittgenstein's work is vehemently denied by "orthodox" reconstructions of his thought, mainly on the basis of Wittgenstein's explicit raised de-transcendentalizing intentions, which are further augmented by his unsystematic, decentralized view of semantics. See, for example, COVEOS C., *Όλα Κυφορούνται μες στη Γλώσσα* (Athens: Kardamitsas, 1996), pp. 319-22 and esp. 330-32. Personally, while concurring with Coveos' analysis of Wittgenstein's overall work as being wholly devoid of transcendental arguments, I find myself closer to Anthony Thiselton's and Ray Monk's portrayal of Wittgenstein's personality and ideas as fitting in more sensibly within a Kantian intellectual framework. My contention is that Wittgenstein's iconoclast look on metaphysics comprises a de-transcendentalized, or *naturalized* (i.e., semanticized), version of Kantianism, heir as it is to the latter's moralism, acute cognitive immanentism, and dualisms (such as the strict separation of *facts* from *values*). See THISELTON A. C., *The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description, With Special Reference to Heidegger, Bultmann, Gadamer, and Wittgenstein* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmann, 1980), pp. 359-60, 362; MONK R., *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius* (London: Penguin, 1991), pp. 25-6. Aside from Wittgenstein's controversial Kantianism, there is intriguing evidence for the presence of unmistakable Kantian traces in positivist and post-positivist linguistic non-representationalism as a whole: see ROMANOS G., *Quine and Analytic Philosophy: The Language of Language* (Cambridge, MA: M.I.T. Press, 1983), pp. 23-4. More recently, Robert Hanna has also accounted for Kant's transcendental idealism as the unsung initiator of the semantic turn in modern philosophy, in *Kant and the Foundations of Analytic Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

5. In general, so-called "orthodox" interpreters of Wittgenstein's work, such as Costis Coveos and the late Burton Dreben, maintain the continuity of Wittgenstein's thought against the habitual division of it into two distinct phases, seeing as they do but a single, though subsequently broadened (by the time of the *Philosophical Investigations*) intention running throughout his work: this is identified as a strong anti-theoretical attitude, also described in terms of a "therapeutic" project, bent on making all philosophical (i.e., metaphysical) problems vanish by being exposed as nonsensical questions unworthy of serious consideration, the philosophical equivalents of neurosis and mental cramp; for when rephrased in more ordinary and mundane ways, with the help of linguistic analysis, these selfsame problems are shown for what they really are, namely the products of linguistic confusion and misuse. Moreover, "orthodox" interpreters cite as Wittgenstein's chief incentive the attainment of spiritual tranquility (PI 133) and, in

designed, like Kant's marvelous First *Critique*, in order to "abolish knowledge, to make room for faith;"⁶ a faith purified from idle speculation and metaphysical nonsense not by the construction of a newer dogmatic system, but "by closing up the sources of error,"⁷ as Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* and its subsequent enlargement, the *Philosophical Investigations*, in turn would be setting out to do – except that, where Wittgenstein was concerned, the major impetus, as opposed to Kant's pietist influences, appears to have been the Judaic mindset, largely known for its total reliance on revealed truth and its near-absence, if not hostility for, creative theological speculation. But private motivation aside, the objective in both cases is strikingly similar: not only do we find the same demarcation of *facts* from *values* in the corpuses of both thinkers (so crucial a wedge for the demotion of traditional metaphysics, and, by many accounts, one of the principle hallmarks of Modernity), but we are further produced with a firm and impenetrable ban (of a different sort for each thinker, to be sure) on the natural human inclination to voice the ineffable and lend verbal expression to what is "higher": "Sophistication consists in the attempt to deduce the knowledge of

Dreben's account at least, a "religious" interest in ensuring the progressive removal of all metaphysical constructs as idolatrous usurpers of divine revelation. Thus, contrary to the popular misperception, what Wittgenstein ("earlier" or "later" for that matter) opted for as he drew our attention to the irreducible multiplicity of language-games and word usage, was tranquil *silence*, not the indefinite prolongation of dialogue, as writers like Richard Rorty would have it. See Coveos, pp. 370-4. Cf. KOETHE J., *The Continuity of Wittgenstein's Thought* (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 1996).

For the flipside to Wittgenstein's portrayal as an anti-theoretical, non-constructive iconoclast, see PUTNAM H., *Pragmatism: An Open Question* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999). Putnam offers a contrasting reading of Wittgenstein's intentions as being sufficiently pluralistic and dialogical, and not half as steeped in positivism, as many commentators would like to think: "I hope to combat the prevalent idea," Putnam says, "that Wittgenstein is simply an 'end of philosophy' philosopher, i.e. the idea that the whole 'message' of the later philosophy of Wittgenstein is that philosophy is analogous to a neurosis, and that the purpose of Wittgenstein's work is simply to enable us to 'stop doing philosophy'." (p. 27). Putnam's chief argument to that effect is that "[u]nderstanding a language game is sharing a form of life. And forms of life cannot be described in fixed positivistic meta-language" (ibid, p. 48; his italics). Koethe also admits the possibility of some real constructive philosophical theorizing in Wittgenstein's later work, as complementary to the "therapeutic" or "destructive" task (p. 49), which he spells out in more detail in pp. 64-71.

6. KANT I., "Preface to the Second Edition," *The Critique of Pure Reason*, Vasilis Politis, ed. (London & Vermont: Everyman, 1996), p. 21 (B XXIX).

7. Ibid., p. 22 (B XXXI).

God ... by rational necessity and to apprehend and prove its necessity,” wrote Kant. “There is no need for this,” he further warned readers in anticipation of present-day anti-theoretical theologians, since “[i]n religion the knowledge of God is properly based on faith alone ... Sophistication in religious matters is a dangerous thing ... A speculative basis is a very weak foundation for religion.”⁸

This solemn attitude of reverential forbearance in the face of the numinous, imbued as it is with a sternly mandated immanentism that brooks no confident metaphysical pretensions, certainly deserves our attention; for, if anything, it inculcates a much-needed sense of the infinite qualitative difference between the human and the divine spheres, of God’s ungraspable alterity so keenly (and just as famously) insisted upon by Kierkegaard. The bottom line of this credo, which posits an unbridgeable asymmetry between the finite and infinite realms, amounts basically to the enforcement of an all-encompassing epistemological humility, in the form of a categorical injunction to renounce all hopes of ever obtaining a panoramic overview of history or the world from the outside, so to speak, as independent and objective realities *in themselves*. Nowadays, of course (in our long de-transcendentalized, post-theological milieu), the restriction of all meaningful discourse to our common, finite system of concepts is justified not on account of an elusive “mystical,” as Wittgenstein (and Kant before him) alluded, but in recognition of the insurmountable limits that are intrinsic to our human mode of cognition: it is the binding thrust of these linguistic boundaries to significant thought, as opposed to the remoteness and inaccessibility of a supposedly “noumenal” realm, that in fact precludes the attainment of a “general concept of reality,” let alone the omniscient, non-human viewpoint, which pre-Kantian (which is to say, pre-critical) metaphysicians have routinely striven for.

