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Joseph C. Mohrfeld  
*Minnesota State University, Mankato*

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## **Wittgenstein, Kierkegaard and the Unspeakable**

Joseph C Mohrfeld (Philosophy)

*Dick Liebendorfer, Faculty Mentor (Philosophy)*

### **Abstract**

Soren Kierkegaard and Ludwig Wittgenstein have long been thought of as philosophers with little, if anything in common. There are but a handful of contemporary philosophers who have provided links between works by Kierkegaard and works by Wittgenstein; however no one has, at least explicitly, provided the following link I intend to show in this paper. I will show Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* and Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico Philosophicus* have a remarkably common theme. The theme is the ability of one to communicate, or understand the unspeakable, that which remains beyond the limits of language. Both have a unique approach to arriving at the same conclusion, Kierkegaard through religion and Wittgenstein through logic, but each reaches a point in which a person must remain silent.

## 1. Introduction

The idea of saying and showing in relation to language, the idea that there are structural features of thought and language which cannot be rationally articulated but that none-the-less show them, make themselves manifest, was first extensively developed by Wittgenstein in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*<sup>1</sup>. In the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein develops the mentioned idea in connection with the picture theory of propositions. The idea that there are limits to language, limits on what can be rationally articulated, which one must adhere is also at least implicitly advocated by Soren Kierkegaard in *Fear and Trembling*<sup>2</sup>. Kierkegaard, however unlike Wittgenstein, was not concerned principally with representations of linguistic and cognitive structure. Rather, he was concerned with rational articulations of the religious. In this paper I intend to demonstrate the striking, and overlooked, similarities between Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* and Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* in regards to the limits of language and rationality. I also will apply Wittgenstein's later work, *Philosophical Investigations*<sup>3</sup>, which provides another argument for understanding *Fear and Trembling*.

There are numerous differences between these philosophers. They employ different vocabulary to develop their respective concerns with regards to what can be rationally articulated. They make different claims concerning what eludes rational representation. Also, there are differences between the goals of their respective projects as well as the circumstance or ambitions that lead each to try to say what is argued to be 'unsayable'. Yet, despite such differences, a key similarity prominently remains and is the focus of this paper. I will first develop and explain the picture theory of propositions presented by Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus* and explain the terms employed by Wittgenstein to articulate this philosophical problem. It is by appeal to the picture theory that Wittgenstein distinguishes what can be said from what can only be shown. After developing and explaining the picture theory of propositions and its consequences I will provide an argument for the link between Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* and Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*. I will then provide an alternative view to understanding the character of the ineffable by way of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*. This final alternative view which I offer will provide yet another level of depth to the comparison of Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein. I will offer a view that something is inarticulate because the form's of life, the context of language, is lost, unlike the *Tractarian* view in which something is inarticulate because it is absolutely ineffable. There exists no fixed boundary as in the *Tractatus*, but rather a floating boundary dependent on context. First, my exposition on the *Tractatus*.

## 2. Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*

Wittgenstein's book, *Tractatus Logico Philosophicus*, presents, for the first time, Wittgenstein's picture theory of propositions. This section provides an exposition and explanation of the picture theory. This will lead to an explanation of how Wittgenstein's theory of language emerges from his picture theory, and finally set up the argument for a connection between Kierkegaard's talk of the irrational and rational and Wittgenstein's talk of the difference between being inside and outside language.

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<sup>1</sup> *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Routledge 1974.

<sup>2</sup> *Fear and trembling*, Soren Kierkegaard, edited by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton 1983.

<sup>3</sup> *Philosophical Investigations*, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Blackwell 2001

Wittgenstein calls a proposition a logical picture and propositional structure logico-pictorial structure. The picture theory of propositions builds on a view about the ordinary pictures and their relation to the states of affairs they depict. An ordinary picture of, say, ‘a cat on a fence’, is a complete picture. There is a cat and it is pictured as being on a fence. The picture is complete in that it is specific and definite. The same can be said of propositions considered as logical pictures. The expression ‘is on a fence’ is not a complete picture and it is not a complete proposition. Wittgenstein’s view is that complete propositions are the primary bearers of meaning and that expressions such as ‘is on the fence’ have meaning only in so far as they make a contribution to the meaning of a complete proposition, a complete picture.

The need for the picture theory of propositions is made apparent at the beginning of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*. Wittgenstein claims the world is everything that is the case (1)<sup>4</sup>. The ultimate constituents of the world are the facts and not the objects that in combination make up the facts. Since we want an account of the world, of what is the case, a mere list of objects will not provide this. A list will not tell us what is true and false. Objects which are named can be said to exist only in so far as they are components of facts. Alone, as opposed to being in combination, names of objects yield only incomplete pictures. Facts must have complexity; they must break down into objects, into simpler parts. Otherwise there would not be a describable fact, there would only be a namable object. But an account of the world requires that we be able to say at least, for example, that such and such an object exists at such and such a time or place. Wittgenstein says that the general form of a proposition is “this is how things stand” (4.5). In this respect a proposition is a picture of possible states of affairs. If the state of affairs exists the proposition is true and if the state of affairs does not exist the proposition is false. The world is constituted by existing states of affairs. Reality, in contrast, is constituted by all possible states of affairs. False propositions picture possible states of affairs. ‘My car is black’ is a state of affairs, but there is also a possible state of affairs in which it is red. I’ve only to paint it red and what was false becomes true. Thus even false propositions depict states of affairs. They picture possible states of affairs but not actually existing states of affairs. In this sense false propositions picture reality.

The meaning of a proposition, its sense, is given by the state of affairs that it pictures. Ultimately, this requires that propositions be composed of simple names and simple objects. It requires that there be a point where signs and the world necessarily connect. This point is reached when signs can be understood only in connection with the objects referred to. If the signs are to be understood in connection with yet more signs, argues Wittgenstein, there is no need for a picturing relation to states of affairs in the world. But signs and the propositions in which they figure can not always be understood in connection with yet more signs, more propositions. If signs were always understood in connection with yet more signs there would not be any essential connection with the world and so one would not know what she says to be the case. If “... whether a proposition had sense would depend on whether another proposition was true... in that case we could not sketch any picture of the world (true or false)” (2.0211-2.0212).

In summary reality is made up of both the existence and non-existence state of affairs. By picturing facts we represent reality, or more specifically we provide a picture

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<sup>4</sup>Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* is a series of numbered remarks, I will make references to Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* parenthetically in the text, mentioning the number of a remark.

of reality, by picturing states of affairs that may or may not exist.<sup>5</sup> We can say to be the case, a proposition can say to be the case only what is a possible state of affairs. That a proposition pictures a state of affairs requires that the proposition and the state of affairs share a structure. For example, 'the car is red' shares a structure with the state of affairs that the car is red. 'The car is red' predicates the property named by 'red' of the object named by the 'car'. This structure is duplicated by the state of affairs. The fact that the car is red involves an object, the car, having the property red. It is only in virtue of sharing structure that a proposition can picture a state of affairs and so be either true or false. The proposition is true if the world is as the proposition pictures it, and false if the world is not as the proposition pictures it.

But now we encounter a problem. A picture cannot depict its own pictorial form. A picture is able only to display this form. It must be the case that a picture can only display its pictorial form, because a picture depicts a state of affairs and does so in virtue of sharing structure, a form, with that state of affairs. A picture cannot depict that structure; it can only depict a state of affairs with that structure and do so by duplicating the structure. At best another picture could be created which pictures, or duplicates, the first picture. The second picture then does not picture its own pictorial form; rather, it pictures the first picture and does so in virtue of sharing a structure with the first picture. That is to say, the depiction of its pictorial form is impossible because pictorial form does not have the tools to depict pictorial form from outside of its structure. I can step outside the garage and picture, represent that the car is red, but I cannot stand outside representational structure and represent that structure. Diego Velasquez's painting *Las Meninas*, is, according to Michel Foucault, in his work *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, an attempt to illustrate the idea that there are limitations on the ability to represent representational form.<sup>6</sup> Velasquez's painting depicts a painter painting a scene. But we see only the backside of the painter's canvas. We see the subject of the painting only as a reflection in a mirror. Thus the representational relation between the painting and the subject of the painting is left mysterious.

A picture's structure is such that it is able to exist only inside the picture it structures. Propositions thus cannot step outside structure and say anything about it. Propositions are in this respect like ordinary pictures. A picture can not say anything about its own pictorial form; it can only say something about a state of affairs that it depicts. A picture of a red car, for example, says that the car is red. But the picture says nothing about the structure of the picturing relation. We can call this problem, which arises in Wittgenstein, the inside-outside problem. Inside pictorial form one can only provide pictures, including pictures of pictures. These pictures picture states of affairs which make up reality. As said above what a picture pictures, what it represents is its sense or content. Pictorial form is just a special case of logical form.

A picture must contain the possibility of the situation that it represents (2.203). A picture of a red car and the proposition 'the car is red' both intend a particular state of affairs. This must be the case or a picture does not satisfy the constraints that Wittgenstein places on intelligible propositions. Pictures, and propositions as pictures,

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<sup>5</sup> "A picture is a model of reality" (2.12), "A picture presents a situation in logical space, the existence and non-existence of states of affairs" (2.11), and "We picture facts to ourselves" (2.1).

<sup>6</sup> *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* pp. 3-16, Michel Foucault, Vintage Books 1973.

exist in logical space. Logical space determines both the form and content of intelligible propositions and thereby determines what are possible states of affairs. Logical space and the possibility of states of affairs are given by simple names, the objects they denote and by the possibility of those names and objects combining with one another to form propositions and states of affairs. The content of names is derived from the objects named and form is derived from the possibilities of combination. Thus, for example, ‘the car is red’ is an intelligible proposition and pictures a possible state of affairs. The expression ‘the square root of two is red’ is not intelligible and does not picture a possible state of affairs.<sup>7</sup> Since names get their meaning from the objects they denote, objects must exist if names have meaning. Yet as Robert J. Foglin<sup>8</sup> explains, every object must exist in a state of affairs within a range of possible states of affairs. He constructs a simple world which exhibits how objects combine to form possible state of affairs.