Quite obviously, this modern prevalence of immanent conditions of meaning in contemporary public discourse has discredited all statements, doctrines, and beliefs pressing against the outer boundaries of human experience, including theological propositions. Interestingly, however, the self-same anti-metaphysical sentiment that appears to have propelled the widespread endorsement of built-in limits to sensible utterance, has been occasionally entertained by theolo-

8. KANT I., *Lectures on Ethics*, Louis Infield, trans. (New York : Harper & Row Publishers, 1963), p. 87.

gians as well, if only to stress the futility and the arrogance of metaphysical dabbles in view of God's sovereignty – and in a sense evoking Kant's and Wittgenstein's original intentions, at that. It will be remembered that the theological counterpart to this positivistic standpoint is most notably exemplified in the work of Karl Barth, who set out, in unmistakably Kantian undertones, to denounce all systems of thought as vain and idolatrous human constructs: In his own words, "Whenever thou sayest 'I' or 'we' or 'it is so,' thou dost exchange the glory of the incorruptible for the sake of the corruptible ... thou dost imprison and encyst the truth ... by some pretended *insight of vision* ... thou dost manifest thyself ignorant of His secret ... Even negation of this world and perception of the paradox of life; even submission to the judgment of God and waiting upon Him; even the behavior of the 'Biblical Man' – if these proceed from the adoption of a point of view, of a method, of a system, or of a particular kind of behavior, by which men distinguish themselves from other men – are no more than the righteousness of men."⁹ And as he adds elsewhere, "The Moment' of the movement of men by God is beyond men, it cannot be enclosed in a system or a method or a 'way' ... The law of the Spirit of Life is the point of view – which is no point of view! – by which all human boasting is excluded."¹⁰

Barth's (and Kant's) recommendation to people of faith to forsake "human boasting" in the knowledge of religious matters, first and foremost by resisting the temptation to assume the role of God's mouthpiece (an unambiguously dangerous and self-serving conceit, admittedly) seems to me strongly reminiscent of Wittgenstein's inscribed confession that the *Tractatus* was written "to the [restoration of] the glory of God." In what manner does Wittgenstein safeguard the divine prerogative of ultimate judgments? Succinctly put, by setting up a justly celebrated system of linguistic analysis based on rigorous new developments in logic and semantics, whose upshot is a set of assertability-conditions mandating a total verbal confinement to empirical propositions – in all amounting to his solemn, categorical injunction that one "be silent" concerning what one cannot speak about (*Tractatus*, 7): meaning, silent about anything that purports to exceed or transcend the outer boundaries of human life and experience.

9. BARTH K., *The Epistle to the Romans*, Second Chapter (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press), pp. 56-7.

10. *Ibid*, Third Chapter, p. 110.

In light of this imperative, we would more likely not be remiss in assuming that, where faith was concerned, Wittgenstein's anti-theoretical predilections favored the (fideistic?) retreat to the introvert piety of a "wordless religion."¹¹ There is sufficient textual evidence to support this view: as Wittgenstein once wrote, "I can well imagine a religion in which there are no doctrinal propositions, in which there is thus no talking. Obviously, the essence of religion cannot have anything to do with the fact that there is talking, or rather: when people talk, then this itself is part of a religious act and not a theory. Thus it also does not matter at all if the words used are true or false or nonsense. In religion talking is not *metaphorical* either; for otherwise it would have to be possible to say the same things in prose."¹²

Clearly, there is a lot in the foregoing statement, a telling witness to Wittgenstein's deep faith in the benefit of silence as the foremost, if not exclusively appropriate, means of doing justice to what is "higher,"¹³ to suggest a strong resemblance with theological apophaticism. Needless to say, of course, the suspected (or hoped for) common ground should hardly seem surprising, considering that such deliberate exercises of speechlessness out of respect for the transcendent have a long and universal history in religious phenomenology. Accordingly, as one might expect, this fundamental recourse to verbal pause forms an intrinsic aspect of Christian spirituality as well, not strictly limited to its mystical quarters: time and again, having laboriously grappled with God's inscrutable mysteries, eastern and western Church writers ended up recommending prayerful silence as a much more reliable spiritual resort than free-floating speculation, given the notorious propensity of human imagination for deceptive illusions. On that note, St. Isaac the Syrian seems to have been right on the mark when he penned a famously pertinent remark: "Speech," he held, "is the organ of this present world. Silence [on the other hand] is a mystery of the world to come." (Ascetical Homily 65 (66)). There is no question that divine truths, assuming of course that they are to be taken at face value, cannot for the most part be prepositionally sustained without suffering an anthropomorphic diminution;

11. This is how P. Engelmann describes Wittgenstein's aim in *Letters from Ludwig Wittgenstein with a Memoir* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1967), p. 135.

12. MONK, p. 305.

13. Inclusive of which are, besides religion, ethical and aesthetic judgments as well.

hence, alternative, non-verbal ways of theological expression must often be sought to convey the most paradoxical and, sometimes, deeply antinomic articles of faith that contradict and indeed affront human reason. Here we would do well to remember that Wittgenstein's key distinction between *depicting* and *saying*, or rather between *making manifest* as opposed to making assertions, has been consistently upheld in the iconography of the Eastern Church, as an integral instrument of its witness: there is no need to belabor here the well-established liturgical and theological function of Byzantine icons, so far removed from the mere decorative role of western Christian art. In view of this fact, then, I feel that Orthodox theologians should be forgiven wondering whether their Church's organic conflation of *lex orandi* and *lex credendi*, which made possible the iconic and hymnal renditions of Church doctrine in the first place (prior to its secondary consolidation in creedal manuals and formulas), would have satisfied Wittgenstein, as a gratifying alternative to the propositional essentialism and metaphysical thickness of far too many theological formulas, particularly those of a Scholastic stamp.