A	B	C	D

Figure 1.1<sup>9</sup>

(a, b, c, d should be labeled down the left-hand side beginning with a in the top box followed by b, c, d in each subsequent box but due to formatting issues this was not possible to include in the diagram)

This grid as a whole illustrates a region of logical space, where the shaded boxes represent actual combinations of objects, and the unshaded boxes represent possible combinations of the objects, combinations which do not obtain. Logical space is made up of the possible combinations of one object with another object. Possible combinations are Aa, Bb, Cc, Dd, Ab and so on, but AB is not a possible combination. Irrationality results when we try to construct propositions in a way that lies outside logical space. Logical space is exhibited by the possible combinations within the grid.

By appeal to the grid we can also clarify the difference between what can be said and what can only be shown. Aa can be combined and AB cannot be combined; so Aa can be said but AB cannot be asserted. We can not say, assert, that ‘car’ and ‘red’ can be combined in the proposition ‘the car is red’, nor that ‘square root of two’ and ‘red’ can not be combined. Rather the possibility of the former and impossibility of the latter shows itself. In neither case can one construct a picture or proposition which pictures or says the thing in question. Since ‘the car is red’ is intelligible it would be empty to assert that it is. Neither can one say that red is a color. That ‘red’ is the name of a color shows itself. But if ‘red’ is already understood, it is empty to assert that red is a color. In the linguist’s vocabulary, there are aspects of syntactic and semantic structure that can not be significantly said can not be significantly represented.

The claim that red is a color is a priori true. That is, one does not need to look to the world to discover its truth. It is true in virtue of the meaning of the signs that compose the claim. The claim that the square root of two is red is a priori false. In both cases, thinks Wittgenstein, they are not genuine propositions since they do not picture states of

<sup>7</sup> Wittgenstein does not give examples of simple names and objects. I do not assume that ‘red’, ‘car’ and ‘square root of two’ would qualify. But nothing hangs on the examples here.

<sup>8</sup> *Wittgenstein: Second Edition* pp. 7-8, Robert J. Foglin, edited by Ted Hondriech, Routledge 1976.

<sup>9</sup> This grid is a duplication of the grid used by Foglin on p. 8 of *Wittgenstein: Second Edition*

affairs whose existence or failure to exist render the propositions true or false. So one cannot say that red is a color, nor can one say that it is not the case that the square root of two is red. But these things none the less show themselves. Similarly, the claim that the car is red is a genuine proposition; it pictures a state of affairs and is true or false depending on whether the state of affairs exists. That it is a genuine proposition shows itself. There is no state of affairs that is pictured by ‘the proposition that the car is red is a genuine proposition’; so “*the proposition that the car is red is a genuine* is not a genuine proposition”.

A possible situation would be a situation which is not yet settled to be either true or false. Reality is made up of such possible situations. Wittgenstein defines reality as what can be pictured. All genuine possible situations correspond with the possible existence and non-existence of states of affairs. Therefore the picture must be true or false, correct or incorrect. And so, anything which can be asked can in principle be answered. One can never offer a question which can not, at least in principle, be answered. A possible situation in logical space is a situation which can be verified to obtain or not obtain. If the picture can be constructed at all it can be judged true or false. However, the truth or falsity is independent of pictorial form, if it were not, the proposed proposition would be a tautology and therefore not a genuine proposition.

Traditionally, philosophers have raised questions which cannot be answered in propositions that conform to the requirements of the picture theory. The problem with philosophers, according to Wittgenstein, is that they do not understand that language is the problem which needs to be dealt with, not other frequently raised and unanswerable questions. Philosophical questions, according to Wittgenstein, are questions about the essential structure of thoughts, propositions and the world, structure which Wittgenstein believes we can say nothing about. And so “what we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence”. (7)

Among the things philosophers try to say something about, but on Wittgenstein’s view nothing can be said, are in ethics. Ethics tries to say how things ought to be rather than how things are. But a claim about how things ought to be does not picture a state of affairs in the world. It is neither true nor false, and so not a genuine proposition. Historically, ethics begins with alleged factual claims about human nature and then proceeds to claim that a moral and happy life is a life in accord with the facts of human nature. While “the world of a happy man is a different one from that of the unhappy man” (6.42), Wittgenstein claims that the difference is not a factual difference. One’s attitude towards the world is different, but the facts are not, “not what can be expressed by means of language”. (6.43) According to the picture theory if a state of affairs cannot be depicted there is nothing to be judged true or false, correct or incorrect. There is representation only in pictorial form. Only what has logico-pictorial form can be expressed in language and “the limits of ones language mean the limits of ones world”. (5.6) Ethics, then can only be part of the limit, the structure of the world. There are no ethical facts.

Wittgenstein’s own claims in the *Tractatus* do not satisfy the requirements of the picture theory of propositions. Claims such as that propositions picture states of affairs and that logico-pictorial form can not be pictured are not themselves claims that might be either true or false, they are not themselves claims that picture states of affairs that may or may not exist. Thus Wittgenstein says that his own propositions are nonsensical and

should be seen as a ladder which once climbed up is to be thrown away. (6.54) The reader must transcend these propositions to see the world as the facts it is made up of.

This is similar to the way Kierkegaard writes *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. James Conant's essay "Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein and Nonsense" deals with this similarity at length.<sup>10</sup> My paper will not deal with the similarities of the *Postscript* and the *Tractatus*, but I believe it is important to show other comparisons between these two philosophers. Both Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard remark at the end their books that all of what their books intend to say is nonsensical and completely contradictory to the premises of their books. However there is great importance in laying out the propositions anyway, even if you are to throw them away in the end. Conant describes these ladders as tools employed in producing clarity of vision. To fully understand the idea of language one must throw away the method with which one tries to understand language. You can only understand language through language, anything that is outside the expressive power of language must be unintelligible. Yet we want, Wittgenstein wants, to understand language itself. Just as Wittgenstein says logico-pictorial form cannot be represented in logico-pictorial form, Kierkegaard claims the religious cannot be understood in rational discourse. Wittgenstein tries to say something about logico-pictorial form, but concludes that form can only be shown. Nonetheless, Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus* appears to try to say what cannot be said. For Kierkegaard one falls into temptation if she attempts to step outside the rational, if she attempts to say what is irrational, communicate what cannot be communicated.

### 3. Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*

To allow for an occasion to find oneself outside the rational there must exist, Kierkegaard believes, a teleological suspension of the ethical. This teleological suspension of the ethical is illustrated by Kierkegaard in his reinterpretation of the story of Abraham<sup>11</sup>. In the story Abraham is given a test of faith by God which requires him to take his only son Isaac to the top of the mountain and sacrifice him before God. Abraham cannot understand why God would ask this but does not doubt God's command and remains deeply committed to his faith in God. Everyone who witnessed this event believed Abraham must be either committing murder and is therefore a murderer or something beyond rational comprehension and therefore something religiously wonderful which cannot be explained rationally. An individual such as Abraham, whose action is beyond rational explanation, Kierkegaard calls a knight of faith and calls the action absurd. The knight of faith is someone who is able to remain fully committed to an absurd action with faith that, as Kierkegaard says, through the absurd the object which was resigned will be granted back through the infinite. The infinite is what remains beyond the limits of the temporal and rational. The infinite is such that one can only find themselves within it but are not able to explain the phenomenon known as the absurd which places them there. To say that the absurd places them there or that they act through the absurd is just to say that the action escapes rational understanding. Rational articulate understanding is confined to particular cases occurring in time. That is rational articulate

<sup>10</sup> "Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein and Nonsense", James Conant, *Pursuits of Reason*, edited by Ted Cohen, Paul Guyer and Hillary Putnam, published by Texas Tech. University 1993.

<sup>11</sup> The story of Abraham, also known as the father of faith, is taken as a biblical story from the Old Testament. This story has multiple readings and interpretations and Kierkegaard uses four distinctly different readings of the story in *Fear and Trembling* to provide a more agreeable account of the story.



understanding is finite and temporal. More specifically, one accepts that he must do something which has a particular consequence, and he accepts that the consequence will not occur. Accepting both is paradoxical and absurd. Yet what Kierkegaard calls resignation involves such paradoxical acceptance.

The absurd occurs through an infinite resignation of faith to obtain what seemed unobtainable. The object in Abraham's case is his son Isaac. Although Isaac is to be sacrificed, Abraham hopes for Isaac's return. In Kierkegaard's own case it was the love of Regina, Kierkegaard's fiancée, which is unrequited. The Complexities of Kierkegaard's relationship with Regina left him compelled to reject her, all the while hoping, accepting, that she would return to him. This, as Kierkegaard would say, resignation of Regina is difficult for Kierkegaard to accept and he believes the story of Abraham would aid accepting and understanding it. To resign Regina Kierkegaard drove her away, breaking up their engagement, an engagement had in the finite, temporal world, in order to receive her love back once again in the infinite by virtue of the absurd. Kierkegaard believes receiving the resigned object back through the infinite is the most wonderful movement, albeit difficult movement, any person can experience. The movement in Abraham's case is, from the accepting God's command to sacrifice Isaac to accepting that Isaac will be returned to him. The movement in Kierkegaard's case is from accepting the compulsion to reject Regina to accepting that she would return to him. In both cases there is a paradox that cannot be understood in finite, temporal, rational terms. The movement cannot be understood, except 'by virtue of acceptance of the absurd'. Abraham can in no way understand what occurs when he accepts that he must sacrifice Isaac as a show of faith. Abraham can only maintain faith in the paradox, as Kierkegaard says, in which the absurd exists. Kierkegaard believes the reason why the movement of resignation is so difficult is because a person has to be fully committed to the act of resignation. In Abraham's case this would be the act of sacrifice, an act full of paradox. Abraham must have gone to the mountain, Kierkegaard believes, with every intention of killing his son as God asked of him. Only because he was truly committed to sacrificing Isaac was Abraham able to accept that by virtue of the absurd Isaac would be returned to him. For this reason Kierkegaard believes Abraham is something greater than the murderer which by rational and temporal standards he is.