Now, apart from the way of silence (the eventual suspension of linguistic representation with a view to preventing the objectification of God), one of the most salient aspects of patristic apophaticism, very strongly reminiscent of Wittgenstein's own view of language, is its staunch denial of an "essence of reference:" in other words, its emphasis on linguistic contingency, so crucial a point to both linguistic analysis and post-structuralist deconstruction, and in full accord with Ferdinand de Saussure's decentralized theory of semantics. From the theological end, nowhere is this more obviously portrayed than in the intricate and prolonged debate between the Cappadocian Fathers and the 2nd generation Arians Eunomius and Aetius. In brief terms, the Cappadocians mounted a skeptical attack on Eunomius' theory of thick linguistic representation so as to refute his system of necessary reference, whose purpose was to establish the ontological disjunction of Christ the Son from God the Father. To demonstrate the reasonableness of their neo-Arian agenda, Aetius and Eunomius proclaimed the essence of God to be comprehensible and thus nameable, as a prolegomenon to isolating one particular concept ('ungenerate') as the distinctive ontological trait of the Father alone (*not shared by the Son*), by virtue of which the Father's unique divinity, and in effect monotheism too, would be consistently preserved. In other words, neo-Arians expressed confidence in the prospect of attaining a conceptual access to the divine substance, thanks to a presumed

isomorphism between reality and language and a kin theory of necessary overlap between signifiers and signifieds.¹⁴

It was this twofold picture of language that was forcefully challenged by the Cappadocians, mainly on the basis of an alternative theory postulating linguistic conventionalism and, perhaps more importantly, a compelling acknowledgment of our cognitive and conceptual incompleteness. But the Cappadocians were not alone in disputing linguistic essentialism and its inordinate coextension of the real with the knowable; like Thomas Aquinas in the West,¹⁵ Gregory Palamas would also uphold semantic contingency and the ontological priority of the world over all human conceptions of it some centuries later, even if in a different context: “and should there be agreement among ourselves as regards things, I care not about words ... since for us the truth lies not in sayings but in things ... so that our task is not aimed at words, but the whole strife focuses [instead] on things.”¹⁶ Here it is worth mentioning that Palamas’ view of linguistic reference as a conventional affair throughout follows consistently the trajectory of

14. Eunomius’ extant corpus is available in VAGGIONE R. P., *Eunomius: The Extant Works* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987). Following the appearance of Basil’s *Contra Eunomium* (364CE), Eunomius produced his *Apologia Apologiae*, a point by point refutation of Basil’s work preserved only in fragmented form in Gregory of Nyssa’s own subsequent *Contra Eunomium* (381-384CE).

15. Thomas Aquinas addressed the question of meaningful signification from within the broader angle of the problem of universals, in his “Commentary on Aristotle’s *On Interpretation*.” His view of language is expectedly pre-modern, in concurrence with Aristotle’s triadic hierarchy (16a in Aristotle’s work), where mental concepts or “affections of the soul” are placed at the top, followed by oral speech and, lastly, by words and signs, invented as a necessary resort for manifesting one’s “conceptions to those distant in place and [those] who will come to be in future time.” “Commentary...,” Lesson 2, 2 in Thomas Aquinas *Selected Writings*, Ralph McInerny, trans. & ed. (London: Penguin, 1998), p. 460. Like Palamas and other eastern Church writers, Aquinas follows Aristotle’s lead in rejecting the necessary correspondence between signifiers and signifieds: “What naturally signifies is the same with all men, but the signification of writing and speech, with which we are concerned, is not the same with all peoples. No one ever doubted this with respect to writing, of which not only the reason for signifying is conventional but whose very formation is due to art. Speech [on the other hand] is formed naturally and for that reason some wondered if it did not signify naturally. But Aristotle here determines by the similitude of writing that just as it is not the same among all, so neither is speech. Clearly, then, neither writing nor speech signifies naturally, but by human institution.” (“Commentary...”, Lesson 2, 8 in *ibid*, p. 462).

16. GREGORY PALAMAS, “The Synodal Tome” (1351), in KARMIRIS I., *The Dogmatic and Symbolic Monuments of the Orthodox Catholic Church* (in Greek) Vol. I (Athens: 1960), p. 703.

Greek patristic thought in its theory of language. For example, among the earlier Church Fathers, Gregory Nazianzus held that “for us the truth lies not in names but in things,”¹⁷ while for Athanasius words similarly “do not impact on nature [i.e., on what exists]; but nature rather changes the words as it draws them unto itself. Nor do words precede essences, but essences come first, and second to these come the words.”¹⁸ Regrettably, even a furtive survey of the intricacy of the exchanged arguments from both sides of the Eunomian debate is absolutely unfeasible in the extremely limited space of the present paper; suffice it to say simply that the debate is highly instructive and relevant nowadays, for it clearly illustrates the radical incompatibility of the apophatic standpoint with all forms of linguistic essentialism – an intellectual feat that in all likelihood should be hailed by most modern linguists and philosophers of language with approval.

Beyond its core relevance for the narrowly technical field of semantics, moreover, a more promising use of apophaticism concerns the broader emancipating repercussions that it may possibly entail for the study of physical and human realities, if purchased as a counter-reductionist principle of open-ended inquiry. So suggests, at any rate, a well-known Orthodox scholar in his recent re-statement of the apophatic view and its potential range, wherein he submits that when applied to epistemology and the social sciences, apophasis may work as an intellectual counterforce to dogmatism in general. This is because “[d]efinitions, whether positive or negative, are at best only approximations; they have limited validity, and becoming aware of these limitations constitutes the authentic core of apophaticism.”¹⁹ The assumption behind this ostensibly trivial statement is that an initial endorsement of the conventional, non-fixed institution of definitions and names must also impact on one’s conception of the real, endowing it with an irreducible depth. Beginning, then, with the contingent nature of reference and, more to the point, the ontological (extra-semantic) disparity between signifiers and signifieds, apophaticism deduces the fallible, tentative status of knowledge and the need of “dispensing with ultimate formulas,” of main-