In the story Abraham begins his journey to the mountain with Isaac and on the way is asked by Isaac why he must commit such an act. Isaac cannot comprehend that it is a test of faith, so Abraham cannot explain this to Isaac. The knight of faith, however, exists in the infinite and irrational, yet Isaac exists in the rational and temporal; so, communication between Abraham and Isaac is not possible. Abraham either must remain silent or fall into temptation by trying to explain his act. Temptation occurs when one finds herself in the infinite yet attempts to justify actions in finite, temporal terms. Not only does one engage in action that can not be understood in finite and temporal terms but, as in Abraham's case, in those terms the action is unreasonable, unacceptable or even evil. Temptation occurs, for Kierkegaard, when a person tries to explain actions outside the finite and temporal, and so outside the resources of ordinary language, language that always occurs in finite, temporal contexts. Language is limited to finite and temporal contexts.

Wittgenstein argues in the *Tractatus* that one can speak only of what can be pictured; so the limits of rational discourse are the limits of what can be pictured. Yet

Wittgenstein believed that thought and language contains a structure that shows itself. Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* is an effort to exhibit that structure which can not be spoken. Making it manifest is an important project for Wittgenstein. Kierkegaard similarly argues that something exists outside language of which we cannot speak of. We can explain only what exists in the finite.

Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein believe something interesting makes itself manifest outside this limit imposed on language and rationality, and each agrees that this cannot be explained within language. Further, a person in the finite cannot comprehend the infinite because they are limited to the constraints of the finite. This is similar to Wittgenstein's logic which limits the language we use to describe our finite, temporal world. Only what remains inside the limits of the picture theory of propositions is describable through language. One cannot describe what is outside of the limits of the picture theory; one cannot even describe that limit. 'Intelligible propositions picture states of affairs in the world' does not itself picture a state of affairs in the world, and so it is not a genuine proposition. Abraham's situation requires him to remain silent or fall into temptation trying to communicate the infinite. Kierkegaard claims that Abraham cannot grasp what is occurring within the infinite he finds himself in and would be crushed by the complexity of the absurd if he were to try to understand. To attempt to understand this paradox would be so overwhelming it would crush<sup>12</sup> anyone who attempts to. He must therefore accept the movements of the infinite on faith alone. Given that Isaac has only the tools to understand the finite he would not be able to understand what was being communicated to him from his father, because his father remained in the infinite. So what must occur is something beyond the rational which allows for the ethical to be suspended.

Kierkegaard presents the idea of a teleological suspension of the ethical early in *Fear and Trembling*, an idea which becomes the focus of his book. He encounters a problem when trying to prove the existence of the teleological suspension of the ethical. The problem is that language cannot explain this phenomenon. The teleological suspension exists within the irrational, outside of the finite temporal structure of language. With the teleological suspension of the ethical, Kierkegaard claims, one enters the religious. If a teleological suspension of the ethical doesn't take place then Abraham is nothing more than a murderer. To avoid so describing Abraham requires an infinite faith toward God. Teleological suspension of the ethical in favor of the religious provides a way of allowing that actions such as Abraham's are permissible because of the ends which the action strives to achieve, ends which involve infinite resignation toward God.

I have provided the argument that what exists outside of language cannot be spoken. Kierkegaard believed Abraham was able to transcend the boundaries of language by making holding a deeply committed faith in the absurd. Trying to understand the absurd would have led him into temptation. Abraham remained silent. This silence can be seen in an entirely different way, a way in which I will show in the next section by appeal to *Philosophical Investigations*.

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<sup>12</sup> This crushing is an emotional and mental phenomenon which occurs because of the paradox. One cannot believe they can understand the paradox of the knight of faith. The paradox would be so overwhelming to any person they would not be able to continue in the paradox. The paradox must remain a paradox, and one must only attempt to make the final movement by infinitely resigning all love and faith to God. But this final movement is so impossible only one who Kierkegaard refers to as the knight of faith will ever be able to make such a movement.

In summary the teleological suspension of the ethical means that the ethical can be suspended in virtue of the end goal, which is ultimately the infinite resignation toward God or through faith. But one suspends the ethical only if one does not fall into temptation. One falls into temptation by trying to understand the suspension through rational temporal language. Wittgenstein claims that for one to try to say what is outside the limits the picture theory of propositions imposes on language is to try to say what is nonsense. None the less Wittgenstein is driven to try to step outside language and represent its structure. But he recognizes that, given the picture theory, he can utter only nonsense. Kierkegaard argues a similar point. He thinks that one can, and Abraham did, find oneself outside of language, unable to use language to justify actions which are ordered from outside the rational. Wittgenstein, in the *Tractatus*, acknowledges that all of the claims made about language are made from outside the limits of language, outside constraints imposed by the picture theory of propositions, and are therefore irrational. Thus he proposes we see his propositions as a ladder which must be thrown away. Both Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard think there is something interesting and worth trying to say. But neither allows that there is anything that can intelligibly and rationally be said. Both undertake to try to say something about what is outside of the limits of language, or the rational, but do not allow for language to exist beyond these limits.