17. Oration 29, 13: PG 36, 92.

18. PG 26, 152C.

19. BEGZOS M. P., “Apophaticism in the Theology of the Eastern Church: The Modern Critical Function of a Traditional Theory,” *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review*, Vol. 41, No. 4 (1996) 327-357, p. 356.

taining “an openness to reality and a freedom over against systems, conceptions and final theories or dogmas.”²⁰

Apophaticism’s open-ended approach to reality, as adumbrated in the foregoing passage, scores an extra point of agreement with those neo-nominalists committed to debarring traditional attempts to extract the One, True description of Reality from the rubble of so-called appearances. As is well-known, Wittgenstein’s views have been used, sometimes inordinately (most notably in the radical case of “incommensurability,” an extreme form of epistemic relativism)²¹ as a block to ideology, and a tool for undercutting the enduring, pre-critical tendency to construct grand metaphysical systems with pretensions to establishing a “final vocabulary,” be that religious, scientific, cultural, political or what have you. Richard Rorty’s neo-pragmatism stands as a watershed in this concerted effort to free humanity from the dogmatic essentialism of procrustean ideologies, by making truth an intra-linguistic affair, relative to the historicity and contingency of human discourses.²² Here the analogy with apophati-

20. Ibid.

21. The epistemological principle of “incommensurability” holds that different, and especially rival, scientific theories or frameworks of thought are so self-contained as to defy any degree of overlap and comparison. See BERNSTEIN R. J., *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics, and Praxis* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), pp. 79-108. Initially a concept of milder origins and intentions debuting in THOMAS KUHN’s classic *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, “incommensurability” has been blatantly appropriated as a bulwark of relativism by social constructivism, a branch of postmodern epistemology whose adherents tend to absorb knowledge in sociology, assuming as they do that all scientific description and observation are, contrary to mainstream belief, theory (and interests)-laden. From this maxim a further, more radical, assumption is sometimes drawn: that far from objectively mirroring facts, all prevailing scientific beliefs are but the ideological gloss of power structures.

22. Beginning with his groundbreaking *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), Rorty has striven to rid philosophy and especially public discourse from the rancorous grip of “platonic,” or extra-societal, categories, in alertness to the dangers of social stagnation and oppression inherent in grounding normativity to transcendence and all kinds of “revealed” truths. His chosen means of lambasting “Platonism” consists of an idiosyncratic version of neo-pragmatism, featuring an overblown (and highly contestable) non-representational holism, which pushed Quinean immanentism to its limits in rendering truth a self-contained intra-linguistic affair: “To say that truth is out there is simply to say that where there are no sentences there is no truth, that sentences are elements of human languages, and that human languages are human creations.” RORTY R., *Essays on Heidegger and Others: Philosophical Papers Vol. II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 58-59.

cism admittedly collapses, because apophaticism would never affirm that “truth” is but a euphemism for transient intercultural exchange and agreement (especially in the sense of Rorty’s all-out nominalist stipulation that “there is nothing beyond vocabularies”);²³ nor would apophaticism so immanentize true reference as to render it intra-linguistic throughout – on the contrary! But granting this crucial point of divergence²⁴ between apophaticism and neo-nominalism, there’s no doubt that both share a kindred commitment to undercut in-temperate hopes of attaining God’s impossible viewpoint, determined as they are to foil in their distinct ways, the perennially tempting metaphysical folly of essentialism.

All this amply suggests that the Christian witness to the world, especially nowadays, cannot afford to assume a pose of imperviousness to the techniques of linguistic analysis and the impressive advances recently made in contemporary philosophy of language, including Wittgenstein’s. Judging by the content and style of post World War II theology, this lesson has long ago been taken to heart by most serious theologians, particularly in the Anglo-Saxon world; so much so, in fact, that one would be hard pressed indeed to cite a single modern theologian seriously disputing that theology can certainly learn and benefit from the valuable tools for curbing semantic confusion and verbal excesses, so aptly championed by the makers of 20th century neo-nominalism. Prepositional clarity aside, I would further add that a naïve return to a simplistic representational

23. RORTY R., “Private Irony and Liberal Hope,” in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 80.

24. The eschatological nature of the Christian faith may be singled out as a further point of discord between eastern Orthodox apophaticism and neo-nominalism: for, after all, apophaticism, as a Christian offspring, may be chided for introducing an eschatological bias to epistemology (e.g. in the form of a linear-cumulative understanding of history and knowledge with hints of determinism), whereas neo-nominalism is more akin to the Copernican paradigm in disallowing for privileged (i.e., ultimate) coordinates or vantage points in linguistic reference and ontology, thanks to its theoretical backbone, non-representationalism and its holist theory of truth. However, it must be kept in mind that apophaticism, much like linguistic analysis, is essentially a technique, not a doctrine. As such, we would submit that apophaticism is worthy of serious consideration as an epistemological principle, for it can suggest ways of ontological reference that are innocent of essentialism and stifling reifications of meaning, though not at the cost of downsizing reality to the limited range of human conceptuality, as Thomas Nagel has warned. For more on the subject, see Part I of my book *The Reductive Veil: Post-Kantian Non-Representationalism versus Apophatic Realism* (Katerini: Epektasis, 2005).

view of language is neither feasible nor desirable nowadays, even among realist theologians. For, apart from the systematic impairment (if not demise, for many) inflicted upon Cartesian epistemology and its pre-modern philosophy of consciousness, no adequate Christian anthropology can afford to ignore the intrinsic bond between language and thought so forcefully brought to the fore by modern linguistics; much less can theology fail to appreciate the qualitative difference which language makes to any cultural aspect that is distinctively *human*. As Paul Tillich once put it, “Man is free in so far as he has language. With his language, he has universals which liberate him from bondage to the concrete situation to which even the highest animals are subjected.”²⁵

This heightened appreciation of language, often to the point of an all-out cognitive (even moral) *a priori*, has sometimes spawned an eager espousal of so-called theories of linguistic holism and non-representationalism among earnest theologians, inclining many of them to see opportunity rather than harm in the endorsement of a thoroughly conceptualized view of reality and meaning. John Milbank, for example, one of the most promising theologians at work in the West today, has recently affirmed that “the post-modern embracing of a radical linguisticity, far from being a ‘problem’ for traditional Christianity, has always been secretly promoted by it.”²⁶ At bottom, Milbank and like-minded scholars such as Fergus Kerr,²⁷ D.Z. Phillips, Anthony Thiselton²⁸ and Prof. Grant, have more or less appropriated the popular, widespread assessment of Wittgenstein’s so-called “later” period in terms of a “hermeneutical turn,” as encompassing a relinquishment of his earlier realist proclivities (tersely expounded in the *Tractatus*) and a gradual endorsement of a pluralistic and contextualist understanding of language and meaning with unmistakably dialogical implications. Based on that appealing assumption, they welcome the Wittgensteinian concept of “language games” for its promise to validate theological discourse as an au-

25. Paul Tillich: *Theologian of the Boundaries*, Mark Kline, ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), p. 191.