A person existing within the finite only knows how to explain the infinite through the finite. The person in the finite, therefore, can never understand the person in the infinite. As for one who is in the infinite, he is as pointed out above faced with two alternatives. First, he can fall into temptation by trying to explain and justify his actions through the finite, or second, since there is no way of explaining the infinite through the finite, he can remain silent. Had Abraham spoke no one would have understood him; therefore, Kierkegaard believes Abraham remained silent. He has left the structure of language and cannot use the rational to explain what is outside of it. Kierkegaard explains Abraham cannot be mediated, meaning he cannot communicate a justification for his action by appeal to moral rules or universals. Those rules or universals are the stuff of our everyday temporal and finite understandings. Trying to communicate is trying to understand his action as an instance of the universal and so trying would be to fall into temptation. Abraham talks, but he does not try to be understood, i.e. communicate, because he knows he cannot be understood. To be understood would mean communicating the universal. The attempt to communicate by appeal to the universal would be to succumb to some temptation. Thus Abraham can perhaps talk but cannot communicate. In his act of sacrifice Abraham is therefore condemned to silence or to idle talk, to babble. Abraham has taken the leap of faith, which involves a simultaneous expression of the infinite in the finite, the eternal in the temporal. That is, he accepts the command to sacrifice and accepts that Isaac will be returned to him. He accepts the absurd.

Wittgenstein also talks, or writes, but by his own account, he does not say anything. One might understand him as pointing or gesturing in the direction of what he would like to say if only he could. Similarly, Kierkegaard may be understood as gesturing or pointing in the direction of a religious experience about which he wishes to communicate, if only he could.

This similarity between Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein is significant in that it provides a new approach to the problem Kierkegaard was dealing with involving the

bounds of rationality and the suspension of the ethical. Conversely, Wittgenstein's philosophy has not been traditionally thought of as being influenced by Kierkegaard but this similarity may offer a new approach to understanding Wittgenstein and his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Both philosophers will agree there exists something beyond language which is able to make it-self manifest through showing, whether the picture theory of propositions or the teleological suspension of the ethical. But what here makes itself manifest cannot be described within the rational and temporal limits of language.

This view does not exhaust the way one can interpret the story of Abraham in relation to language and the problem of the ineffable. An alternative view is offered by Wittgenstein in *Philosophical Investigations* which relies on the presence of context for one to be able to understand language rather than being able to explain languages structure. I will provide this view in the next section.

#### **4. *Philosophical Investigations***

My paper has so far illustrated a connection between *Fear and Trembling* and the *Tractatus* in regards to the ineffable, which exists beyond the fixed boundary of what can be said. Abraham has transcended the bounds of language only to find himself in a situation in which he can only show what cannot be said. Wittgenstein in *Philosophical Investigations* thinks one can make grammatical remarks, remarks which attempt to describe the structure of language. But these remarks are in a way empty. In the *Tractatus* claims about logical form were not genuine claims since they did not picture anything, so could not be either true or false. In *Philosophical Investigations* grammatical remarks are not remarks anyone can doubt and so are not parts of, names in, any genuine language game. They are instead descriptive of language games. They describe what we say, what we do, in particular contexts. They simply describe and don't explain language games. It is nonsensical to try to speak about and thereby explain the structure of language. One cannot setup rational language and rationality and yet have it explain thought. Yet in *Philosophical Investigations* as in the *Tractatus* this attempt occurs. One can describe language through language, but this produces only grammatical remarks which no one can doubt, not genuine moves in the language game. Such remarks are like tautologies found in the *Tractatus*. I will now apply this way of understanding language, an understanding in terms of language games, to a view of *Fear and Trembling* in relation to the context with which the question 'what is one's duty toward God' can be asked.

I will provide a brief overview of *Philosophical Investigations* in regards to my project. However I want to note that this is in no way a complete exposition of the work, but rather an argument from the main theme of the book that there exists no fixed structure which language can say anything about. The appeal to forms of life will illuminate a possible way to conduct Abraham's inability to rationally articulate the religious. My argument will be that the context, the form of life is what gives sense to the question, 'what is one's duty toward God'. Without that context the sense of the question is mysterious. Attempting to ask this question absent the context which gives it sense raises many problems, as I will point out as a defense of Abraham's silence. They are also problems that underlie Kierkegaard's difficulty in understanding and explaining this silence. First I will provide a brief explanation of *Philosophical Investigations*.

In *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein argues language can only be understood within a social context. Only within a social context is there the possibility of a distinction between the correct and incorrect use of the word. A hypothetical solitary

speaker has only her dispositions to use a word, but her dispositions may be mistaken. It is agreement and disagreement with her neighbors that supplies the recipient with all for the normative difference between correct and incorrect use. Thus the social character of language precludes a private language, a language that would be understood by only the speaker. It is the importance of social context that I will be emphasizing. The dependence on social interaction renders the context of that interaction important. There is no social interaction except when interaction occurs in particular social context. There can be no private language for means of interaction. Wittgenstein says that it is in particular social contexts that we take part in language games. Wittgenstein says that we play language games because the use of language is social, cooperative, and like other games governed by rules. We must have language games even to provide meaning to names of objects. For example, an ostensive definition of 'red' requires shared social practices that involve sorting red from green, both from shapes, and both from the objects which have colors and shapes and colors as properties. One could imagine trying to teach a child the differences between 'red', 'square' and 'chair' by training her to sort objects first by color, then by shape and lastly by object. The sort of training and the kind of skills acquired here are akin to the training and skills acquired by the builder's assistant in language game two.<sup>13</sup> The activities in which the child and the assistant are trained to engage show what is meant by 'red' and 'slab'. Language games provide a way of showing the way language is used in a form of life so serve as a basis for attributing sounds with a certain meaning.

The language game one must look at in the case of Abraham is that game which is described by spelling out the religious form of life. Spelling out such a form of life involves spelling out the context in which religious language is employed. The task here is like that of spelling out the specific contexts, and the practices and forms of life engaged in, practices and forms of life in which 'red' and 'slab' are employed. The specific question we need to address is how one teaches, for example, 'having a duty toward God' to a child, or someone else who is not already able to engage in the appropriate activities, practices, or forms of life in the context of the religious. The context of, employment of, 'duty toward God' is what must be explained if the expression 'duty toward God' is to be understood. When this context, and the activities, practices, and forms of life therein engaged in are fully spelled out, 'duty toward God', and so duty toward God, is understood. The context and practices include the linguistic context. Just as understanding 'red' requires understanding, for example, 'square' and 'chair', and understanding 'slab' requires understanding 'beam', so understanding 'duty toward God' requires understanding yet more religious language. That language would help clarify the source of this duty and what the consequence is for not obeying one's duty. Such things can be clarified only by appeal to more religious language and the additional language can be understood only by appeal to the details of the forms of life in which it has been employed. Explaining the duty to God and explaining the consequence of not fulfilling the requirement of duty as well as explaining the source of the duty all go together. By way of illumination I will provide a story involving a religious person and how Kierkegaard would expect them lead their life so an understanding of how the context for language could arise for this particular situation.

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<sup>13</sup> *Philosophical Investigations* paragraph 2

By appeal to Wittgenstein's views in *Philosophical Investigations* we can provide an account of the alleged unintelligibility of the religious dimension of the story of Abraham. The story is a case in which the context of language is missing, and so does not allow us from within language to provide an explanation of the religious dimension of Abraham's circumstances. Abraham can provide no explanation for why he must follow God's command because he has no context within which religious language such as 'duty toward God' can be understood. Thus, he cannot communicate the religious dimensions of his dilemma, and so no other person has an understanding of what Abraham is doing. The act is ineffable. Kierkegaard cannot describe why it is Abraham cannot articulate his action because on the view I am describing and which is derived from *Philosophical Investigations*, religious language has lost its context. One can no longer explain what 'duty toward God' means and so what one's duty toward God is because 'the duty toward God' and so duty toward God must be explained from within a form of life within a particular context which according to Kierkegaard no longer exists. We have slipped into 'Christendom', a state in which the Christian person is not truly Christian because they do not have an understanding of the form of life necessary to understand religious language. This is apparent in Kierkegaard's dismay with those who profess religious belief rather than living a life which exhibits an understanding of true Christianity. There is a difference in the person who lives the religious life and the person who merely professes living the religious life. While this explains Abraham's inability to communicate the religious dimensions of his dilemma, it also seems to allow that he has a private understanding of that dimension. "We are what is called a 'Christian' nation – but in such a sense that not a single one of us is in the character of the New Testament."<sup>14</sup>

Yet it is Wittgenstein's view in the *Philosophical Investigations* that Abraham cannot have an understanding of his action through private language and so no understanding is possible at all, not even by Abraham. The only possible understanding he could have would be the result of a relationship with God, a relationship that involved communication, in which both he and God understand the context of the religious language. Abraham still would not have the ability to articulate, to anyone other than God, the shared context which is needed for understanding because the understanding is missing, and so to everyone else Abraham seems to speak nonsensically.

There remain a few issues which arise with this explanation. If one allows language to exist between Abraham and God, God either must exist within the finite, or a form of life between God and Abraham cannot be allowed, and so language cannot be understood, and so God exists as only a deeply held hyper-subjective notion which would require private language, and therefore according to Wittgenstein preclude understanding. This problem arises because it is assumed Abraham could understand the order from God, and that since he understood the order he committed the act in question. But this is problematic. It assumes a relationship with God that is either in the finite, infinite, or that Abraham's understanding draws on both the finite and infinite. Coexistence within both the finite and infinite is problematic on textual grounds because Kierkegaard places great importance on an act of transcending the finite into the infinite. For a transcendence to occur one cannot occupy simultaneously both the finite and infinite. If that were possible

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<sup>14</sup> *Attack upon "Christendom"*, Soren Kierkegaard, edited by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton 1983.

one would not be thought to transcend the finite for the infinite but instead finite and infinite would be poles on a continuum. This leaves the first two possibilities. I will present them only briefly because much more space and time is needed to elaborate fully on them.

One could be thought to allow God to share a language with Abraham because Abraham is commanded by God to sacrifice Isaac. Abraham must share a form of life with God to understand the order from God to sacrifice his son. But this is problematic when viewed through Kierkegaard's reading of the story. Abraham exists in the finite until he commits to the act of sacrificing Isaac and enters the infinite says Kierkegaard. It cannot be argued that Abraham understood the order from God to sacrifice Isaac if Abraham existed in the finite prior to the order unless either God existed in the finite along with him, or something such as a hyper-subjective notion of the self existed. If God exists in the finite it discounts the omniscience of God which is deeply held by religious interpreters and also makes the form of life necessary to understand God, and by extension Abraham's action, readily accessible to any other person. This would then strip the significance of Abraham's action because God's command, and so Abraham's action, could be understood by people, and so people would not view him as a murderer but instead as obeying God. This will not work for Kierkegaard though. He does not think Abraham can be understood in this way, and so I propose the notion of the hyper-subjective self. Kierkegaard, in this regards, is committed to saying it is not a religious act but instead a secular call to self-hood. Or a deeply subjective religious act. Both raise the problem of private language. If it is merely a call to selfhood then it can only be understood through private language. Wittgenstein denies the existence of private language in *Philosophical Investigations*. This is a complex issue I will address in the next chapter of my paper.