26. MILBANK J., *The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language, Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1997), p. 85.

27. KERR F., *Theology After Wittgenstein* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1986).

28. THISELTON A. C., *The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description, With Special Reference to Heidegger, Bultmann, Gadamer and Wittgenstein* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 1980).

tonomous and self – sustained vocabulary – henceforth insulating it from such mighty empiricist challenges as A.J. Ayer’s²⁹ criticism of metaphysics or the celebrated “verifiability” principle (a reversed precursor to Popper’s “falsifiability,” widely popularized by Anthony Flew.³⁰ Prof. Grant’s eloquent use of the gestalt-switch potency of linguistic ambivalence, so elaborately raised in the *Investigations*, clearly intends to justify the uprightness, within appropriate limits, to be sure, of certain religious or metaphysical propositions, when meaning and reference become contextual.

These are all commendable efforts, sharply contributing to our growing appreciation of Wittgenstein’s unique relevance for a wide array of theoretical disciplines, including theology. A more nuanced exposition of the promising theological consequences and ramifications of Wittgenstein’s insights, in particular, would require the length of a monograph, and even so it would be far from conclusive. That much said, my purpose here, as was stated at the beginning of this paper, is narrower and patently less correlational: specifically, it is to point attention to what I consider as the fundamental discord between Wittgensteinian semantics and apophaticism, on the level of goals and background ontology. In my view, it is imperative that the disparity be identified and spelled out, because an uncritical application of the strictures of linguistic immanence, whether Wittgensteinian or Quinean, on Christian theology is only bound to hamstring the latter to the point of total impairment, bereaving it thereby of the capacity (and the mandate) to serve as a continuous verbal witness to the incarnation.

Naturally (and in spite of my aforementioned thesis), many a philosophically-oriented theologian, the present writer included, would still long for the prospect of a fruitful engagement with Wittgenstein’s profound remarks on meaning and reference, given their resemblance with the patristic approach to language-use, as outlined in the foregoing paragraphs. In actual fact, however, the hoped-for resemblance between Wittgenstein’s picture of language and apophaticism is unfortunately very limited, but in fact highly misleading. For the sake of clarity, let me briefly recall the most pivotal aspect of this important

29. AYER A.J., *Language, Truth and Logic* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976); see also AYER, *The Central Questions of Philosophy* (Harmondsworth, 1976).

30. See his paper “Theology and Falsification,” in *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, Anthony Flew and Alasdair MacIntyre, eds. (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1964), pp. 96-130.

principle of theological epistemology, as it might shed some light on, and hopefully dispel, the frequent misconstrual of Wittgenstein as an “apophatic” thinker, at least in the Christian sense. Apophaticism has been commonly designated as the acknowledgment that “the truth is never exhausted in its verbal formulation,” chiefly on account of the (commonsensical?) admission that the world is larger than we can ever know, perhaps even conceive of. This viewpoint, reflecting as it does a pre-modern semantics, is succinctly conveyed in a famous saying by Basil of Caesaria: “All theological utterance is less than the thought of him who speaks it, and less than the intention of him who is conducting the discussion, because language is somehow inadequate to represent our thoughts.”³¹

Basil’s dictum captures the essence of the subtle but significant disparity between apophaticism and Wittgenstein’s semantics: for as opposed to its pre-modern antecedent, contemporary linguistics, which informs the eliminative agenda of the most influential philosophers of language and mind in our time, assumes the co-extension of world, meaning and language that also makes up the backbone of Wittgenstein’s thought, early and late alike (“The limits of my language mean the limits of my world,” *Tractatus* 5,6; cf. *Philosophical Investigations* 329, 337, 338, 339, 342 and esp. 344, for his firm belief in the intrinsic intertwinement of language and meaningful thought). This major insight (1), shared almost to the point by neo-pragmatists like Quine and Rorty, the so-called champions of “linguacentrism,”³² is further complemented by two consequent points: (2) the promotion of a *descriptive*, as opposed to an *explanatory* role of language, and, lastly, (3) a decentralized picture of language, as a contingently structured activity bereft of the traditional, pre-modern remnant of fixed prepositional reference and language-free signifieds. An interesting equivalent of this tripartite account of linguistic reference and meaning is Quine’s self-styled “semantic ascent,” an enhanced and *empiricised* version of Rudolf

31. (Letter VII.44).

32. The term was coined by GEORGE A., “On Washing the Fur Without Wetting It: Quine, Carnap, and Analycity,” *Mind*, Vol. 109, No. 433 (January, 2000): 1-24, as a catchword illustrative of neo-pragmatism’s “intra-linguistic immanentism,” a post-positivist standpoint whose forerunner may have been (for all I am aware of) Wilfrid Sellars’ revolutionized empiricism in its repudiation of the realist myth of “Unconceptualized Reality.”