One could relate this problem to trying to explain duty toward God to a child. One would have to set up a context within duty toward God could be understood. This requires the naming of the objects 'duty' and 'God'. Duty can be explained in relation to other events or actions, such as one has a duty not to lie about a promise. Duty can be explained by observing an action. One could show the child what duty is by keeping a promise and saying this is duty. Different degrees of duty exist however. Duty toward what is ethical is explained in such away that is tangible, like keeping a promise, but duty toward God is intangible. Especially for Kierkegaard, who believes religiosity should exist as an inward display of faith rather than an outward action which can be observed. Duty is difficult to explain, but duty toward God is even more so. To explain God one must once again have a context with which to place God. God exists either in the infinite, beyond what can be articulated, or as some hyper-subjective view of the self, by which only private language could explain. Private language as we have said is not allowed. Kierkegaard is trying to provide us with a picture of what duty toward God is by trying to explain the story of Abraham, but fails because one cannot seemingly have an understanding of duty in the religious sense. This seems to leave the form of life necessary to understand duty toward God empty. Therefore language is not capable of providing an explanation of the event.

I have tried to illustrate why it is that according to *Philosophical Investigations* Abraham must remain silent about his obedience to God's command. I have also pointed

out a glaring problem which exists in trying to even say anything about God's command toward Abraham.

## 5. Conclusion

This paper has been an attempt to provide for the first time an explanation of Abraham's silence in *Fear and Trembling* in regards to Wittgenstein's language theory presented in the *Tractatus* and Wittgenstein's revised conception of language in *Philosophical Investigations*. Providing an understanding of silence via Wittgenstein gives a greater significance to understanding Kierkegaard's project in *Fear and Trembling*. By looking at the problem in regards to transcending the bounds of language we can have a new understanding of what it is Kierkegaard views as religious language, namely that which exists beyond the rational. This language can not be articulated yet there is something important in trying to say something about it. This language can only be shown rather than said, it makes itself manifest. This makes the problem of Abraham's silence understandable. Abraham, by virtue of faith, has transcended the bounds of language and must remain silent. By looking at the problem in regards to the context of language which attempts to explain the action we run into a deep problem of Abraham's understanding of God's order. This may not be as significant as it appears, and one can still understand why Abraham must remain silent. No context exists, no form of life, which allows for language to contain meaning. Meaning can only exist in relation to other language and since no language exists with which a context occurs one cannot say anything about the ineffable. These are two dramatically different views about silence. I believe the argument from *Philosophical Investigations* becomes more interesting when viewed in regards to an ethical reading of *Fear and Trembling*, a view I provide in another essay entitled 'What cannot be said about *Fear and Trembling*'. The argument from a *Tractarian* reading provides a strong interpretation in regards to a religious reading of the text, and actually provides a strong defense for a religious reading by giving a new importance to religious language. This is a view I also describe in my essay as the meta-religious reading of *Fear and Trembling* because it remains religious but does so in a much different way than often argued for. Both are important I believe because I see the text as a meta-religious ethical text. My essay explains this view and why it overcomes the standard religious and ethical views.



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### **Author Biography:**

**Joseph C. Mohrfeld** is a graduate of the Philosophy department at MSU, Mankato. A Ronald E. McNair Post Baccalaureate Achievement Program Scholar, Joe has completed his second published work *Wittgenstein, Kierkegaard and the unspeakable*, a defense of S. Kierkegaard's teleological suspension of the ethical, primarily from *Fear and Trembling*. This research was presented at both the the Ronald E. McNair summer research conference in July 2004 and the 2005 MSU, Mankato URC in April. Mohrfeld was invited and inducted into Phi Kappa Phi national honor society and Golden Key national honor society during his junior year. In the following year Mohrfeld will be continuing this research under the guidance of Dr. Richard Liebendorfer, MSU Philosophy department chair while taking a year off to focus solely on this philosophical issue before attending graduate school. In addition to scholarship he enjoys snowboarding, riding his motorcycle and spending time in the wilderness.

### **Faculty Mentor Biography:**

**Richard Liebendorfer** earned his MA and PhD in philosophy from the University of California at Santa Barbara. Before joining the MSU faculty in 1988, he taught at San Jose State University in San Jose, California and at the University of Louisville in Louisville, Kentucky. His principal research and teaching interests concern issues that overlap philosophy of mind, philosophy of language and metaphysics. Specifically, he is interested in whether people and human cognitive ability can be represented in ways that render those abilities scrutable and explicable within science, or whether instead people and their abilities can be understood only as culturally and historically embedded. His approach to these questions is most always under the influence of the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein. In addition to professional interests he likes Jazz, the oriental board game Go and films. He also runs neurotically and pines for exotic travel.