Carnap's reduction of reality to linguistic frameworks, in all aiming to render the concept of "truth" an immanent property, solely internal to human languages and theories.³³

What did Wittgenstein hope to accomplish by forging an isomorphic unity of language, mind, and world? As was briefly stated earlier, his long-term purpose was to establish an austere immanentist blueprint, strengthened by a method of linguistic analysis, which should effectively debar the sanguine concoction of broad metaphysical and theological syntheses in the traditional, systematic fashion. More simply put, Wittgenstein's intention was to discourage the creation of free-floating, transcendent accounts of reality, of the sort promising deeper metaphysical explanations beyond the empirical level that ordinary language can sustain. Obviously, assuming language to be co-extensive with the world places a decisive delimitation on the acceptable usage of language, at once curbing the validity of its non-empirical references. A further incisive step in the consolidation of linguistic immanentism is the rejection of the possibility of *wordless thought* and private languages. For, by rejecting the pre-modern notion of "meaning" as a non-empirical, self-contained entity existing antecedently to or independently from its verbal expression, one also undercuts the possibility of semantic ideality or reified, context-free prepositional meanings (perhaps in moderate anticipation of Derrida's exclusion of "transcendental signifieds"). And no sooner are these tossed out than metaphysical questions follow suit, given the habitual reliance of metaphysical or *extrahuman* beliefs on the subjective elevation of words, concepts, and signs to the ideal status of a single, *absolute* meaning, from which ultimate conclusions about reality can supposedly be drawn. Notice, too, that in this nominalist perspective, mind and meaning stand or fall together: as Putnam once put the matter, "meaning is always related to mind;" in other words, "[t]o mean something was ... just to have it in mind," since "the whole aim of mentalism [decisively undercut by philosophers like Wittgenstein and Quine, and more recently by Daniel Dennett] is to identify the meaning of a word with something that is in the brain/mind of every speaker who knows how to use the word."³⁴

33. QUINE W., *Word and Object* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1960), pp. 270-76.

34. PUTNAM H., *Representation and Reality* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1988), pp. 19-24.

In this paper, we would be hard-pressed for space to rehearse the concerted objections to this comprehensive picture encompassing language, world, and mind/meaning as a seamless unity. Taking this limitation into consideration, we could risk sketching a perhaps unduly condensed version of the main line of criticism leveled against this watertight intra-linguistic model, by drawing attention to its own covert metaphysical constitution – so keenly suggested by its implicit ontological commitments that are assumed rather than demonstrated, and misleadingly clad in naturalistic apparel. Reasoning along those lines, realist critics like Michele Marsonet have raised a valid criticism by taking “linguacentrism” to task for insidiously rendering all existents relative to our human viewpoint.³⁵ Thomas Nagel rounds off aptly this critical look on modern linguistic immanentism by dubbing it a new form of idealism in disguise, on account of its attempting, out of lack of humility, to “cut the universe down to size”: “the view that what exists in the widest sense must be identified with what is thinkable [and sayable] by us in the widest sense—is an attempt to cut the universe down to size.”³⁶ Both critics have shed light on the unmistakable common denominator shared by linguistic immanentism and traditional idealism, as formulated by Bishop Berkeley. If their criticism holds water, neo-nominalism forms a naturalized variant of Berkeley’s traditional idealism of the mind, assuming as it does that “what there is is what we can think about or conceive of, or what we or our descendants could come to be able to think about – and that this is necessarily true because the idea of something that we could not think about or conceive makes no sense.”³⁷ Linguistic idealists, in other words, rather than making the old metaphysical claim that “to exist is to be perceived,” submit instead that the real coincides necessarily with what is a possible object of thought *for us*, much like Kant had insisted in his rejection of knowledge-free objects, where nothing could qualify as an “object” at all, unless it conformed to the human, spatial-temporal mode of perception. In this manner, neo-nominalists have exchanged an earlier form of anthropocentrism, which visualized all existents as ontologi-

35. MARSONET M., “Linguistic Idealism in Analytic Philosophy of the Twentieth Century,” in *Current Issues in Idealism*, Paul Coates & Daniel D. Hutto, eds. (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1996), pp. 114-15, 117-18.

36. NAGEL T., *The View from Nowhere* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 109.

37. NAGEL, p. 90.

cally or phenomenally³⁸ dependent upon human perception, for a naturalized version of it bent on subjecting all permissible (i.e., meaningful) ontological reference to the possibility of human conceptualization.

In the interests of common-sense realism, which urges the recognition of both our cognitive finitude and our embeddedness in a larger-than-human world, Nagel insists that “[a]ny conception of the world must include some acknowledgment of its own incompleteness.”³⁹ In a similar vein, theological apophaticism keeps the notions of reality and truth incommensurate with the possibility of their conceptual grasp and domestication, in a manner that renders prohibitive its correlation with Wittgenstein’s joint (semantic/ontological) horizon. More to the point, apophysis staunchly rejects the offhand conceptualization of ontology characteristic of English-speaking philosophy in the aftermath of its celebrated “linguistic turn.” It is to be expected, of course, that the very likelihood of intrinsically *unpatterned* layers of reality will appear intolerable to the neo-nominalist mind, so used as it is to domesticating all existents by framing them in humanly intelligible coordinates. But such an instinctive uneasiness in the face of transcendent, semantic-free ontological possibilities, while justifiable as a reasonable precaution against notional license and abuse (in the form, say, of a retreat to an esoteric, “infallible” idiom), may well prove counter-productive, a hopeless impediment even to open-minded enquiry, if

38. In passing, it might be useful to recall the *ontological* dimension involved in the transcendental completion of Berkeley’s idealism by Kant, if only as an illustration and a reminder that every epistemology must, in fact, tacitly rest on some minimal background ontology. As is well-known, the Kantian response to Hume’s nihilist assault on induction consisted not only in the grounding of phenomena in *a priori* conditions of perception but also in retaining the ontological identity of the phenomena with their noumenal aspect. This apposite interjection of the things-in-themselves (*Critique of Pure Reason*, B45, B59) in the Kantian effort to “save the appearances” suggests that more than mere “appearances” are at stake in setting up a robust epistemology: for his part, Kant felt compelled to affirm the independent existence of the world (ibid, B42-43, B44, A28, A36) so as to round off his idealism with sufficient ontological solidity and endurance, in view of its likely peril to collapse into an untenable theoretical construct (of the Berkeleyan sort, for example). Sometimes, these inevitable ontological underpinnings, though largely unapparent, may entail strong metaphysical implications for their host theories of knowledge, notwithstanding the latter’s claims to an ordinary physicalism or a naturalized empiricism, as in the cases of Wittgenstein, Quine, Davidson, Rorty, etc.

39. NAGEL, p. 108.

hardened to the point of dogma; because probing the unknown, as the history of science has shown, requires something more than the willingness for revision and self-correction, invaluable as that may be for scholarly and intellectual growth; open-minded enquiry essentially involves the humbling, and no doubt disquieting, awareness of a potential cognitive finitude, a readiness to entertain the likelihood of running up against a qualitatively impregnable territory, intrinsically resistant to all human apprehension.

It is indeed one thing to resist the tempting metaphysical folly of essentialism, of seeking to attain God's impossible viewpoint; it is quite another to delimit meaningful discourse (and, by extension, ontology) to what is humanly perceivable alone. For the consistent pursuance of an overtly physicalist empiricism has a way of misleading us into mistaking a reassuring, but potentially partial and reductive, picture of reality for the whole. Certainly, as we become increasingly aware of undomesticated and formerly unimaginable terrains, such as the Freudian unconscious or the radically indeterminate quantum realm of subatomic particles, the tapestry of reality unfolds before us as larger and far deeper than may be humanly fathomable, and as a result thereof resistant to conceptualization, at least in its entirety. But if structurally elusive layers of reality such as those just mentioned are not, in principle, readily dismissed as unreal or unworthy of attention on account of defying conceptual domestication, it must be surmised that the finite range of human perception cannot be the true yardstick by which to measure reality at large, as Wittgenstein and most⁴⁰ neo-pragmatists would have us believe. As soon as the closet metaphysical presumptions of linguistic internalism are meticulously disclosed, one can begin to see how the

40. Neo-pragmatist Hillary Putnam takes pains to set his own "internal realism" apart from the linguistic internalism of Quine, Davidson, and Rorty, concered as he is that "once truth goes 'immanent,' there is no reason [as Rorty maintains] to privilege science over literature, or over ethics, aesthetics, and so forth." PUTNAM, "A Comparison of Something with Something Else," in *Words & Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), p. 343. Disturbed about the prospects of Quinean holism, as these are reflected in its commitment to a radical inscrutability of reference, Putnam presents the otherwise scientific Quine as standing closer to Rorty and even Derrida than Quine himself would care to admit, and certainly on opposite ends from theorists like Karl Popper, for whom "there is, [as] for Quine there is not, an interpreter-independent fact of the matter as to whether an arbitrary sentence is true" (ibid, p. 342). For a more "conservative" sketch of Quine, more assuring of the robustness of his empiricism, see DANCY J., *Introduction to Contemporary Epistemology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985), pp. 100-1.

apophatic asymmetry, far from comprising a defeatist skepticism or a programmatic hindrance to knowledge, serves rather the cause of knowledge – broadening as it does our sense of the real (if only at the cost of permitting the occasional emergence of metaphysical nonsense), while putting human reason into critical perspective, above all by keeping reason’s aspiring reach disproportionate to its cognitive grasp. The opposite, one might say, would signal the captivity to a reductive, Protagorean worldview, spiritually impoverished in its innocence of potentially radical forms of otherness that may end up discarded because they resist their thorough conceptualization.

Talk about conceptual captivity is very apposite here: for if language is the House of Being, as Heidegger held, sometimes it can become its prison as well. It is against the backdrop of these linguistic fetters to being that apophaticism’s essential contribution can become apparent. It is my contention that apophaticism, as the counter-paradigm to all forms of linguistic non-representationalism, pulls off a major philosophical feat: it *liberates ontology from epistemology* by making room for conceptual inscrutability as an intrinsic part of an existent’s unconditional ontological integrity, thereby allowing beings to manifest themselves in ways other than those expected of them. To the extent that beings, and especially persons, are spared the hegemony of conceptual or other categorization,⁴¹ ontology is restored to its pre-Kantian rigor, and truth is made identical with freedom.

Permit me to conclude my address with a brief note on Wittgenstein’s impact on Christian metaphysics, apart from the question of his possible equivalence or incongruity with apophaticism. It seems to the present writer that no Christian viewpoint consistently upholding the miracle of the incarnation, as the unique meeting point of heaven and earth in the person of Christ, would go very far along with immanentism, whether of the earlier, Kantian-transcendental ver-

41. A reasonable rejoinder to worries of conceptual captivity and categorization facing personhood in rigidly communal settings informed by Wittgenstein’s insights would immediately invoke the indeterminacy of reference in Wittgenstein’s semantics as its foremost attribute. Here, the very absence of fixed terms should prevent the ossification of descriptions. Even so, the problem of self-determination persists in every worldview grounded on the thesis of a total immersion in linguistic frameworks, when these are premised as both inescapable and communally prescribed, enough so, at any rate, as to exclude private and especially aberrant idioms.

sion, or of the more contemporary, linguistic sort; for in either case the incarnation is cancelled, God fails to touch the world except only in metaphor, and moralism (as the likeliest surrogate for metaphysics) looms large: As Wittgenstein himself emphatically declared, summing up the fundamentals of his world-view, “The sense of the world must lie outside the world ... in it no value exists ... How things exist in the world is a matter of complete indifference for what is higher. God does not reveal himself in the world” (*Tractatus* 6.41, 6.432). Evidently, as Connor Cunningham comments, “such a transcendent cannot really make a difference to finite reality, and therefore is far removed from the transcendentals of active religions, with their myths, allegories and creeds.”⁴²

Cunningham’s observation hints at a broader and increasingly arduous concern engaging contemporary theology with unprecedented intensity; this is the problem of its public mission and role, at the present critical juncture involving two serious challenges: an obstinate pluralism, on one hand, hatched amid a deeply skeptical milieu (in itself a healthy and constructive challenge for faith), and the alarming temptation of a resurgent religious fundamentalism, on the other. In response to this question, let me briefly contend that Christian theology must, in the last analysis, reserve for itself the liberty to make positive statements, notwithstanding its doxological and iconic function (in its traditional resort to the “semantics” of pictorial representation as a non-prepositional means of conveying doctrine, much as Wittgenstein would prefer), and despite the theological appreciation of silence as an indispensable source of spiritual nourishment. True to its nature as a verbal witness to the incarnation, Christian theology must be continuously planted in contemporary culture as a seed, if it is to relate to life and make a positive impact on it. Another way of putting this would be to say that theologians should find the courage to exercise the required hermeneutical creativity in order to draw the existential consequences of the Christian faith, and thus make theology relevant and meaningful anew. Failing to do so is liable to reduce theology to the dim vision of a sectarian and fleshless ideology, which as such would be unaccountable to the world, far from its true ontological and existential magnitude and the intentions of the Church Fathers, the majority of whom made ample (if also critical) use of the best intellectual re-

42. CUNNINGHAM C., “Wittgenstein After Theology,” in *Radical Orthodoxy*, John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock and Graham Ward, eds. (London & New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 86.

sources available in their time. After all, Christianity came of age intellectually in a cultural context cross-fertilized by Hebraic and Greek categories of thought, and so stands as a point of intersection between revelation and reason. Given its complementary lineage, then, Christian theology need not, as indeed it must not, shy away from dialogue with contemporary social and philosophical challenges as these are publicly voiced in the broader intellectual scene.

Such an agenda, allow me to reiterate for a final time, is foreign to Wittgenstein's religious proclivities, despite the well-meaning reconstruction of his later ideas as emboldening dialogue and open-ended conversation. Consequently, for all the important insights theologians can draw from Wittgenstein's linguistic analysis or from post-structuralist deconstruction, for that matter (sometimes cited as a rival, far more radical technique of destabilizing fixed meaning), I fear that a consistent theological pursuance of these techniques is only bound to stifle theology, given their non-dialogical, non-hermeneutical ends. Sticking to Wittgenstein's insights in particular, as our main object of concern, I would like to submit that, if my analysis of his intentions holds, his efforts were spent in showing not the "unlimited richness of [linguistic] meaning"⁴³ with construc-

43. P. Christopher Smith, conceding as he may be to some degree of convergence between Gadamer and Wittgenstein, in *Hermeneutics and Human Finitude: Toward a Theory of Ethical Understanding* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1991), pp. 105-17, eventually contrasts Wittgenstein's reserved contextualism with Gadamer's all-out hermeneutical intentions, on the ground that while both philosophers aimed at restoring words to their *ordinary* meanings [PI 116], for Wittgenstein meaning was still determined by isolating the appropriate "Language-game" as home to a word, *at the exclusion of all other games*. Gadamer, by contrast, says Smith, followed Heidegger in upholding our *total* immersion in language, no doubt lured by the prospects of an "unlimited richness of meaning (ibid, pp. 117-31).

Costis Coveos, as already mentioned (see fn. 5) sets Wittgenstein's analysis further apart from the positive projects of "constructive" philosophers falling into the hermeneutic tradition, like Dewey, Gadamer, and Rorty. What seems to be common among these, he says, is a wish to prolong and help sustain philosophical dialogue indefinitely by drawing attention to previously unobserved conceptual nuances, whose freshness may help us avert social stagnation and promote cultural change. But Wittgenstein, Coveos reminds us, was simply not interested in conceptual multiplicity as such, nor did he point attention to the social formation of linguistic reference in appreciation of its possible contribution to the renewal of public life. Wittgenstein's true purpose, according to Coveos, was rather to help us see that philosophical problems, when rephrased in more ordinary and mundane ways (with the help of linguistic analysis), vanish as pseudo-problems. More simply put, what Wittgenstein ("earlier" or "later", for that matter) opted for, was tranquil *silence*, not *dialogue*. See COVEOS, *ibid*, pp. 370-4.

tive purposes in mind (i.e., as amenable to philosophical or social dialogue, much as Richard Rorty would have it), but a flagrantly more prosaic idea, in the eyes of hermeneuticists at least: that when placed in context, words are shown to have more ordinary meanings than the singular, beguiling sense habitually assumed by systematic philosophers and unrepentant metaphysicians. When thusly interpreted as an elaborate exposition of this core thesis, the *Philosophical Investigations* is erroneously described as a “hermeneutical” work in the line, say, of H.G. Gadamer’s pluralist intentions, despite forging a similarly decentralized picture of language. In actual fact, Wittgenstein’s purposes were diametrically opposed to Gadamer’s and Rorty’s, in being *therapeutic* (and in that sense, positivistic) rather than *dialogical*. For at the heart of his celebrated contextualism, which affirmed the irreducible multiplicity and fluidity of word usage and meaning, there lay but a sole purpose: the progressive disqualification of the arbitrary amassing of linguistic regularities routinely utilized by metaphysicians as the essentialist building-blocks of their ostentatious philosophical systems. “Instead of producing something common to all that we call language, I am saying that these phenomena have no one thing in common which makes us use the same word for all – but that they are [simply] *related* to one another in many different ways” (PI 65). In my reading of his work, Wittgenstein says something far more radical than mere contextualism, and far more interesting philosophically, I should like to add, no matter how much at odds it may be with theology’s prerogatives. He says, elaborately but just as adamantly, that the transcendent is by definition off-limits to the human ken, certainly so as regards its linguistic encroachment because, as Quine would put it, “Truth is immanent and there is no higher. We must speak from within a theory [or language-game, as Wittgenstein would put it].”⁴⁴

Let me conclude my clumsily condensed commentary by repeating that Christian theology cannot be delimited to a negative or strictly apophatic function, charged as it is Father with the complementary task of articulating its ontological and existential implications in a cataphatic manner, even as it remains conscious against hardening theological insights to the point of ideology. Hence I must agree with Brian Hebblethwaite, that “a religious faith in God has meta-

44. QUINE W., “Things and their Place in Theories,” in *Theories and Things* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1981), pp. 21-2.

physical implications which it is in no way irreligious to try to spell out. To consider the philosophical aspects of belief in God is not to resort to an abstract God; it is rather to abstract, for theoretical consideration, certain presuppositions of faith in the living God.”⁴⁵ In the last resort, the theologian’s uneasiness with Wittgenstein’s linguistic analysis is not unlike Karl Popper’s discord with it, which (in the interests of scientific realism) famously took Wittgenstein to task for systematically undercutting “the gift of wonder,” a necessary prerequisite in Popper’s mind for the progress of both science and philosophy, and just as vital, if not more so I would add, for theology as well. For theology is actualized precisely when, as Chrestos Yannaras once wrote, the paradox of Siloam is continuously reaffirmed, when, that is, “with a little mud of the earth, human eyes open to the wonder of life (Jn 9:6-7).”⁴⁶

45. HEBBLETHWAITE B., *The Ocean of Truth: A Defense of Objective Theism* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1988), p. 38. My qualms about Hebblethwaite’s overall proposal, on the other hand, stem from what I see as his uncritical reliance on natural theology and his concomitant pursuance of a rationalistic argumentation from truth to God, which does border perilously on traditional and, in my view, outdated apologetics.

46. YANNARAS CHR., *Elements of Faith: An Introduction to Orthodox Theology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993), p. xiv.